

Josefina Guilisasti, *Marfa/Puerto Viejo*

Josefina Guilisasti's work creates a sense of unfamiliarity from the familiar. Everyday images undergo a small shift in perception to provoke new questions and new doubts where there were none before. We could consider Guilisasti to be a radical conservative: conservative in her use of supposedly outmoded forms of art (realism, landscape, still life), and radical in her pushing of these staid conventions to the realm of philosophy and doubt.

The series of eight canvases *Marfa/Puerto Viejo* were painted in 2006 in response to a visit to Marfa, a small west Texas town surrounded in the mystique of having been transformed by Donald Judd into a Minimalist paradise. Judd's uncompromising geometric sculptures in the landscape reminded Guilisasti of an illegal beach community in Puerto Viejo, Chile, where makeshift summer homes are built on the coast by people living thirty miles away in the nearest town. The physical parallels between the northern Chilean desert and the west Texas landscape are uncanny, and are further underlined by the similarity between Judd's precise cement forms and the simple tin cubes built anonymously by the Chileans.

The visual similarity between these two scenes—further emphasized by Guilisasti's treatment of both in warm grey tones—serves to provoke the question of what makes these places similar and what makes them different from each other. While Judd's vision for Marfa was based on the imposition of his vision of absolute perfection (aided by copious funding from the Menil family) on an unsuspecting rural town through the large-scale purchase of tracts of land, the community of Puerto Viejo is temporary, precarious, and illegal. The inhabitants of Puerto Viejo visit the beach every summer, rebuilding the structures they left the previous year, and enjoying the beach life until it is time to move back again. Arriving to, and building on the beach is technically trespassing, but the location is so remote that their vacation is over by the time anyone can do anything about it. Another important difference is that the builders in Puerto Viejo are predominantly women who are responsibly for the construction and services of the community, while Judd's project is unarguably masculine.

In order to understand Guilisasti's creation of unfamiliarity, we should first look at what creates familiarity. The familiar is always close to something we know, a family resemblance that makes us understand that despite superficial differences: two things that share a similar origin. The paired images in *Marfa/Puerto Viejo* have precisely this kind of family resemblance: there are certainly differences in the landscape or the construction of the blocks, but at a far enough distance, they look close enough to be related. And here our visual sense of relation enters into conflict with our rational knowledge of what the images represent: two extremely distant places, two very different projects in two entirely different contexts. Beyond the coincidence, Guilisasti is calling attention to one of the oldest debates in art: how and why we believe that an image corresponds to reality, and what an artistic image can tell us about that reality. Our mind inherently wants to find patterns and connections between images, while our imagination wants to find the different and the particular. This tension is at the heart of Guilisasti's project.

The four pairs of paintings in *Marfa/Puerto Viejo* invite a ‘compare and contrast’ approach. We want to find the differences between the images, and also which image belongs to which context. In doing so, our perception shifts from the general to the particular, from the structure to the detail. While it could be argued that one of the tenets of Minimalism is a focus on the general, the geometric, and the universal, Guilisasti’s precise rendition in oil paint, and her introduction of Puerto Viejo into the discussion functions almost as a challenge to this belief that art can be archetypal and perfect. In this way, the paintings are almost a subtle jab at Judd and the principles he upheld, albeit a jab rendered with painstaking detail, patience, and care. There is no simple conclusion to be drawn from this exercise of compare and contrast, but rather a gentle wearing away of our certainties about how and why art represents the world, or even, in this case, how art represents other art.

This coexistence of exquisite realist painting and a sophisticated conceptual project places Guilisasti in a very unique place within contemporary art. Where others may see an inherent contradiction between realism and conceptualism, Guilisasti’s great contribution is to reinsert deliberate and sophisticated reflection back into the apparently moribund traditions of landscape and still life. In 1965 Frank Stella famously stated that ‘what you see is what you see,’ Guilisasti’s work, if nothing else, places a small and sincere question mark at the end of that statement.

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