

One History, Two Gazes

The visual artists Josefina Guilisasti and Alvaro Oyarzún exhibit “Construcción de dos miradas” (Construction of Two Gazes) at the AFA Gallery. This show synthesizes the work they have been developing for a while. Both, albeit working separately have elaborated works that converge on the reflection about tradition in painting from a contemporary art standpoint. Not a minor question if we consider this tradition as one of the core issues of the representation theory, the notion of image and the figure of the artist. These are the concepts developed by Guilisasti and Oyarzún in their work. The path we will traverse through their “two gazes” starts with the analysis of their works in an autonomous manner, and, then, they entwine their proposals in a similar area; the previous, with the objective of making their encounters and confrontations that arise from the desire – shared – to construe a work that, from art, dialogues with itself.

From Still Life

Objects, surfaces and things are some of the elements we repeatedly find in what has been denominated, as a genre, Still Life. In ancient Greece they called the representation of things that did not have any value *topographic* painting and, later, in the European Academy, it consolidated as a pictoric genre to point out lesser painters. Still Life basically has to do with the pictoric representation of objects on a surface, objects that have remained practically identical throughout history (for example, vases, plates, jars) and that thanks to small decorative variations that do not disrupt their function throughout centuries – give testimony to cultural changes. Josefina Guilisasti analyzes the genre’s reiteration, proposing from painting and installation the representation of “objects” present in contemporary visuality.

In “La vigilia” (The Vigil), work exhibited in 2001, Guilisasti displays a series of furniture that contain within them paintings of items of daily use (such as pots and tea kettles) represented from the same point of view (see Figure 1). The furniture and each niche give a touch of reality to the paintings, we seem to perceive something real, nonetheless, and once this first impression is overcome, we discover we are facing representations. We only see footprints of objects that, being absent, are recreated in the bi-dimensional plane of the canvas. This state of being away is based on the visual functioning that these items acquire in our daily life; seeing them so often makes them paradoxically invisible; Guilisasti grants them visibility to indicate how the eye operates: it categorizes gaze to the point of considering certain elements as invisible and marginal. The Still Life genre operates in the same way. In “Bodegones” (Still Life Paintings) (2006) she collected a series of porcelain adornments that had a decorative function in the homes of a determined social class. These objects, as the previous ones, were displayed mute and invisible. The adornments, mostly birds, were portrayed from diverse angles: front wards, sideways, from below; each painting was placed in a niche, and a series of vertical lines of all the colors used in the production of the paintings were used as a support of the conjunct (Figure 2). The paintings seemed real, the spectator had to get close to them to note the total farce conducted by the artist.

In her research about painting and a genre that translates it, Guilisasti defines herself as “painter”, a particular and worth mentioning condition while establishing an enclosed framework of movement. Painting has had as a central problematic issue, its condition of inexactness between reality and fiction. One just has to remember the story of Pliny about Zeuxis and Parasio where each painter challenges the perception of the other: the first painted bunches of grape that fooled some birds while the other asked Zeuxis to draw a curtain that hid part of his painting, Zeuxis, surprised, admitted his defeat: the curtain was part of his rival’s painting.

Pliny’s tale describes essential elements of the Still Life genre. These elements dialogue with the problem of painting, gaze and deceit; issues that Guilisasti develops in her work, also wishing to “discover” or “disclose” the veil we establish when cataloguing certain objects as not worthy of our gaze.

In “El duelo” (The Duel) –title of the work “Construcción de dos miradas” (Construction of Two Gazes) – we see an evolution in her visual research. She displayed in the gallery six large pieces of furniture that being in line divided the gallery in two, thus forming two paths.¹ From the front we see our ledges crammed with boxes with pictures in them, these pictures represent daily objects, that, different from those used in her previous works link their functionality to their decorative quality: cups, tea kettles and plates have a floral motive inscribed in one of their faces (Figure 3). Behind, the furniture can be looked over while seeing the back of each box and the pillars that support the furniture, which are geometrical like the boxes. (Figure 4)

This work is composed of two gestures. One is minimal: the painting of small pictures of delicate objects with their floral motives. The other is maximal: one hundred and eighty pictures within one hundred and eighty boxes inside six very large pieces of furniture. Thanks to these reciprocal operations, the minimal gesture becomes a maximal and monumental gesture.

In her minimal gesture we see the paintings. Each one of them registers the same operation: the collection of daily objects that, in contradiction to others, are used and decorate at once. Her minimal floral inscriptions become banners that code them under this bipolarity. On extrapolating their nutritious function, they acquire their protagonism at intervals, becoming witnesses of social moments. Although not all the objects belong to a specific class, even the most humble have upon them the label “partially used”.

These flowers can be read through different optics. One of these makes us think of their inescapable function as a connector axis between object and image. The form and substance with which the objects are produced (oval, round; ceramics or porcelain) and the design and the species when inscribing the flower upon them (serigraphic, painted; roses, *hibiscus*, sunflowers) dialogue between themselves with no type of distance: they are so close they become one (Figure 5). This inscription model can be seen in Chinese porcelains since the functions of image and form made a distinction between their uses and their circulation. In “El Duelo” (The Duel) the flower is the matrix of the measurement of the object and the object is the matrix in the measurement of the flower: its pictorial translation generates a representation of elements that materialize such a relation.

The space of every object in the picture is variable. They are seen from different angles (it would seem we were looking at those below from up and from below those above). Sometimes they occupy all the space, others they appear timidly only showing one side. There are close-ups, take-offs from far. The eye becomes a photographic lens that registers diverse situations and states (Figure 6). The information each picture gives, aware of a gaze, is stressed by demanding from the viewer his/her ability to hoard one hundred and eighty images framed in the same installation. The eye moves along, fast, under so much visual saturation, and sometimes passes distracted. According to the painter:

“I have been thinking a lot lately about the issue of the series... It is an essential part of my production since it regulates the work time I will deliver, each painting has four processes and very seldom do I take it up again. It is an orderliness and time control that subordinates me and that, to a certain degree, somehow also subordinates the spectator’s gaze”²

This visual desperation moves to representation when detecting broken objects, sediments that contain the trail of their respective flower inscribed in the broken part (Figure 7). Breaking the model has a double reading on the one hand, and in this case in the pieces that disassemble the represented object in the upper ledges; and on the other, in “breaking the model” according to which contemporary art becomes established as a discourse of the novelty that denies the past.

¹ The furniture was made by the architect Patricio Mardones at Guilisasti’s request. By being designed from this discipline, they acquired a character that overcame their mere condition of “furniture”, turning into a spatial element that stressed even more the installation and the pathways to be followed by the spectator.

² Conversation with Guilisasti (10/12/09).

Guilisasti takes up again this reasoning, establishes a delicate common thread that tries to create from today an anterior structure that is still operative. Her work is a visual thought made production that contributes a minimal experience to the spectator who carries it within to the quotidian, affecting the form in which she/he perceives her/his reality.

About the pictoric tradition

Alvaro Oyarzún's work is multifaceted, in his means (painting, drawing, photography and installation) as in the topics he treats. The common element in his work is representation of "art", understanding this concept as a convention composed of the life of the artist, the situation of creating and the ideas about art. Oyarzún works extracting his clichés and blind spots, uses irony, black humor and sarcasm to give more substance to various fragments that, once reunited, transform each piece into a theater of representation.

A work called "La imagen pintada o los más bellos recuerdos de la vida del Capitán Zanahoria" (2007) (The Painted Image or the most Beautiful Memories of the Life of Captain Carrot) displays on a wall a large amount of drawings and paintings that surround a sequence of photographs of a small carrot that wishes to be a modern artist due to the little commitment of the contemporary artist. After living through several situations (going from a "leap into the empty" up to the threat of a giant rabbit) he discovers, at the end of his mission that his father was the founder of modern art (Figure 8). The images accompanying this tale varied in format and topic, and completely saturated the wall; when mixed they created several sub-stories that the spectator could recreate in each reading.

Oyarzún has a working method that consists in continually creating interminable series of drawings about the most varied topics: couple relationships, orgies that end up with bodies ripped to pieces, incongruent dialogues, characters that seek their space in art, geographies of unknown places that have signs of artistic movements on them, lone individuals that walk with an art book in their hands, among others. This large amount of typologies is defined in the technique and format to be used; it's not only the "topic" but also the method of translation through a limited group of materials according to each series to be developed.

In this show he also dialogues with the development of art, now "in the second stage of abstraction". In "Construcción de dos miradas" (Construction of Two Gazes) he presents "Seven directions for a new history of geometric painting or of how Piet Mondrian *the young* managed to come out of the "De Stijl" morass before Theo van Doesburg falsified his own resignation". In the gallery he displays a group of 650 drawings on an extended wall. Each drawing was performed exclusively for this series, following the typologies established previously as well as creating new ones (geometric models, "abstract" landscapes and characters"). These drawings, produced in the workshop through a line of coherence, are mixed at the moment of the show, allowing us to inquire into them in multiple ways. Materials become fundamental; drawings are made over seven different sheet sizes from a 48 color pantone, keeping in mind that not only the represented images are of exclusive analysis, but also the materiality of the paper, the color, the use of certain pencils, sketching variations and the staging on a large mural installation. This operation is not at random, it has direct relationship with the pictoric dimension of producing an abstract painting in the manner of geometric abstraction.

The artist is portrayed as an errant subject that seeks to belong to an art convention. In this series, the artists wants to be part of De Stijl, to such an extent that he becomes an abstraction and inserts himself in "abstract" landscapes, finding himself with books, signs and absurd dialogues solely with the idea of becoming Piet Mondrian the young (Figure 9). Oyarzún displays this series of drawings like a "Boogie Woogie", the most representative work of Piet Mondrian of what has commonly been called "the second stage of abstraction". From afar we see

a paper made Mondrian, from up close we see the typologies mentioned previously inscribed in their faces. Each one of them is difficult to describe, a general cadastre accounts for: signatures of the abstracts, characters immersed in senseless geographies, geometric models, maps, flies, nonsense dialogues, orgies that end up in minced bodies, all framed under a singular color and size, that is, seven directions to approach a same topic (Figure 10).

These typologies, produced under a regime of meaning, become diluted when mounted according to the color combination: the “topic” is left aside and its visual quality is upgraded. Subtexts are generated, that for instance range from a dialogue about De Stijl between two women, passing through a geometric design, a couple cut up in pieces that declare love to each other, up to a sort of rocky island with artists names on it. Finally all the order established at the beginning is mixed up in a novel system. This staging of typologies by means of the use of color builds a deceitful relationship for the spectator, since from far he/she sees an abstract painting and close up the story of the statement through figurative denunciation.

It could be asserted that his work constitutes a “criticism of the institution”, a trendy term in the 80s used to point out a group of artists against galleries, critique and the art institution. In my books, the “institutional criticism” is still tied to art conventions, that is, they criticize but participate openly –in this sense, artists continue to exhibit, critics write about their works and sell to collectors. Playing “seriously” to speak ill of art is sometimes not so fruitful, it plays against you. Oyarzún does not necessarily agree with this mode, his resort is not criticism as a vector; rather it is irony, mocking and sometimes vexation. He proposes a mapping of a situation that directly afflicts an enclosed group of persons that relate constantly with this discourse. His works talk about art in art spaces; he presents actions that are insidious for the specific public that consumes them. To talk about an audience that is being represented by a drawing on a wall transforms paper into material that absorbs the situations that occur in front of him.

Commonly, when we refer to a good way in which a portrait is done, we say “it just needs to talk now” due to its resemblance to “reality”. In Oyarzún’s portraits, the models talk because they are “loyal to reality”, we don’t see fiction: both the unproductive dialogues and the searches stage something that occurs constantly. By caricaturizing such scenes, in this case using the “geometrical abstraction”, he tries to make the spectator see something that is truly impossible to see, it is something like the visibility of the “abstract” in its pure conventionality (which demands a certain visual preparation to enter its signs).

An abstract art built through certain pathways of meaning –seven that expose and laugh at its postulates- is what the discipline of history of art does. In this sense I think it is interesting to analyze the hystorigraphic models under the optics of this work: the built phrases, the judging and sometimes the mythification are constant potholes that the discipline suffers. To see it staged, as though the mounting were the staging of a tale that wasn’t told, can create the necessary malicious trap to understand the “senses” and the “explanations” that a discipline that tries to weave a history of sense about art will acquire. The trap is necessary not only for the artists but also for the history that regulates them, the spaces that shelter them and the spectator. We all search for sense just as Oyarzún’s characters in their vain “strolling” through art (Figure 11).

(de)Construction of two gazes

The writing of this catalogue ran up with several questions worth mentioning. The artists titled their show "Construction of two gazes" and furthermore each work has its own name. In previous exhibitions they also shared the space, but the pieces were always autonomous. Their works develop solitarily in their studios and they occasionally share meetings to talk about group shows. It is as if it was assumed in advance that the works dialogue, that without emitting words they know they are going to speak about the same thing (Figure 12).

This exhibition can be read under the corporal tours of the spectator: on having entered the gallery we meet Guilisasti's work, our look tries to monopolize the paintings in one glimpse and crosses the installation of furniture to observe from behind. There it runs up with geometric figures "behind the picture", that compose a series of figures that, as the back side of the represented images, become abstract. On having denied the image of the objects, the painter

proposes to us an abstract tour that on having left certain visual corridors we prune in order to connect with the composition of the draftsman. On having gone out of the corridor we enter once again, now through the signatures of a series of abstract artists on small color papers. From this point, we can continue through the series of corridors, portals and visual bridges that the artist stretches, reading a book that describes to us the myth of abstraction.

Guilisasti's faded tones face Oyarzún's coloring. The installation and its sculptural condition face a great number of two-dimensional planes on a wall. The history of painting is judged today through two artists who, in contemporary key, talk directly with a tradition that does not seem to become exhausted.

I use (De)Constructing two gazes more as a game of words than as a quote to the method of deconstruction. Now then, something looks alike and unintentionally makes sense the moment I stop writing the text. The works I have presented have a visual structure, they are alike as the own authors affirm: the "construction of two gazes", of two points of view that share the same space in repeated occasions. My review towards them is also alike, in the sense that both their use of the traditional media and the direct relation to the history of art seems to me like a valid route today: as a necessary position, an urgent resistance that faces what we usually call contemporary art, which has possibly suffered its own depletion.

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