

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

EL OFICIO DE PINTAR

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN FEDERICO HERRERO AND JENS HOFFMANN

JH: Can you tell me how you got involved with painting? When did you start and what works did you do in the beginning?

FH: I liked painting and drawing ever since I can remember but only developed a clear idea of what to actually do with it when I was about 20. At that point I became very enthusiastic about embracing *el oficio de pintar*.

JH: I remember an early series of paintings called "Fictional Publicity" (2000) that you hung in trees in the streets of San Jose. These paintings, and the way you used them, seem key in regard to an understanding of the different aspects of your work. Can you speak more about this specific series of paintings?

FH: It is true that "Fictional Publicity" brings together quite a number of my concerns. These works are small paintings, mainly on pieces of found wood and sometimes also on little canvases, which I placed into the public space by hanging them in trees. I was interested in changing the meaning and function of an environment by introducing a small object that did not belong there. Occasionally they would stay for weeks but most of them were taken away a few minutes after I placed them. Some of them reappeared in different spots, others just in the place I originally put them. It was fascinating to see this taking place. All those paintings were made in the streets and hung right in the trees in different spots of the city. I think the idea of showing in the streets was also simply a need to find a place to present my work in public since I did not have access to galleries or museums at that time. I

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also wanted to work in direct response to the city and my experiences with it.

JH: I like the concept of how the urban environment of San Jose can not only be an unrestricted space for exhibiting your work but also a studio, a site for artistic production and how both go hand in hand. It seems like a possible solution to the dilemma that Daniel Buren described in his 1979 essay "The Function of the Studio".

FH: You are right. Maybe there is a connection but I only became aware of his text later, after someone pointed it out to me on another occasion.

JH: After doing this series of works you actually started to paint directly onto walls, sidewalks and streets maybe inspired by the tradition of murals in Latin America but also by graffiti and by that developed a practice in which the streets became your canvas. Can you speak more about this?

FH: I was actually not motivated by the mural tradition in Latin America, although it is very strong and important in some places like Mexico and Guatemala. In my country it did not really develop, and graffiti has not been a strong practice either. I was moved by other reasons. Painting on a canvas is fine but for me it was never enough. In Costa Rica I am surrounded by moments of pictorial simplicity, which I am very attracted to. I am fascinated by the way people, who need to communicate something in a very direct way without the barrier of language, use paint. Looking at streets signs, advertisements, billboards and all other pictorial, non-language based forms of communication has influenced me a lot. The remarkable thing for me is that we see them everywhere in the cityscape and that they are placed there often randomly.

JH: What you do seems to me very much like a reaction towards the particular situation of large Latin American cities and their chaotic urban conditions.

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FH: Cities in Central America grow big but there is always an exchange with the rural areas of the country and the outskirts of the cities. The urban does not grow vertically but to the sides, horizontally, it is a kind of continuous periphery, the city never ends but instead it melts with the jungle, the mountains, the plants, the cracks in the street, the dust, the traffic, the buildings, the rain and the people. When I was working with the paintings that I hung in trees I thought a lot about this, wanting to form a landscape that would at the same time represent all of this but also be one of its elements.

JH: I am intrigued by your description of Central American cities. What do you think is specific to San Jose in comparison to other capital cities in Central America? Not only in its shape and size and its urban formation but also in terms of its socio-political realities.

FH: To begin with San Jose is situated in a country that is politically and economically relatively stable. Unlike in other big cities of the region you actually have the chance to find a job here. Violence and crime are low and the city has a large middle and upper-middle class that you do not find anywhere else in Central America to such an extent. San Jose is extremely Americanized and is full of shopping malls, etc. Investors from all over the world are coming here to develop the markets in Latin America making San Jose their headquarters. San Jose has a lot of immigrants mainly from other Central American countries who come here as workers and from Europe and the US who come here to retire. It is marked by a complete lack of urban planning and therefore relatively chaotic. The city centre, downtown San Jose, is based on the old Spanish grid model while the rest of the city feels like Los Angeles, an endless labyrinth of never-ending suburbs.

JH: As you say Costa Rica is by Western standards probably the most developed country in an otherwise very desolated region. How do you feel about this? Do you address this in your work?

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FH: I think I am able to do what I do because of living in Costa Rica. I can take a step back from the immediate problems of the region and look at all of this from a more distant perspective. I do address this in my work I suppose by simply not engaging with the issues and problems you described. They do not exist in my life or where I live and appear rather remote. Not that we do not have social inequality, poverty, etc. but it is by far not as bad as in the rest of Latin America. I am, and most Costa Ricans are, somehow privileged in this sense.

JH: As an artist from Central America who is exhibiting primarily abroad, you have a good knowledge and understanding of the international, globalized art context. How would you describe the state of contemporary art in Costa Rica in comparison to that?

FH: The art scene in Costa Rica is very active but unfortunately very little recognized beyond Central America. There are plenty of interesting artists and San Jose has a number of very lively spaces for contemporary artistic practice. I think the situation here is in good shape, especially in comparison to the other countries in the region. This goes back to Costa Rica's unusual economic situation that we talked about before. But all of this is of course not as developed as in Europe or North America, and especially a critical and more theoretically minded discourse is completely missing.

JH: Do you think that the journeys outside of Costa

Rica have had an influence on your work? How would you describe this influence?

FH: The journeys gave me the possibility to meet people in other places. That was very important. The possibility to exchange ideas and thoughts with other artists coming from distinctly different places of the world was very influential. I guess that any kind of information has some impact on the work done, the exchange of information and awareness produces a kind of excitement about possibilities, which translates into my work.

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JH: In addition to that you seem to work often in a very context specific way and to be aware of the realities of the places you are working in. I think the piece you did for the Bienal De La Habana in 2003 is a very good example of that. Can you speak a bit more about that work?

FH: I had visited the Bienal de la Habana before I was invited to participate and noticed that no Cuban was actually coming to see it. This situation repeats itself in most of the international Biennales, the visitors to the event are mostly tourists, in this case so-called art tourists. I wanted to do something that was useful for the locals and for people who did not necessarily care that much about art specially but who had very strong feelings regarding their political situation and a lack of optimism about a better life, as is the case of many Cubans. I did realize that I could not change this myself but to a certain extent there are ways to bring a bit of joy and optimism, and besides I was trying to step away from the structure of the exhibition itself, that is how I thought of making a project in a public place where actually almost no tourists go. I painted a world map on the bottom of a public swimming pool, since they are not allowed to leave the country it was a metaphor for being free to go, actually to swim, to anyplace in the world one wants to. The painting is still there and the pool is still in use. The world map on the bottom of the pool in Cuba later developed into four different versions of the same piece for the World Expo in Nagoya in Japan (2004). It took of course a very different direction because Japan and Cuba have totally different circumstances but they are both islands and the element of the water was key. It shapes the people who live there and how they relate to the rest of the world. For Japan I was more interested in focusing on making people aware of global warming and how the poles of the earth are melting and how this is becoming a more and more critical situation for the geography as we know it today. The four maps depicted relations between land and water and water erasing land and countries disappearing and so on. I am interested in how a painting can have a more dynamic function, a much more direct one.

JH: When did you actually exhibit abroad for the first time?

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FH: It was for a group show done between Puerto Rico and Costa Rica entitled "Puertos y Costas Ricas" in 2000 that was related to the idea that these two countries are always confused. The first part of the project took place in Puerto Rico the second part in Costa Rica. It was a very interesting form of exchange as it was less about producing an exhibition but more about art as a place for meetings and conversations in an almost old fashioned educational sense.

JH: Talking of education, where did you study?

FH: I studied painting in New York; but I did not properly graduate. When I finished high school in San Jose I started to study architecture at the university. I did well but realized that I was not going to be an architect. I wanted to study art and convinced my family to let me go to an art school. I studied painting at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn for three semesters. Yet, I was not comfortable with the art scene in New York and was not sure if I wanted to be part of all of that. I decided to come back to Costa Rica and did all sorts of things but always continued painting until I realized that this was really what I wanted to do and began to get involved more seriously.

JH: Let us go back to your work. After the pieces that you did in the cityscape like the "Carefully Repainted Yellow Areas" (2003) for example, you moved back again into proper exhibition spaces and the studio. How did this happen?

FH: "Carefully Repainted Yellow Areas" was something I really enjoyed doing, it was an exercise in space and a way to embrace the context I live in. I used to talk with a friend in school about becoming house painters and making invisible art, I was so interested in monochrome paint that when I went back home from New York I found San Jose to be an amazing canvas to develop all these personal ideas. I started to bring elements from my street paintings back into the gallery when I was actually asked to do so. It was a form of cut-and-paste, and the transition back into the gallery and the actual studio took a while, it was not something that happened from one day to the next. For a long

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time I did both. I realized that there was something interesting going on bringing the street paintings into the gallery, they had a different quality in the clearly marked territory of the white cube. I very much enjoy to work and to play with the architecture of exhibition spaces, which is another reason for me to go back but I also never actually lost interest in making paintings on canvases.

JH: It seems as if the canvas is a refuge for you to discuss more personal issues while working outside in the city on site-specific projects is a way of reaching out to discuss more socio-political issues. Is that correct?

FH: I think you are right. When painting on a canvass you know there is no transgression, it acquires a rhythm of production that is very related to yourself. I find that important in order to keep a balance with making site-specific works on what I would describe as *live* surfaces. One deals with a personal universe, the other deals with a social vocation.

JH: What works did you present in your last solo exhibition in Düsseldorf?

FH: The idea of the street as a studio that we spoke about before led me to consider private spaces also as a temporary studio in which there are elements that I like to play with, so I would say that improvisation is a very important aspect of the work when I do a project for a gallery space. In general I find it difficult to differentiate one show from the next, what I do is to have a sense of continuity in the paintings that I do on canvas, as if they are all one painting, this idea that other artists have been developing which is to treat the work as a landscape that is ever expanding. I am not working on a conceptual basis and I do not have a plan of what I want to do before I come into a gallery space. The exhibition in Düsseldorf consisted of many different elements like a logbook or record of my personal activities. I mainly presented paintings on canvas. They depict the place I live in and the immediate memory of what I did during the day I painted them. I also made wall paintings in the gallery and transit lines on the floor. The paintings are a kind of exercise in memory, a personal

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diary of my life. I use the same method that Roberto Matta used for his work when he started from the white emptiness of the surface to develop a form of mental landscape. It is my own scan of the brain if you will.

JH: How was the exhibition composed as an overall installation, how did the canvases and the wall paintings correspond with each other?

FH: It is a game of various colour fields in which the canvases and the site-specific works create a dialog on a number of levels. I used the gallery as a temporary studio and intentionally left traces of this activity in the space. Together with that I showed rather straightforward paintings. This combination is a way to experience painting in a more physical way. But I think there is another reason for this composition, which has to do with the commodity aspect of the paintings. The site-specific works are not for sale. This is not necessarily a gesture against the market but rather a gesture in terms of the dynamics that result from that contradiction.

JH: I think this is very interesting especially given the fact that paintings are always considered as *made* for the market. Can you speak a little bit about some of the individual works and their relationship to each other?

FH: Each painting is a continuation of the other. I usually work on them together at the same time and at a certain point they begin to function in terms of what is lacking in the others and in relation to the question of how they can complement each other and have a dialogue. I think the paintings in the end all tell the same story, they narrate a moment in time and they represent personal constructions of places and ideas. The relation that I try to establish in the space is one in terms of rhythm and memory, because many of the actions that are depicted through the drawings inside the paintings repeat themselves in the other pieces.

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JH: Can you tell me more about the little creatures that you place repeatedly into your paintings?

FH: They are aliens. They are all in my head and are simply a very personal way to interpret my daily life. Although they seem to relate to the style of cartoons I am less interested in those connotations. They are rather mental forms, like a distorted personal memory from my daily experiences. They represent the ideas that come into our minds, sometimes only lasting a split-second.

JH: Before you mentioned Roberto Matta, are there other historical influences on your work?

FH: I became aware of the work of Roberto Matta just before I went to New York. When I arrived there I got to know the work of his son, Gordon Matta-Clark, who is by now much better known. I think that what Gordon was doing physically to buildings Roberto was doing to canvasses. I see my work existing in-between those two practices.

JH: What are your plans for the future? Into what direction do you see your work developing?

FH: I am planning to stay in Costa Rica for the time being. I feel the urge to do more work specifically for this context and to continue to develop my work within the local conditions. There is a wonderful public swimming pool near my house which is very popular and which has huge areas of concrete around it where people walk and play. I am very interested in developing a work for that site.