

Out of Its Gaps

By Scott Roben

Negative Gestures

In *Untitled*, a painting of Herrera's from 2017 [page/figure citation], a searing array of high-key colors—red, blue, yellow, magenta—splash across the surface. They hit your eye with a spreading force that you feel before almost anything else. Yet look a half-second longer, and a counter-movement quickly makes itself felt, revealing a second hand that operates through cutting away, interrupting, dissolving. Indeed, no single gesture is permitted to play itself out in its entirety, leaving the whole field to churn with interruption. Looking at this picture, it strikes me that there's something undeniably Herrera-ian to this quality. It has to do with the particular kind of presence that his works assume: the way they confront you, boldly, at the same time that they withdraw—undercutting, and cutting into, themselves.

Entering Herrera's studio in Berlin, you instantly feel that it has been shaped by the habits of a collector. It's dense and cluttered, heavy with the energy of deliberation and production. Herrera is an artist who sifts, obsessively, through history: histories of the arts, of design, of consumer culture. Tables are stacked not only with works in process, but with piles of cut-up printed matter, albums from Berlin's flea markets, vintage art books, painted paper, prints. Walls and even a strip of kitchen are covered with exhibition posters, artworks from friends, spreads of soccer players. One imagines Herrera's work, which often builds up in a layered, stack-like fashion, emerging seamlessly from such environs. Perhaps in some ways, it does. Yet this essay arises from a curiosity about tendencies that run in a direction opposite to this accumulation, toward the work's vocabularies of subtraction, emptying, and concealing.

In this regard, I find my attention shifting away from the buildup of *stuff* in Herrera's work to the negative space that surrounds it. Within *Untitled*'s choreography of gesture and counter-gesture, for instance, negative space, which is traditionally passive—defined as the mere other to positive form—becomes active and richly variable. There's a nuanced vocabulary accruing over its surface. Here, we're led across the bleeding threshold of a paint pour into naked ground; there, we're startled into it by the swooping cut of a knife; while there, a collaged piece of wood stanches a downward flow of yellow paint, its contours sharpening several inches below to a point that stabs into a field of deep blue. On a surface built up both sculpturally through collage, and as pictorial space through color, negative space is released from binary relation and becomes a matter of degrees. It is contextual and contingent.

“Choreography” may be apt as a way of thinking how these works seem to play out in clusters of steps, particularly since dance itself has figured as a motif in Herrera’s work for decades. The liveliness of a work like *Untitled*, and of so many others, is tied to the idiosyncratic ways by which one gesture performs upon and inflects another, most often through varieties of negation: cutting, supplanting, erasing, covering, voiding, slackening, fragmenting, etc. In Herrera’s work, negative space is often bound up with actions like these which could be thought of as negatively performative.

Some of Herrera’s abstract gestures are made from scratch, others are found, others are culled from, or appear to reference, a vast archive of modern painterly gesture. One way of understanding the tendency toward negation might be as a refusal of the authority and heroism that pervaded so much modernist gestural abstract painting, particularly in the United States—a genre that haunts *Untitled* and other pictures like it. However, instead of focusing on what is (perhaps) being refused, I find myself much more preoccupied with the question of what types of sensations are made possible by, and accrue within, Herrera’s negative spaces and gestures: something like the range of meanings that, in dialogue, might hang over a “...” or a “—”...

Cut Through

For many years, the cut-away gesture has been a signature motif of Herrera’s work, making its way into paintings, prints, felt works, photographs, and wall paintings, among others. These forms appear as emptied-out painterly gestures that often act as containers, placeholders, or traces. As discrete forms composed of negative space, they’re inherently contradictory, a quality that Herrera deftly exploits.

On multiple levels, the cut-outs prove categorically slippery. For instance, although they carry the warmth of hand-made gestures, they also have a Pop-like feel, trading the intimacy and touch of the singular mark for the cool impersonality of reproducible graphics. In a 2005 interview in *BOMB* magazine with Josiah McElheny, Herrera explained his move away, around that time, from found, mass-produced imagery, asking, “...[i]s it possible to have the same kind of impact with nonfigurative images as with images taken from popular culture?”¹ The cut-away gestures do just this, in the sense that they filter handmade marks through the methods and textures of mass visual culture. Masking is a longstanding technique of printmaking and commercial graphic design; today, of course, Herrera’s cut-out forms call to mind the more recent technology of applications like Photoshop, whose interfaces comprise layers that can be masked as well as toggled on and off. Equally, they evoke the smooth-edged results of the “trace” function of contemporary vector-editing software, whereby pixelated

raster images (like a digital photograph) are converted into elements that are infinitely scaleable. The contradictoriness of the cut-outs resonates psychologically, too. As forms that have been dislodged from their original material context, they're both familiar and alienating. On a semiotic level, they blend meaning and materiality, lodged in an uncanny place between being traces and ciphers of painting. Perhaps most plainly, they assert presence out of absence, a formulation that carries potent affect.

Glancing across Herrera's work, you'll find many cases in which these forms themselves are strategically deployed to trouble conventional divisions between the picture, viewer, and surrounding space. *From the Top (Cream)* (2009) [page/plate citation] is one example. It's a grid of framed pictures made with layers of cream-colored paper out of which gestures have been cut. The cut-outs expose layered openings that recede backward, initiating a play—in terms of the thickness of the paper, the peeling away and flattening—of exposure and concealment. These negative spaces are spectral, calling to mind the void, or bodily orifices. At the same time, though, they lead *out* of the picture, into the space beyond it: not the void, in fact, but the wall. The piece thus departs from conventional notions of the pictorial support as a container, scrambling the category of the *thing* that we're confronted with by moving beyond its boundaries.

Of course, if subtraction here is a way of expanding the picture—merging its layers with those of the frame and architecture—this is in keeping with tendencies of the work at large. Herrera's pieces in cut felt, whose thickness carries a sculptural quality, similarly animate the room, particularly when they are slacked or installed off of the walls; so, too, do installations that employ windows or printed wall coverings as backdrops for smaller works. At its best, art attunes its viewer to new frequencies of perception; Herrera's work has done this for me in the way it evokes an experience of the world, of popular visual culture, of private interiority, as well as the physical space through which we live and move, as imbricated within a constellation of fragmented, interpenetrating layers.

Not Yet Here

It should be noted, of course, that the work rarely dwells in negativity. It breathes and pulsates. Through its ongoing process of fragmentation and recombination, it's often very playful. And in the way it builds a language in which certain aesthetic categories are collapsed—or “contaminated,” as Herrera has put it—it tends to expand rather than foreclose possibilities.

In search of precedents for work that similarly employs negation as a way of broadening the known range of sensations that can be evoked by a picture, my thoughts drift toward certain postwar American artists experimenting with emptiness on the one hand and accumulation the other. Robert Rauschenberg comes to mind, for example—less, perhaps, for his early experiments with erasure than for his monochromatic *White Paintings*, which emptied the picture plane of visual information so that it could become a container for shadows, insects, or other phenomena that might touch it. These works prompted his contemporary, the artist John Cage, to declare, emphatically, “A canvas is never empty.” Cage’s own work with silence, which welcomed the infinitely rich and unpredictable material of ambience into its fold, falls decidedly in this category as well. And, though they are less formally austere, Andy Warhol’s images of mass-produced consumer commodities come to mind for their equally perverse withholding of subjective content one decade later. Voided of the kind of emotional depth expected of art by bourgeois audiences, Warhol’s pictures resonate with other kinds of potential. (Warhol was, in many regards, a virtuoso of negativity: “My mind is like a tape recorder with one button—Erase,” he wrote in his memoir.²) Plenty of ink has been spilled on the relationships between these three giants of postwar American art, but for the present purpose, it bears noting that, for each of them, the act of removing content was tied to a strategy of opacity—refusing the kind of direct access to their own subjectivity, or to transparent meaning, that an audience would expect, and thereby directing perception to places it may not habitually go.

Several decades later, Herrera is working through a very different set of questions and stakes, but I suspect that some of these modalities are embedded in his grammar. While his works have depth, they’re not transparent in the sense that their layers could be peeled back to reveal a core; instead, with its tendencies toward interruption, his work performs multiple, contradictory places and times at once: here and now and then and there, private and mass-produced, inside the frame and out, flat and three-dimensional. This is something that collage, which Herrera’s work expands as a medium, may be particularly adept at doing. Herrera’s sensitivity as a composer (creating relationships through subtraction, concealing, cutting) allows parts that don’t fit together to speak together, opaquely. The interruptions add up to sensuous heft.

Rather than simply empty, negative space is energetic because it’s relational; it’s the breathing room across which individual elements of a composition communicate. I’ve often felt, in front of Herrera’s work, that it’s charged with a hard-to-place quality of potential, as if it’s both here and elsewhere at the same time, speaking from multiple places at once. Previously, I’ve written in passing about this quality in Herrera’s work in relation to the writing of the cultural theorist José Esteban Muñoz, who theorized queerness as a way of being whose

utopian political potential lies in the fact that, like a horizon, it can never be arrived at fully in the present.³ (Understood as an absence, queerness may itself be, in this framing, a kind of negative space.) There are, in fact, threads of queer sexuality and visual culture that run through Herrera's work that are ripe for a closer reading through the lens of thinkers like Muñoz, but the work opens up beyond this as well. You might broaden the lens to include other ways of being and feeling are seemingly foreclosed in the present—marked by absence—and along those lines, it's difficult to ignore the fact that one of Herrera's most frequent wells of source material is the visual archive of modernism, a culture whose legacies of failure, exclusion, and violence continue into the present day. Negation and opacity are two ways by which Herrera's work both signals those absences while also establishing absence itself as part of a poetic syntax.

Mirror

In 2019, Herrera produced a series of clear glass panels featuring fragmented shapes in black glass [page/plate citation]. The panels are displayed on top of a pencil drawing done directly on the wall, resembling the outline of a cut-out. As fragments of empty forms arranged on a transparent ground, these pieces are comprised entirely of negative space.

Each work shares the title *Body and Feet Positions in Relation to Line of Dance*, suggesting they can be read as abstract choreographic scores. Yet in another sense, they are more than diagrams. They perform. Their reflective surfaces shift along with your vantage point, and the black glass casts minute shadows onto the wall behind, turning each panel into a slow-motion moving image. Within the relationship between the glass, the wall, and the surrounding environment, a subtle dance plays out in real time: of containment and overflow, figure and ground, transparency and opacity, fragment and whole, still and moving image.

It's not so surprising that, more recently, this body of work was pushed into confrontation with performing bodies. For an exhibition entitled *Mirror*, Herrera mounted a newer iteration of the glassworks in front of windows facing the Spree River in Berlin. This time, the gestural marks depicted by the glass, as well as the surface of the water outside, were echoed by a wall painting whose blue, gray, and white shapes tangle and cut into one another in a field of broken, refractive gestures. The choreographer Gabriel Galindez Cruz staged a performance with five dancers around the work, their movements responding to and mirroring the forms of Herrera's paintings. At times motionless, at times animated by gestures that were both elegant and stuttering, the dancers seemed to weave themselves into the disjunctive performance of Herrera's work, channeling its moods. Playing out within the negative space bracketed by the work—from the room, to the

window, to the water beyond—dance itself, which in its ephemerality is bounded on both ends by absence, becomes another fragment in Herrera’s choreography. Of parts in flux, coming together and apart.

¹ *Arturo Herrera*. Interview with Josiah McElheny, *BOMB*, Fall 2005, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2005/10/01/arturo-herrera/>.

² Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York: Harcourt, 1975) 199.

³ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).