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Honest Images

Javier Díaz-Guardiola / Starsky Brines · 2015

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It is not at all easy to describe Starsky's work. Appearances, once again, deceive us. Influence takes many forms; the layers overlap each other; the strokes; the roughly encrypted messages.

By way of a diary, Starsky Brines's work (Caracas, Venezuela, 1977) acknowledges his surroundings, what affects and appeals to him; what is necessary to denounce and what is worthy of praise. From the white canvas to the intervened photography; from engraving (which he is beginning to try) to two-dimensional images; from the chromatics that draws on his all-pervading native Caribbean, to the black and White, so full of possibilities, and strong enough to catch the spectator.

Here lies the universe of this young artist, both condensed and shredded.

Starsky, what led you to devote yourself to art?

After a childhood surrounded by animals and the exuberant nature of the eastern plains of Venezuela, of sharing life with my mother's crafts, and a certain economic hardship assumed with lots of humor at the time, which in one way or another marks you as time passes, a childhood full of freedom and adventure, but with conflicts and disagreements, like every other life, and then moving to Caracas.

All of these facts made fertile ground for my work as an artist. A clear disagreement with sudden changes, caused by the fact of moving the city, awoke in me. This led me to try to turn my emotions into images.

It is a matter of identity and belonging what leads me to throw my viscosity into painting. But there is no particular reason: there is a cluster of situations that conspired to submerge me in this way of expression. Seeing wonderful things emerging from fabrics, felt; seeing waste containers become puppets in the hands of my mother impressed me a lot, and I think that was a determining factor for my decision to become an artist.

Anyway, I always wanted to be a painter, and from that desire, I developed my ability. I always painted. Apparently, the form of expression chooses you. And between one experience and the other, arrives the time of deciding what you're going to do with your life, and, for various reasons, the chance of making art my lifestyle was given to me. On one occasion, a friend of mine told me that the Venezuelan artist Jesús Soto, one of the greatest exponents of kinetic art, needed an assistant. I took the job and at that moment, I understood that art would be my life. The possibilities of becoming an artist took a completely different meaning during my workdays in that workshop; I decided to enroll in Art School.

What are your interests as an artist today?

I understand art as a work open to speculation and aesthetic enjoyment that, does not fake its paint nature and elementary condition. It is figurative and open to the possibilities offered by my time and surroundings; made of pictorial material that invites to be discovered; composed of colors, stains and lines that allow encounters with a reality exacerbated and amplified to distortion, to evoke everyday situations and the dynamism of the city hidden from us .

You speak about painting, but drawings are the base of your work.

Drawing is a specific element in my proposal: it opens up spaces and allows me to boost the composition, which develops in an organized chaos, where different realities interact together. You can decrypt phrases and comments in a palimpsest of visual possibilities, quotes from everyday life. Because my painting is a painting that comes from painting per se, from work and persistence. The idea of saying more with less as always seduced me, communicating with what is at hand. Making other people's guts vibrate, with a drawing pencil and a piece of paper, with a gesture that contains life and connects the viewer.

I seek to move people with a work made with my own hands, a work with no pretensions. That interests me, and that people can enjoy from the naturalness of a gesture and rejoice in the beauty of everyday things, that can also become complex and profound, without limiting the provocation, irreverence and social criticism that art should possess. I want to show true images that make people experience pain and joy at the same time. I try to evoke the transitory nature of existence, and the fragility of life.

That everyday life to which you refer is in your work titles. How does a phrase like "Our lives are revenge and lies" (2009), "The cool air hits me in the face" (2009), "If it hurts so much laugh like a pig" (2009) or "What does it matter where you step?"(2009) become artistic work?

When used as titles of my works, they create a change in the perception of the painted image and becomes the closure of the plastic process. Phrases create a greater chance of relationship and become more polysemic images, so that perception is not literal. They bring a ludic component to play with the relationship between ideas and concepts, creating a dual distortion of real life.

As Hockney would say, it seems a contradiction but it is not, then, using these phrases as titles, which for me are in themselves powerful images, create another one, extended, larger, with an undulating and multi-referential purpose. We can then have absurd situations that enrich the discourse of painting and that end up being consumed by the viewer within the plausible possibilities the image, itself, offers. It is difficult for me to decide which of these phrases attracts more my attention. They are like a countersense, absurd, and that inevitably seduces me.

The prominence of the human figure is inevitable in your paintings, a figure that tends to morph with the animal.

At first, it was the result of trying to explain my reality and evoke the equation province-metropolis, with all the symbolism that may arise from it. Today I would say that it is the human being as the central focus of my painting, which metamorphoses into a sort of

multiple being. Perhaps it responds to an idea of a mutant human, that is animal, that is human, very human, murderer and victim at the same time. I think it's a portrait of the human race full of prejudice and archetypes. The animal world has always been a source of thought and, above all, mystery. It is that thing that has no concept, but is in us and at any moment can reveal itself and become the cruelest beings on earth; and at the same time, love, mourn and feel deep compassion.

That, in the end, makes them self-portraits.

Yes indeed. I feel like what I see around me is the portrait of myself in other circumstances. What causes commotion in me, as for to take it to the canvas, is an image of what I could be, what I could have been and what I am: spectator and actor, stimulus and stimulant.

Says your Spanish gallerist that anything influences you, from a conversation in the street to a visit to the Museo del Prado. How are you able to maintain a consistent style when your work feeds from so many sources?

That is an attitude towards life. I have learned to use everything within my reach. My work is open to the future; I intend not to lock myself in an image, and develop projects that life presents me. But for something, that open, to achieve its effects, exercise and constancy are essential. I try not to be always the same and let things have an impact on me, affecting me, to make me look different. On every trip, every walk out of my house, I explore and retain what I think is necessary for my paintings. I keep it as an image or immanent presence as internal stimulus, as a nightmare and fear, and, at some point, that internal memo becomes an image.

To the specialized critics, your pictorial work is increasingly violent, or contains more violence. Do you agree with this?

Although sometimes my characters seem humorous, at the background of my work something dark lies, just as in life. It is part of the ancient battle between good and evil. In my canvas, nobody is really bad ...or really good.

They all live in the daily struggle for survival, and, meanwhile, fall in love, argue, walk or pose. The issue of violence is present in me through the fear and loneliness experienced at certain times in my life.

With art, among other things, I learned to use that feeling in my favor. It has helped me to heal and to accept what I am. When you are in the province, it is not hard to face death and violence. For example, one breeds animals, feels affection for them and then slaughters and eats them. See how they become food leaves any child disturbed.

These experiences allowed me to take some small distance, which paradoxically made it possible for me to approach death and violence, and then, as an adult, understanding they're a part of life and let it seep into what I do. Along with this, there's all the extraordinary fables and tales of ghosts and witches that constitute the Venezuelan provincial imaginary, which translates into a form of violence based on fear, and for a child it doesn't feel like a game

When as a kid we visited my family in Caracas, we experienced many clashes between gangs, crossfire. And when we moved here, it somehow turned into daily life. I cannot say that this is what is happening right now in the country, but I can attest that the issue of violence has

radicalized. And you have to learn to deal with the stress it causes. You convince yourself that everything could turn against you at any time. In my country, the problem requires action, requires commitment from the citizens. I am an artist, but also a human being who walks through my city, who lives and feels, who suffers the pain of seeing loved ones killed.

I consider it my duty to report and point out the matter. Otherwise, I would not be honest with my way of dealing with painting.

Your compositions are very chaotic, very visceral, cumulative ... How do they start and, above all, how do you know when they're finished?

They start with a sort of dynamic meditation in front of the support, shaking my mind and my body from one place to another. Maybe I seek an image that serves as a trigger, background music and lots of adrenaline, until I start to stain the fabric, synchronizing my body and mind.

Plastic struggle is then undertaken, struggle with ideas, with previous advances that may not work in a new fabric. It is a process of tensions, of zooming in and out on the images; of glazing signs and symbols, where everything wants to scream at the same time. Then I negotiate with them until some balance is achieved. Each one settles in its proper place. That's how pressure starts to decrease; action time is shorter and I distance myself, until I see what happened. This does not determine if the work is finished, but indicates a breakthrough. How do they end? When I've vomited everything and there is no more space. Then I look for another canvas and it all starts again

The remarkable thing about these compositions is that drama, tragedy, the grotesque, the playful and the ironic are kept in the same level. How is this balance possible?

The way you describe my images fits Caracas very well, where it seems that everything is happening at once; it's an explosion of anecdotal, picturesque, playful and dramatic images.

In addition, I like to think that my painting responds to that way of existing: maybe it's the ability of transferring reality to media, to understand by observing and analyzing the already developed image. Just as the photo steals a supposed reality and turns it into something else, that's stills totally linked to the first. It is difficult to understand, but we manage to maintain balance.

To what does your vibrant chromaticism respond? Is it a way to catch the viewer?

I think it is correspondent with the existing light in Venezuela, which makes everything shiny and vibrant. The colors are intense and Caracas is a city full of colors. We are accustomed to use colors in our clothing, accessories. This is a tropical country, full of fruit, blue skies, party, carnivals and, in that sense, this is part of my identity. This inevitably catches the viewer, but this is first a feature of my environment and then a feature of my paintings. I have another body of work entitled Urban Bestiary, where I do not use color. In any case, I think the audience can be caught with black and white. Approaching the viewer consists of something else

Part of your work is based on drawings and paintings that you start from scratch, but we must also take into account those works in which the base are existing photographs or newspaper pages. I guess the way you proceed in each case is different. What are the similarities and differences between each process?

When there is a preset image, you start from that picture and it gives you data to create a dialogue, seek interferences and relationships, whether is a photograph or a page of a diary, because both media have specific graphic features and, in many cases, they're provided with texts that enrich or, conversely, are highly determinative.

They are different ways of facing plastic expression. What sets them apart, in my case, is that when I confront the blank canvas there's a silence, a time of introspection, perhaps a little more internal. The fabric leads you to think, to wander in situations. When there is a preset image, it interrogates you and forces you to think about it. The action starts at that point. I would say it's like two times: one is more intimate, and the other, on the contrary, points to the collective and the social. However, it might not always be this way: recently in my compositions that start from scratch the influence of my paintings on newspapers can be seen, like in the series No happy ends. Because nothing is still, or determined; everything is intimately related.

Rereading the titles of your work again ... Have you ever thought about dedicating yourself to writing?

Yes I've thought about writing ...but I don't know about devoting myself to writing ... Perhaps painting is a very jealous art form, and it doesn't leave me enough time to take writing seriously, but I've made some texts for my artist friends and the occasional story about violence. Sometimes I like it, and I get passionate about it, but painting requires so much time, and I am happy to devote myself to it.

A work that draws both from personal experiences and environment, would radically change if you decided to leave Caracas?

I don't think so. What Caracas gave me is already in me, and wherever I am that way of feeling will be reflected. In addition, each city has its own peculiarities and similarities with others. I will probably seek for the essence of what I do wherever I am. Identity and memory exists everywhere, and that interests me. And anything that could be happening to me, both sensitively and emotionally, will find a way to speak, allowing me to start new projects and artistic proposals, building bridges with what I am, and what I could be experiencing at that particular time. Caracas does not limit me, on the contrary, she has taught me that I can work my way out with whatever I have at hand.

Have you already defined what your next goals will be?

I'm always reconsidering and rearranging my work. Now I'm using very conventional materials that I had set aside, such as oil. I want to add greater plastic richness, depth and light to my images, and oil is ideal for it. I'm also experimenting with photography. I'm taking pictures now, I'm no longer intervening other peoples photographs; instead I'm setting scenarios in correspondence with the aesthetic that I have been proposing in the Project: Urban Bestiary. I recreate spaces trying to achieve consistency with my painting, working with models and experimenting with light, and then I intervene photography with painting again. I'm also making graphics, thanks to the invitation of a large collection that has a specific project for this medium, and that has allowed me to take in new ideas and research possibilities.

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