

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Federico Herrero: painting as critical action.

A painting by Federico Herrero is a chromatic intervention in the world, a transfer from canvas to city. At first sight, this amiable painting surprises the viewer with different possibilities of contemplation. As it seems, the artist proposes a scene that, given its incapacity to render the sublime, could offer a sensorial feast of glowing colors. This is precisely the case with Herrero's works on show at the Kunstverein Freiburg, which comprise five large canvases measuring up to 500 x 300cm or 650 x 250cm, the *Mask* series, and interventions on the gallery wall¹. In this exhibition, a mutual attraction approximates color fields that unfold into a continuum, gather together, or yet reach a harmonious cohesion in the actual space of architecture. Hues of blue, green, pink, and warm colors are shed in the form of spatially arranged energy layers, in epidemic propagation, somewhat like a musical notation. Herrero's pictorial oeuvre travels between the intimist realm of the visual language subject and the inscription of painting in the public space. No matter how abstract they may seem, these pictorial interventions that function as operative mechanisms of Herrero's color phenomenology are much more complex than the perception of both the physical-chemical issues and the singing lightness of his color ensembles. Federico Herrero performs through the arrangement of "signifying chains" of color – here the reference is to Lacanian theory – among materials and procedures, by means of different pictorial actions and strategies devised for the social insertion of painting, and for the redefinition of art's political status, starting from the subject of perception in a psychogeographic dimension. A phenomenological analysis of Herrero's production should seek to perceive the layers of meaning beyond the immediately sensorial involvement and the more apparent signs of painting. The artist's Costa Rican hometown, San José, serves as his laboratory for performing in the world.

Of Martians and parataxis

In Federico Herrero's oeuvre, space is built with energy fields articulated through color. A slight tension permeates these fields, somewhat as aftershocks triggered by displaced tectonic plates. The artist's will of painting is also a desire for color. The different media (oil, acrylic or spray) that he uses for each color determine differences in terms of corporeality, speed of the material, and space modulation. The brushstroke is slow and viscous. The color spray is swift. Some color areas become energy vortices. Every added color transforms the harmony and the cohesive visual ties linking the color fields. Risk and improvisation are in attendance.

In Herrero's painting, color zones tend to be perceived as amorphous fields that reject geometric form as well as any outline representation of a being or thing. These zones are small and variable expanses of assorted solid colors. The artist's paintings may suggest that a stall in the rationalist geometry of color grids has affected the concrete mathematical logic of Richard P. Lohse's *Thirty systematic color rows* (1950/1955), Ellsworth Kelly's *Colors for a large wall* (1951), or even Gerhard Richter's

¹ The exhibition "Federico Herrero" was curated by Felicity Lunn.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Farbfelder n. 354 (1974), which presents at random all the existing color tones in 1,025 rectangles. It is as though Herrero's sinuous, indefinite forms could recover an index of paint liquidity and break away from the rigidity of form, while conserving individual color zones intact. Ultimately, they render the irreducibility of freedom in face of geometric reason.

In Federico Herrero's painting, unexpected beings emerge from drawing and populate the color space. This issue blasted off in his easel paintings of 2005. Although said drawing performs on empty spaces between color fields, its figures are triggered by linework. Herrero elucidates the nature of these Lilliputian figures that claim for themselves the status of formless beings: "They are Martians," he states. The painter is not concerned with associating these figures with cartoon characters. "Martians" are imaginary beings, or inhuman humanoids capable of engaging in an extremely disturbing, albeit improbable, relationship with earthlings. "They are all in my head and are simply a personal way to interpret my daily life. (...) They are rather mental forms, like a distorted personal memory from my daily experiences. They represent the ideas that come to our minds, sometimes to last only a split second"². This necessary disturbing relation is what confers meaning to Herrero's works, given that color alone – or perhaps just the drawing – is insufficient to structure a signifying form: to this end, these elements must be juxtaposed and paradoxically integrated through uncanniness (*Unheimliche*).

As an essential phenomenological instance in Herrero's painting, color is liable to relate closely with pure drawing. Stripped of pictorial values, "Martian" figures assert themselves as graphic occurrences. Herrero's project reinstates the controversy about the prevalence of drawing or color in painting that historically involved Alberti, Leonardo, Vasari, Francisco Pacheco, El Greco, van Mander, Titian and Tintoretto³. Despite having stated that "painting and drawing say the same thing," Matisse affirmed that drawing "is a painting made with reduced means"⁴. However, even without stirring antagonism, Herrero sets the two technical procedures apart. In *Arte de la Pintura* (1654), Francisco Pacheco appreciates the value of drawing ("materia substancial de la pintura"⁵) as a means to acknowledge its necessary functionality for painting. In Herrero's work, drawing could be described as de-substantiated painting, at best. Above all, it stands as non-painting amid highly effusive colors. The painter establishes a paratactic relationship between painting and drawing, or between abstraction and figuration. Without a structural nexus connecting these polarities, the fragile existence of his work lies exposed to direct sunlight and vandalism. Yet Herrero upholds the contradiction. His parataxis qualifies colors and Martians, or they cohesively counterbalance painting's permanence and ephemerality. And thus, Herrero's paintings are structured like centaurs: half solid pure color, half zone of untreated canvas containing drawings; half body, half idea; half abstraction, half figurability.

The unpredictable and heterogeneous proliferation of colors and linework turns each painting into a "significant set." The paratactic relationship⁶ problematizes causality, beginning from the juxtaposition

² *El Oficio de Pintar: A Conversation Between Federico Herrero and Jens Hoffmann*. From the artist's archives, hereafter abbreviated FH/JH.

³ See Pierre Magnard. "La couleur ou le dessin?" In: Michel Blay et alii. *La Couleur*. Brussels: Ousia, 1993, p. 96-106.

⁴ Henri Matisse. *Matisse on Art*. Jack D. Flam (ed.). Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1995, p. 194.

⁵ *Arte de la Pintura*. Barcelona: L.E.D.A. Las Ediciones de Arte, 1968, p. 9.

⁶ Parataxis, from the Greek "placing side by side". In the view of some authors, the most meaningful paratactic relationship would imply an antagonism between juxtaposed things.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

of said color zones and drawing. More than being logically related, color and drawing come up concomitantly juxtaposed on a same surface, negotiating their vicinity. An energy system keeps them together, cohesively singing. This situation strangely created by color and graphics brings to mind Rimbaud's *Sonnet of the Vowels*:

"A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels,

I shall tell, one day, of your mysterious origins."

Like in Rimbaud's poem, color abounds in Herrero's space. The paratactic sharing of a same space by Martians and colors somewhat resembles the attendance, via alphabetical disorder, of the inversion of the letters U and O, or yet the chromatic vowels in Rimbaud's poem. The vowels are cast in a different manner, beginning with the letter alpha and ending with the letter omega of the Greek alphabet. Colors and vowels are brought together so they can take the leap that constitutes the poetic mystery of such discretionary coexistence of characters and colors, language melody, and its homophonies. The modulation of color and drawing is better sustained by the antagonistic association of painting with the drawing of mental figures. Whereas color creeps into the poem, writing sketches Martian figures among colors.

Viscous viewpoints

Small eyes (white blotches with a central black dot) are scattered throughout color zones on canvases as well as on pictorial actions in/on buildings. In Herrero's extensive pictorial display at Freiburg, viewers come across a single "omnivalent" eye that brings to mind Odile Redon's *L'Oeil, comme un ballon bizarre se dirige vers l'infini* (English title: *The Eye, like a strange balloon*, 1882). In Federico Herrero's paintings, the eyes are anchors of the gaze, they function like the dark purple circles in paintings by Beatriz Milhazes, such as *Peel me a Grape* and *Macho e Fêmea* [Male and Female] (1995). In the history of the monochrome, paintings that include Picabia's *Le Noir des Noirs* and *Carte à Jouer (Lâcheté de la Barbárie Subtile)* (1949) and Miró's *Bleu I* (1962) contain circles that impart a distinct energy to the solid color field.

In certain instances of Federico Herrero's body of works, as for example in *Life Surfaces* (2005) and *Passengers* (2007), the numerous eyes on the surface confer on painting the proliferating gaze of a Medusa. These graphic events suddenly mirror the spectator's very political performance. If up until that time the gaze traveled along the propagation of colors, now the movement is discontinued. These zones are like eyes staring at the viewer and capturing his/her eye movement. The gaze is viscous and inquisitive. Adhesiveness of the libido ("*Klebrigkeit der Libido*," in Freudian theory) is the capacity of the libido to cling to an object. Painting and eye exchange glances. In Herrero's oeuvre, the chiasm is the point at which painting looks back to, and interrogates, the viewer. The painter propounds a bodily scheme, thereby setting forth a phenomenology of perception that situates the viewer inside the painting, in a process of adhesiveness between subject and the object of the visible in ongoing reversibility. His question could very well be: How does an object perceive the subject? The

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

reversibility of the visible and the tangible is determinant in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's logic of perception⁷. The philosopher's classical argument propped on a quotation by Paul Valéry guides the understanding of Herrero's practice: "It is by lending his body to the world that the painter changes the world into paintings"⁸. Every individual is both the subject and the object of his/her own perceptions⁹. Merleau-Ponty assumes that "since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible [body and object] belong to the same world"¹⁰. Within this phenomenological context, the tangible in Herrero's painting gives back to the painter that which he had lent it. This reversibility in his paintings – similar to that in the oeuvres of Picabia, Miró, or Milhazes – establishes a transitivity from one body to another, between the subject (the painting) and the object of perception (the spectator). Both are seen by, and see the viewer in relations between body and object. Herrero propounds a shift from the condition of body-subject to that of body-object, and vice-versa. In a city, the entanglement of gazes and contradictions is omnipresent. Herrero gives an active role to his painting within this lively political play. Painting is the pole of phenomenological operation that involves the human body and also the mind in a dialectical operation¹¹. The "intentional fabric"¹² into which Herrero builds the phenomenology of his painting requires that the image confronting the viewer be a potentially dialectical image, and that it points to other issues in the artist's body of works.

Easel painting

Notwithstanding his pictorial action in social environments and his keen political connotations, Federico Herrero revealed nearly antithetical positions in the interview he gave to Jens Hoffmann, when he affirmed that "painting on a canvas is fine, but for me it was never enough" and that "I also never actually lost interest in making paintings on canvas" (FH/JH). Herrero shares this lived experience with Pablo Leon de la Barra: "When painting on a canvas, you know there is no transgression; it acquires a rhythm of production that is related to yourself. [...] One deals with a personal universe, the other deals with a social vocation"¹³. To Federico Herrero, painting is an inactual experience of color. In addition to not holding a chromatic memory of places, its future is sheer ephemerality. On a certain exhibition, the artist reveals that "finally, the main aspect of the show was the pigment and how it functioned inside the space, it was about pure pigment" (FH/PLB). The permanent need to experiment with the body and the sensuality of the pigment indicates that this experience is also incomplete. Here such incompleteness – "never enough" – is empowered as a lack (*manque*) that mobilizes desire and is produced in the fields of easel painting as well as in social space. One would contain the lack of the other. One would be the counteracting of the other. "There

⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Alphonso Lingis (trans.). Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1969, p. 142.

⁸ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays*. Carleton Dallery (trans.). Chicago: Northwestern University Press, p. 162

⁹ Claude Lefort discussed this issue when addressing the reversibility of the subject and the object of perception or the relations between flesh and otherness in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. See "Flesh and Otherness". In: Galen A. Johnson & Michael B. Smith (ed.). *Ontology and alterity in Merleau-Ponty*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Intertwining – The Chiasm". In: *The Visible and the Invisible*, op. cit., p. 134.

¹¹ See Georges Didi-Huberman. *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*. Paris, Les Éditions du Seuil, 1992, p.

¹² Expression coined by Merleau-Ponty in *Signes*. Paris, Gallimard, 1960, p. 211.

¹³ *Immersion in Mental Landscapes. A conversation between Federico Herrero and Pablo Leon de la Barra*. From the artist's archives. Hereafter FH/PLB.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

is only desire and the social, and nothing else," Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari wrote¹⁴. And so it is in Herrero's painting too.

Unnatural landscapes

"I employ 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" (FH/JF), Federico Herrero stated, showing his greater interest in morphology and the imaginary in landscape. Informed neither by the "real" nor the symbolic, Herrero's landscape painting corresponds to the imaginary in terms of R. S. I., the principles of which Lacan consolidated in the *Seminar XXII: Real, Symbolic, Imaginary*, in 1975. Free of any surrealizing perspectives and references to comics, Herrero's mental landscapes resemble Matta's "psychological morphologies"¹⁵. However, the differentiation between Herrero and Matta should be carefully made.

In the early part of this decade, Federico Herrero worked signs, indices and traces of urban life into paintings on found pieces of wood and small canvases. These pictures were scattered throughout San José, in Costa Rica. Some paintings were left outside windows and on sidewalks in residential neighborhoods. Others, such as *Bruno Escolier propuso en su informe estas palabras y le valieron el despido* (2001), were hung on trees along streets or in Parque la Sabana¹⁶. A few were affixed on traffic light posts on busy streets so that drivers could appreciate the landscapes. These *Pinturas Callejeras* (2000-2002) are true apparatuses for detonating perception. "I was interested in changing the meaning and function of an environment by introducing a small object that did not belong there," the painter explained about the project *Fictional Publicity* (FH/JF)¹⁷. Here what we have is a semiological landscape with metalinguistic characteristics, a landscape within a landscape. In Herrero's *Fictional Publicity* as well as in his canvases, these aspects render painting's forest of signs. In these terms, his objects relate to Roland Barthes' theory in *Mythologies*¹⁸. When [Costa Rican art critic and curator] Virginia Perez-Ratton brought up Herrero's "urge to paint", she pointed out his quest for communication. However, the artist's drawing is a pre-syntactic linework¹⁹— and, we could add, one impelled by the will of painting. The critic provided the reading key to Herrero's production when she affirmed that the city has been turned into his "giant urban canvas" and that he views "life in general as an enormous changing canvas"²⁰. Herrero's objective was to create a meta-landscape that brought together these indices taken from the San José urban fabric, which would enable him to compose the landscape. The artist experimented with a double impossibility of tautology. This is not a representation of Nature. Although Herrero does not depict any San José scene, his painting features

¹⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998, p. 29.

¹⁵ In Pastor Mellado. *Matta: mal-estar da origem, origem do mal-estar*. In: *Núcleo Histórico: Antropofagia e Histórias de Canibalismo*. Paulo Herkenhoff and Adriano Pedrosa. 24th São Paulo International Biennial. São Paulo, Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998, p. 309.

¹⁶ Herrero's e-mail to the author on September 08, 2008.

¹⁷ *El Oficio de Pintar: A Conversation Between Federico Herrero and Jens Hoffmann*. In: Federico Herrero. Düsseldorf: Sies + Höke, 2006, unnumbered. Hereafter abbreviated FH/JH.

¹⁸ Annette Lavers (trans.). New York: Hill & Wang, 1972. In this book, Barthes announces the notion of "forest of signs", p. 48.

¹⁹ Here I refer to Jacques Bauffell, cited in Pastor Mellado. In: op. cit., p. 308.

²⁰ "L'urgence de peindre: Federico Herrero". In: *Urgent Painting*. Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 2002, p. 112.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

an indexical attendance of landscape; it introduces the notion of landscape within landscape, the return of found material to its urban origin, and the collation of painting and its referent, "San José." Herrero stands as the consciousness of this urban scene flooded with information and effluents. "The landscape thinks itself in me," Cézanne once said²¹. In Federico Herrero, the landscape could be, paradoxically, a perverse double of the locus that establishes an amiable relationship with the viewer – a participant of sorts of the "enormous changing canvas."

Federico Herrero only paints landscapes, though he never envisages a picture from the viewpoint of *Homo natura*. For this reason, his coloring can never be seen as a contemporary attunement of a *Naturphilosophie* representing the oneness of the Spirit and Nature²². According to Justo Pastor Mellado²³, Herrero is also distant from the "subjectivation of the natural world" that Matta engendered on the basis of Chilean geography. The painting *Here, Sir Fire, eat!* (1942) is exemplary. In turn, Herrero's natural sunset landscape (the real) in *Rooftop for Watching Athens Sunset* (2007) requires a building and paint. Its color could not be Newtonian, either. The atmosphere blue in this picture contrasts with the Athens air pollution that functions as a cultural filter between the gaze and the sun. The blue on the floor and walls seemingly exhausts the painting in its coincidence with an architectural finishing material (the wall paint). By way of perverse paths, the magnificent iconic monochrome becomes the apparatus of enunciation and representation of culture²⁴. The cityscape of Medellín (*Landscape*, 2007) features the city as its chaotic frame. The painting executed in San Francisco (*Garden Party*, 2008) puts landscape back on the wall so as to block the view over a garden. Even when alluding to the human face with anthropomorphic images (as in the canvases *Masks* and *Landscapes* shown at the Kunstverein Freiburg, 2008) or the imaginary (*Mental Landscapes and Transit Lines*, Milan: Viafarini, 2004), Federico Herrero reasserts the landscape characters of his painting. His metalinguistic focus is the landscape within the landscape: the drawing ("mental landscapes") interspacing colors, the pictorial action that alters the cityscape, and painting shown in the city. Herrero's program is not about mobilizing a color grammar to describe the world: he aims at designing a geopsychical world atlas to relate colors throughout the continents.

Studio

To set off experiences disconnected from control by prejudice and the "art" institution, Federico Herrero practices painting in a clash with the everyday life of his occasional, random or involuntary public. Some of his actions neither are viewed by spectators institutionalized by the "painting" category, nor address the place for art defined in Guy Debord's "the society of the spectacle." Herrero's institutional criticism refers to two spaces of the art system in its stages of production and circulation of goods in the associative flow of art economics: the studio and the museum as signifying spaces. These spaces are

²¹ In Merleau-Ponty. "Cézanne's Doubt" (1945). In: *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Galen A. Johnson, Michael B. Smith. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1993.

²² See Maurice Elie. "Lumière et Couleurs de Goethe à la Naturphilosophie du XIXe Siècle". In: Michel Blay et alii. *La Couleur*. Op. cit., p. 138.

²³ *Matta: mal-estar da origem, origem do mal-estar*. In: Op. cit., p. 306.

²⁴ See Louis Marin, *To Destroy Painting*. Hypothesis 2 in chapter "Denegation". Mette Hjort (trans.). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 45.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

the artist's allusions to the alienating and schizophrenic relations established between capital, academic power, and the art system²⁵. Above all, his criticism represents a disparaging attack on the unfungibility²⁶ of the commodity "painting", always strengthened by the fetishizing exploration of the aura as value added. The work is unique and perishable. This is the dilemma that the painter poses to the market.

Usually there are only a few paintings to be seen at Federico Herrero's studio in San José, Costa Rica. The studio is the space of said lack. Therefore, in his social model for art, the artist also rejects the notion of studio as an idealized space of creation, "ivory tower," "purgatory of artworks," "selection yard," and a boutique selling ready-to-wear clothing that can be shown as artwork to critics, historians, and curators, according to artist Daniel Buren's acid description²⁷. Considering that Herrero's painting is inscribed in public spaces throughout the world, his studio ceases to be tower, purgatory, yard, and boutique of his own art.

Color in 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," Herrero stated (FH/JH). While demonstrating his productive dialogue with architecture²⁸, the artist's painting also delivers institutional criticism by intervening in restrooms, exhibition halls, and walls of museums and cultural centers throughout the world. The restroom is the place of the socially unmentionable. Like a subversive note, Herrero's pictorial actions in museum bathrooms subtly provide some degree of reference to scatology in the building, even if they never address an abject program. The intervention *Servicio Sanitario* at the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo of San José, Costa Rica (2000) and the exhibition *Tropical Institutional Critique* held at *WC3 - The White Cubicle Toilet Gallery* (The George and Dragon Public House, London, 2005)²⁹ are exemplary. As signs of the sensorial relation between art and life, Herrero's colors now ironize the institution by perversely displacing the image of the gallery "white cube" space to the "white cubicle" in a water closet. Furthermore, with his actions the painter subtly attacks the white cube ideology. In his essays of seminal importance for the discussion of the modern space for art, Brian O'Doherty notes that "the ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is 'art.' The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself"³⁰. Herrero acknowledges the criticism to the white cube. Gently, his pictorial interventions subvert the continuous idealization of the art space as an "aesthetic chamber" in which the outside world does not enter and

²⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (trans.). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

²⁶ In Civil Law, unfungible assets are assets that cannot be substituted for others, even if they belong in the same class, as for example race horses or original works of art.

²⁷ "Fonction de l'atelier" (1971). In: *Ecrits*. Bordeaux, CAPC-Musée d'Art Contemporain, 1991, vol. 1, p. 195-205.

²⁸ In 1966, Herrero enrolled in the school of architecture at the Universidad Veritas in San José, Costa Rica. Sometime later he left the university to take up art studies at The Pratt Institute, in New York.

²⁹ The gallery was created by artist, curator and dealer Pablo Leon de la Barra in the restroom of The George and Dragon Public House, in London. The name White Cubicle is an allusion to the gallery White Cube. Jens Hoffmann extended an invitation for the pub to show at the ICA of London, in 2005. In 2005, Herrero invited Hoffmann to curate his exhibition at the White Cubicle. Information taken from an e-mail from the artist to the author on September 5, 2008.

³⁰ *Inside the White Cube: Notes on the Gallery Space*. San Francisco: Lapis Press, 1976, p. 24

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

life is kept out. For this reason, the artist's actions in museum spaces should not be considered separately from actions in open collective venues, domesticated neither by the "technology of aesthetics" nor by art's social control in the white cube.

In the Kunstverein Freiburg building, Federico Herrero created a sort of interior architectural scene. This is his most recent and complex intervention in architecture informed by the Freudian notion of transference ("Übertragung"). The artist created a painting-environment in which to show his paintings (or vice-versa, his paintings requested a gallery-painting) as a way to integrate his political relations with painting itself. He rendered reliefs and spatial illusion, asserted surfaces and the continuity of easel painting and pictorial actions on walls, and – by describing nexuses between the building stories – explored the relations between architectural planes (floor and wall) and the perspectival projection of the painting onto the floor in this pictorial *Gesamtkunstwerk* (complete artwork) that continually engages the viewer's gaze and movement as artwork engine and subject of transference.

Public space

Federico Herrero does not relate with the city as a mere physical support; rather, he inscribes his painting in the urban fabric with its textures, architectural dysfunctions, dizzying movements, fluid expansion, and networks of gazes of "passersby" and "users". The place makes itself into painting. Herrero's painting announces its purpose to act on the public sphere, to intervene in it with a landscape. According to the artist, the intentionality behind the public inscription of the artwork is to prevent its isolation from the real world (FH/JH). First and foremost, the painting penetrates life, but in its turn life also penetrates this permeable and incomplete painting without the projection of signifieds by the Other. Herrero's painting has no pretense of being such a totalizing instrument as a map of the modern city³¹. At times, painting itself feigns an interrupted and non-totalized pictorial act. Within this political context, it plays the role of relational significant and acquires the status of a social becoming. Its meanings are carved by the environments in which painting is inscribed, including the host environment. Notwithstanding the communication challenges and inadequacies, Herrero resorts to the striking sensorial reality of color to take on cities with a certain degree of invisibility. Far from being graffiti, this painting inscribes color in everyday city life. Herrero's pictures lack eagerness to make the public space into its authorial territory, the utmost narcissistic assertion of the subject in the collective space. To a large extent, and having been stripped of its transgressive character, graffiti uses the city to grow tame in museums and private homes. When acting upon the collective space, Herrero is not looking for a larger audience, and his work is certainly not reduced to the urban locus of color.

As an expansion of the symbolical potential of architecture, the requalification of places converts painting into a diagram of relations involving art and society. This social vocation affects the urban chaos and its fragmentary space, or yet proposes dialectic games at schools or swimming pools. The painter performs as a social agent beyond the instance of form development. His purpose is to re-signify the lived experience of color in the collective space, be it outdoors (street or swimming pool) or

³¹ Nelson Brissac Peixoto. *Mapear Novos Territórios*. In: *Sentidos da Arte Contemporânea*. Fernando Pessoa and Kátia Canton (org.). Vila Velha: Museu Vale do Rio Doce, 2007, p. 170.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

indoor (the institution). Herrero is also aware of Gabriel Orozco's interventions. In *Turista Maluco* (1991), Orozco activates the space of the street market at Cachoeira, in Bahia (Brazil) by placing "color" (oranges) in empty wooden trays. According to Orozco, it is in time that the artistic fact takes place, rather than in space. "The moment the work is introduced is very important because that is when it becomes public and starts communicating with other words,"³² the artist said. Herrero's pictorial actions are modes of overcoming the artist's isolation from the non-aficionado audience by proposing non-institutional relations with painting.

"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 now much better known. I think what Gordon was doing physically to buildings Roberto was doing to canvases. I see my work existing in-between those two practices" (FH/JH). Federico Herrero's interest in the work of Matta-Clark is consistent with his practice. Once admitting the social vocation of Herrero's painting, however, the idea of "social painting" or "socially engaged art" is discarded. Matta-Clark is informed by the situationism of Guy Debord (with whose ideas he became acquainted in 1968, in Paris), as much as certain projects by Herrero relate to this same political source. The status of social agency apparatus of Herrero's painting thrives within the register that the artist defines as "public service". His "painting policy" is not about an ideology about painting, or an ideology infiltrated in painting; rather, it is a way for painting to belong actively in society. It proposes an organic and dialectic relation involving painting, building, city, and society.

Arte Callejera (Street art)

Neither graffiti nor mural painting: Federico Herrero's method emerges from his fantasy to confer existence on the invisible (the "inner framework of the visible") as a phenomenological program in the city: "In the past, I used to talk to my school friend about us becoming house painters and making invisible art," he stated (FH/JH). In fact, this is the crucial challenge that Merleau-Ponty poses in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) – a milestone in post-Husserlian phenomenology, exemplified in relations involving thought, extension, and horizon³³. To address the cultural structuring of the gaze, Herrero's *Rooftop for Watching Athens Sunset* (2007) propounds a territorial machine in which *Homo natura* realizes that the experience of the natural landscape takes root in painting itself. Something similar is situated in Herrero's oeuvre, both physically and metaphorically. Thus, to view this sunset or an exhibition such as the one held in Freiburg is an attitude typical of *Homo historia*. The work's political agency bears no trace of ideological proselytism. Herrero's art is not aimed at changing society; it is intended at making critical modes of perception available to society. It is only natural, therefore, that the artist draws away from the Latin American muralist tradition with his revolutionary programs. "I didn't experience this paternalistic role of the mural painting (...) we don't have that in Costa Rica, we know about it but we don't experience it because it is not present," he admits (FJ/PLB).

³² According to Maria Minera. *Conversación com Gabriel Orozco*, December 2006. Available online at <http://www.letraslibres.com> on 25 June 2006.

³³ *The Visible and the Invisible*. Alphonso Lingis (trans.), Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1969, p. 152.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

Herrero's apparent political aloofness leads to Fernand Léger's concern with the integration of art and architecture in the reconstruction of European cities in the post-War period – a reconstruction involving murals and the public space. Léger affirmed that "a bare wall is a dead surface; a colored wall becomes an alive surface" (*L'architecture moderne et la couleur, ou la création d'un nouvel espace vital*, 1946)³⁴. To Herrero, the "vital space" of painting in the city doubles as its own *raison d'être*, and for this reason he differs from Franz Ackermann, who incorporates city symbols and references in his painting. The city itself comprises the significant whole of Herrero's painting. In their turn, Léger and Hélio Oiticica were influenced by De Stijl: to them, color is not a rhetorical medium. In *Peinture murale* (1950), Léger problematized space, pointing out the need to create an "other space", since easel painting was losing popularity³⁵. Herrero's singularity may be expressed by a comparison with Léger and Oiticica. Beginning in the 1960s, Oiticica proposed events in connection with the cultural framework of *favelas* (Brazilian shantytowns), as for example in *Tropicália* (1966-1967), that later involved other aspects of Rio de Janeiro and were viewed as "urban poetic events". The connections of the two Latin-American artists spring from the differences between the *Cosmococa CC5 HENDRIX-WAR* program (1973) developed by Oiticica and Neville d'Almeida, and *Life Surfaces* (Tokyo, 2005) or *Hamacarium* (Singapore, 2006) painted by Herrero. Despite being antagonistic to Marinetti's futuristic model ("*Noi vogliamo glorificare la guerra – sola igiene del mondo*" / We want to glorify war – the only hygiene of the world), *Cosmococa CC5* included the expansion of the aesthetic field by assuming implications for the area of criminology and a moral opposition to the war. The artist's battle is another matter. Herrero's *hamacas* (hammocks) allude to an ecological outlook that involves the spectator, in the reception stage, based on a Latin American tradition that has the affective or perceptive understanding as a repetition that functions, through rhythms and *ritornelli* (refrains), as a support of existence³⁶.

In the urban intervention titled *Carefully Repainted Yellow Areas* (2001), in San José, Herrero employed the yellow used in urban street signage. Here, color becomes an instrument of miscommunication. "*Carefully Repainted Yellow Areas* was something I really enjoyed doing," Herrero stated. Furthermore, the dimensions of the support do not hierarchize the application of color in the public space: the artist's capacity of integration with a given site does. "It was an extreme in space, and a way to embrace the context I live in. I was so interested in monochrome paint that when I went back home from New York I found San José to be an amazing canvas to develop all these personal ideas" (FH/JH). Costa Rica is a country with exemplary ecological balance and its capital, San José, is a laboratory of tropical architecture informed by the leading ideas of Bruno Stagno. Yet, in discretionary manner, Federico Herrero paints the sidewalk yellow to upset the technical objectivity that informs the use of the conventional sign color. The intervention misleads recognition, it disorients the viewer. Here, the intentionality of the action differs from that of such programs as Ellen Harvey's *New York Beautification Project* (1999-2001), which inscribe plain landscapes in barren sites around the city. Herrero sets out to act as an agent that misconstrues the signaletic role of color in the control of

³⁴ In: *Fonctions de la Peinture*. Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1978, p. 99.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 110-111.

³⁶ Paraphrasing Felix Guattari. *The Three Ecologies*. Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton (trans.). New York: Continuum, 2008, p. 26.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

the urban grid, or risks another attendance of color in the public space as a device at the service of the perceptual in critical alternatives, such as in *Carefully Repainted Yellow Areas* and *Mapa Mundi* (2003). These are the political bases of his phenomenology of color. San José remains as the artist's main laboratory. In a way, the 2008 exhibition at the Kunstverein Freiburg began in 2000 with the painting work he titled *Servicio Sanitario*, executed in the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, in Costa Rica. Herrero is active in city networks throughout the world.

Water maps

Just figure a situation in which the fish in Matisse's painting *Poissons rouges et sculpture* [Red Fish and a Sculpture] (1912) were to leave the canvas to occupy real space. In *Mapa Mundi* (Havana Biennale, 2003), Federico Herrero paints a blue public swimming pool and an orange world map on the floor. Like the fish in Matisse's aquarium, people that are purportedly traveling the world actually swim in this aqueous "planisphere". Matissean movement is shown in *The Dance* (1909). Said immersion in the color of the water-painting relates to the experience rendered in *Núcleos* (1960), the spaces structured with color planes that resemble Oiticica's *Penetrables*. Color is place. Color is made into a topological region in the logic of the senses. Herrero painted swimming pools in Cuba and in Japan (Aichi World Expo, 2005). The thickness of his paintings now results from the combination of paint layers and the depth of water itself. These paintings are determined, therefore, by the content of the "swimming pool" receptacle – water – under the names of transparency, "depth, space and color". Herrero develops a swimming pool syntax that depends less of its architectural shape and more on water itself. If waterless, this painting does not exist. Without a body immersed in water, this painting does not attain plenitude.

The swimming pools in Herrero's painting and in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty should be brought face to face. Whereas the philosopher takes the swimming pool architecture to explain the optical-phenomenological process of vision, the painter takes it to politicize the gaze. In Merleau-Ponty's words, when through the water's thickness he sees the tiling at the bottom of a pool, he does not see it *despite* the water and the reflections there; he sees it "through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without this flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles, then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is – which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place," he wrote in *Eye and Mind*³⁷. To Herrero, however, no place is identical. In empirical terms, the body that Herrero borrows – as in the previously mentioned reference to Merleau-Ponty borrowing from Valéry – is that of an individual who swims daily in a swimming pool. The philosopher addresses the way in which aqueous power materializes as optical effects of an active and living being (the former "spectator") – the being that Herrero immerses in water in search of an "internal animation" for painting, a "radiation of the visible" from the critical involvement of swimmers far beyond the sensorial pleasure afforded by water and the visual sense of the painting. In Herrero's opinion, swimming pools inaugurated his continued investigation of the possibilities

³⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. "Eye and Mind", op. cit., p. 182.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

of an actual, physical immersion *within* a painting³⁸. After that, the phenomenology of the sensorial perception of both swimmer and spectator, and the map, all contributes to the constitution of an image empowered with dialectical mobilization.

Federico Herrero the painter seeks in psychogeography other signifieds for swimming pools. Paraphrasing Bachelard in *Water and Dreams*, we could say that a swimming pool contains water that needs not infinity, and yet Herrero's maps reclaim the political meaning of the notion of vastness. Water is characterized no longer by its density, but by its relational, potential symbolizer. Swimming pools bring to mind the Aristotelian spatial magnitude. It is a *topos* of boundary and territory, the confines of water availability worldwide, and the vastness of people's fancy-free imagination. It is a double and restless vastness: the finitude of water for the consumption of the human species, and the infinitude of freedom for the human being.

The artist's swimming pools are meant for a triple syntax; they are meant, as a relational symbolical becoming, for a triple syntax of life, death and water³⁹. For geopolitical reasons, the significance of painting is variable. The density of the liquid "water" in Herrero's swimming pools is proportional to his capacity to develop new symbolical conditions, beyond Bachelard. "The project in Japan had a lot to do with trying to make people aware of the importance of water and resources of the planet" (FJ/PLB). Herrero claims that Cuba and Japan are islands, and consequently water is a key element for the collective imaginary in those countries and for their mode of relating to 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 geography. (...) 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," the painter stated (FH/JH). To swim in the Japan swimming pool is to socialize the responsibility for water in world scale. Herrero propounds the dialectic exploration of the world perceived as space and experienced things⁴⁰. The hypothesis of a political conflagration of painting emerges precisely along this axis.

Herrero's swimming pool-paintings are destined for the use of the local folk, particularly children and youths. The "swimming pool" architectural element lies beyond the bodily sensation of well-being. As we have seen, here the swimming pools problematize geography by transfiguring "the mere real things," an issue addressed by Arthur Danto⁴¹. Therefore, cartography becomes the only admitted representation: the monochrome map. Antonio Dias (*Project for an Artistic Attitude*, 1970) and Glenn Ligon (*White # 19*, 1994) worked with the very possibility to symbolize the monochrome via the politicization of the color black. Herrero's painting introduces a hydrating psychogeographic mode that activates symbols through swimming. "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

³⁸ In Herrero's e-mail to the author on September 04, 2008.

³⁹ See Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Edith Farrell (trans.). Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1983, p. 12.

⁴⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The World of Perception*. Oliver Davis (trans.). London: Routledge, 2004, p. 17-34.

⁴¹ "Works of Art and Mere Representations" in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

regarding their political situation and a lack of optimism about a better life, as in the case of many Cubans," the artist says (FH/JH). This clash with power, aimed at securing the individuals' imagination capacity, is informed by a situationist detournement further enhanced by the subjectivity of the psychogeography defined by Guy Debord, of which the painting-swimming pool avails itself in each geographic medium. Herrero's swimming pools are a cruel diagram of the processes used for arranging a territory that Debord described in *Society of the Spectacle*: "While eliminating geographical distance, this society produces a new internal distance in the form of a spectacular separation"⁴². The constraint on the freedom of movement increases distances. The swimming pool-painting negotiates with this boundary.

In Cuba, according to Federico Herrero's metaphor, to swim in a swimming pool with an atlas depicted on its bottom is to fantasize the freedom of coming and going, to enjoy the free search for any path in the world. "The one in Cuba had to do with enhancing the possibility to have dreams for freedom. In both cases I think it's a way of making a painting that is more useful to the people and this is finally what interests me" (FJ/PLB). Herrero ranks among the artists that reiterate the principles enunciated by Brazilian critic Mário Pedrosa at the most exacerbated period of the military regime established in 1964 in Brazil: art is the "*experimental* exercise of freedom"⁴³. Overreaching the phenomenological agenda of the four natural elements and also of Bachelard's poetics of space, Pedrosa's inventive genius defined the swimming pool as a lived diagram of freedom. Herrero's swimming pool-painting doubles as a political *habeas corpus*.

Plot of the times

"I can easily make a relation between the space and a scan of my brain, then it can be a way to let people enter my mind and memories, and vice versa, like a reflection", Federico Herrero stated (FH/PLB). In the public space, his painting plots temporal dimensions of ephemerality, entropy, and inactuality.

In the public space, these paintings plot the deconstruction of image by time wear, vandalism, or deliberate action in a few institutions. In *Vitamin P, New Perspectives in Painting*, Hans-Ulrich Obrist underscores the path, in Herrero's painting, leading from intuition to improvisation and ephemerality⁴⁴. However, intuition does not mean naiveté or the lack of a political project for painting. The political meaning of ephemerality is in the practical impossibility to definitely sustain the values of these paintings in the public space. The artist does not retain the final word on the city.

Federico Herrero does not propound investments in the legibility of themes as rhetorical images. Painting seductively leads to complicity. By involving the spectator in a phenomenological process contaminated by a dialectical intentionality, painting garners meanings for contemporary life. The challenge is to work towards the emancipation of vision in face of the *inactual* possibilities of painting.

⁴² *Society of the Spectacle*. Ken Knabb (trans.). London: Rebel Press, 1992, chapter 7, note 167, p. 94.

⁴³ "Por dentro e por fora das bienais" (1969). In: *Mundo, Homem, Arte em Crise*. Aracy Amaral (org.), São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1975, p. 308. Translated herein.

⁴⁴ "Federico Herrero". In *Vitamin P, New Perspectives in Painting*. London: Phaidon Press, 2002, p. 144.

BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

The “inactuality” in contemporary painting is not the same as anachronism⁴⁵. It does not relate to “actuality”, in terms of success or failure⁴⁶, but to the positive pertinence of painting in the cultural field. Beginning with Cézanne, painting has been a field of specific knowledge. The painting may be at once the locus of the inactual and the inactual itself. Emmanuel Levinas problematized the Nietzschean theme of “inactual” to justify his reflections on humanism – “Here the out of date signifies the *other* of the up to date rather than ignorance and negation of it”⁴⁷ – and engaged the *intemporal* exercise of an actuality. To understand the inactuality of painting one needs to realize that Herrero neither works with the collective memory, nor alludes to the history of public spaces, let alone operates with ideological issues that he views as typical functions of Latin American muralism, as a way to recollect history or to politically and religiously indoctrinate the masses: “Yo pienso en un tipo de mural que no actua de esta manera y siempre está actuando en ‘presente’ la idea – un presente constate está también relacionada con el proceso de improvisación”⁴⁸. Herrero does not plan the future of the work, either, because he is engrossed with the ephemeralness of painting in the present. The fact that his paintings “are a kind of exercise in memory, a personal diary of my life” (FH/JF) does not change their inactual status.

Federico Herrero’s painting is an anti-entropic rendition. The painter performs exactly where architecture fails (malfunctioning, dysfunctionality, discontinued usage, decay, etc.). His colors creep into the city scene on/in highrises, houses, museums, galleries, snack bars, overpasses, shrines, schools, sidewalks, swimming pools, and buses as if to recover, through the pictorial sign, those affective planes of the fragmentary city. This painting boasts a situationist standing. Flaws and problems on building walls lead to the productive and stimulating dysfunctions of Herrero’s painting. “The intention of the painting can be questioned, but the final idea is to give a space the chance to have a different use or role by means of color fields where the experiences becomes more physical and interactive,” the artist concluded (FH/PLB). In public space, colors develop strategies of perception in a gentle and yet operating register that, above all, is unlike the intended credible legibility of advertising.

The city provides the setting for pictorial clashes. It is the place at which the painter performs the transfer. In this process, the painting becomes ‘Übertragung’. At the Kunstverein Freiburg exhibition, Herrero has viewers experiencing the notions of terrain, modalities, interpretation and resolution of transference. The geopsychical objective subjacent to certain projects is to re-codify places with a view to constitute new points of contact with art. In this way, to swim is to warp the map. It is to have people’s circulation effacing boundaries. Inscribed in swimming pools, Herrero’s maps enhance the “ontological significance” of a metaphor.⁴⁹ In Athens, Medellín or Venice (*Landscape*, 2001⁵⁰),

⁴⁵ The inactuality of painting is a subject that the author has been addressing in view of the contemporary practice of certain Brazilian painters, including Lúcia Laguna, Beatriz Milhazes and Flávio Shiró.

⁴⁶ Here the author paraphrases Marie Moscovici on the unconscious. In: *L’Ombre de l’Objet: Sur l’Inactualité de la Psychanalyse*. Paris: Seuil, 1990.

⁴⁷ *Humanism of the Other*. Nidra Poller (trans.). Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003, p. 3.

⁴⁸ Herrero’s e-mail to the author on September 7, 2008.

⁴⁹ Expression coined by Gaston Bachelard. Op. cit., p. 34.

⁵⁰ The project presented at the Arsénale earned Federico Herrero the Prize for the Best Young Artist the 49th Venice Biennale.

BRIDGETTE **MAYER** GALLERY

painting occurs in entropic urban situations. Even when faced with absolute decay, Federico Herrero yields to his life instincts, for he knows that "art is the only thing that opposes the entropy of the world," in the words of Mário Pedrosa⁵¹. "I was also interested in having my ideas cancelled and contradicted," Herrero stated⁵². Levinas warns about the inactual or the untimely (*l'intempestif*) upsetting agreements of representation.

Paulo Herkenhoff

Rio de Janeiro, September 2008.

⁵¹ Untitled (talk with Antonio Manuel). In: *Antonio Manuel*. Rio de Janeiro, FUNARTE, 1984, p. 17.

⁵² *Immersion in Mental Landscapes. A conversation between Federico Herrero and Pablo Leon de la Barra*.