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Notes on
the
Painting
of
Patricio de la O

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I start these notes on the painting of Patricio de la O situating him in the history of his origin inscribed as it is in the trail of this symbolic thirty year period (1950-1980) which structures the statute of modernity in Chilean art.

To talk of such origin we must mention the catalogue edited by Edith Pollner in 1968 sponsored by Sociedad de Arte Contemporáneo and Editorial Universitaria, *20 Young Chilean Painters*. (1)

At the time few catalogues exist. Writing is scarce. Discourse on painting is essentially oral.

The plastic space is like that of a tribe, with its main settlement in the grounds of the School of Fine Arts, of the Universidad de Chile. In the heart of the tribe, the truth of the work of art lives in the voice of the artist. On the other hand, the artist conveys the voice of the whole society understood as a tribe. In that context the truth of painting mimics the statements of its hegemonic word. It could not be otherwise. Its hegemonic word has always been the political verb.

To set one of the expressions derived from this word we must say that this catalogue is preceded by a prologue and that this prologue reproduces a conversation between the painter José Balmes and the young Adolfo Couve, in which the latter affirms the closeness of such paintings declaring, "*As we carried those works to photograph them I thought that what they did have in common was perhaps the trip on the truck*".

This is one of the few cases in which the making of a catalogue gave birth to an exhibition. In fact, it took place some time later under the seal of what today would be considered a collective exhibit of advanced students. (2)

At that time it appeared as a *collective* of Balmes' advanced students. At the end of the sixties the term advanced student implied participating of a certain concept of progress in art, and having a clear view of a possible career.

In the absence of an actual market for painting University teachers were a guarantee of social register. Progress, then, in tune with the enforced state modernizations.

Indeed a trip on a truck does not make a generation. But this metaphor anticipates the great metaphor of the *train of history*. Conciliation of art and life presents itself as the late expression of an old unitarian myth rooted in the midst of the 19th. Century, which persists in Chile as a symptom of a non completed modernity.

The posterity of the edition mentioned will not formalize itself in a precise tendency either. Those painters were gradually left on their own. Plastic space would suffer unexpected modifications throughout this decade. Modernity would continue unfinished and conciliation between art and life would seek its best dividends in the space of poetry as a new sign of times. In the Chilean intellectual space, painting would suffer a new defeat: once more literature would relegate it to a second place.

Patricio de la O exhibits in 1969, (Sala Edwards) his *Paintings of Santiago de Chile*. Balmes says in his brief introductory note: "*The young painting of Patricio de la O speaks of a deep reality: urban landscape, half lived and half dreamt, now and then a blue strip of sea and sky, multicolored triangles of popular significance, and black as counterpoint: the terrible misery where life stamps the signs of anxiety. Human figures, immersed in their daily routine enter the picture in fragments rendering a multifaceted time and space. Here are the man, the artist, life*". (October 1969).

Patricio de la O will exhibit again in 1980. *The Series of Return* is, above all, an anthology organized from material *in folder* which had accumulated from Santiago to Chacabuco, Chacabuco to Buenos Aires and Buenos Aires to Santiago.

The *Series of the Return* means, on the one hand, professional return to painting; on the other, return to the native country. "*In fact, this series constitutes the synthesis of experiences lived by the artist in these last ten years*" (Milan Ivelic, May 1980). Experiences lived and seen. To live in painting, is to become a seer, even more, a prophet. Finally, take charge of these last ten years which have become a *mark image* that weighs in the *plastic common sense* configuring a scene urged by the immediate me-

mory of a drama. Ten years of plastic, political and cultural re-composition which oblige (you) to re-think the conditions under which the history of painting developed between the fifties and sixties. In brief, the repetitional drama of an unending fable. History of those who leave, history of those who stay, history of those who return to the native country. To the native country of painting.

Each return to painting demands talking of its abandonment. That abandonment caused by the pressure of everyday life and by a notion of social commitment whose effects weighed heavily on Patricio de la O, marking his estrangement from the territorial country, a condition to recover the ceremonial country, symbolic, embroidered... as a field of flowers, as mountain range. For this reason, in his case, more than abandonment, it is a temporary estrangement. This valuation is not determined by the magnitude of its duration but by the nature of the cultural gesture. Pupil of Balmes, his *educational painting* shares the general features of a teaching, hegemonic at the time. Rather, the only *true* teaching of the last thirty years. Yet the dis-balmization, to give it a name, which does not imply oblivion of that teaching nor devaluation of its historical aims, is a slow process. In fact, the formal distance is the attribute of an independence which supports itself having as background the strong institutional figure of the master. To talk of master in this context is to remit oneself to the *ancient history* of Chilean painting.

Work, then, in Patricio de la O, the unframing of that antiquity, consolidated in his fascination for the diagramming of editorial spaces. A matter of living with other systems, though not meaning their incorporation to a strategy of internal criticism of pictorial practice. Graphic displacement would indicate a certain common sense of the times. Time of *modernization* of the graphic production in the country.

I'm talking of the years 65-70. Nelson Leiva *abandons* painting and becomes one of the most important graphic designers of the country. The turn of one epoch over another is marked by the withdrawal of the graphics of EVA magazine and the referential setting of PAULA magazine. Mechanical resistance to the predominant Balmesianism takes shape in the editorial industry. In that context, Patricio de la O transforms painting into a private activity, its public

inscription is achieved through the professionalization of a graphic attitude which ten years later will fall on the phase of his pictorial re-commencement, taking charge of a formal modification not exempt from problems shaded by patch solutions, specially considering the production of the years 80-81 in relation to the works of the present exhibition.

Need of mentioning Dittborn, to fasten even more the statute of the *abandonments*. Dittborn *abandons* painting to initiate a long detour on the investigation of the means of mechanical reproduction, without abandoning the art system but retiring to practise a relentless criticism of the fine arts institution. However, his criticism will not destroy pictorialism; it only leaves in suspense the matter of the picture in its history. Others will "abandon" painting without ever having painted, those who homologize the *out of the picture* with the destruction of the representative space. (sic)

An appropriate fable for those who from their interpretative convenience of a posterity which omits its low antecedents, re-make history according to organic conveniences of the present.

And how not mention another *abandonment*! Of the alternating fiction of Couve, who says he abandons painting for the novel. In truth, when writing, Couve only displaces, from its *medium* a consistent pictorial ideology of the XVIII century which make us see under a new light the validity of Burchard's painting. The intelligence of Couve resides in returning to Balme the gesture of the Burchard pictorial unconscious. Couve's drama is that his literary verb can not freeze the fugacious fate of the *tranche de vie*. In painting, as at the steering wheel, according to the French code on Traffic Security, *la vue c'est la vie* (sight is life).

What can be anticipated about Patricio de la O is that his retirement does not seem to question the statute of the picture nor that of the institutional art system. What he consciously achieves, is a policy of compromise and continuity with the immediate tradition of the last three decades. In this sense, his separation of the informalist teaching fulfills all the processing steps of the graphic colonization of the picture surface. The picture as a dominant system and the proclamation of its cultural inevitability.

Processing steps not exempt from contradictions

and defeats. His rupture with the classical *staining* of the Chilean painting in the style of the School of Fine Arts of the Universidad de Chile is gradual. In fact, one of the most interesting features of his pictorial work are his compromise solutions. This means a way that is non dogmatic, and at the same time suspect of militant innovations in the plastic plane. This can be clearly perceived in the *first mountain ranges* of 1980 where he employs solutions that appear ineffective to attack new problems, as he faces them with formal procedures and an attitude which belonged to his *period of training*.

Indeed, technical procedures already outdated face to the new requirements of a figuration whose chore is the proposal for framing the landscape. The eye of the classical reticulate (Durer) superposed to the determination of the reticulate of industrial diagramming, above all, of the pages of *El Mercurio*. This means to take seriously the other means of pressure that El Mercurio operates on the Chilean history of universal painting. Importance not only for what it says but also for the topo (typo) graphical organization of its statements.

The framing of the landscape postulated by Patricio de la O emphasizes the materiality of the frame and its literal design to compress and evidence its limit. His pictures really look like windows, sayable for the height and width of their frame. Insistence on the frame to think of the previous frame of the picture; that is, the frame of the culture. For this reason when it is said that a picture is only the text that analyzes it, it means that the picture does not represent reality; it is a simulacrum between the world and language supported by a constellation of other texts which are withdrawn and enclosed in an endless reading.

Then, a cultural frame of acknowledgment and compression of a bidimensional space. In this way the picture is bound to acquire the manifest behavior of an objective superposition –the picture is plane object painted on one side only– on a painted wall.

Painting over painting, format over format, basic exercise of the group theory in the primary instruction of the painting of today. In sum, a proposal of framing which leads him to search a point of re-start in the tradition preceding Balmes and Burchard only to justify those *first cordilleras*,

not now from the direct observation of nature but from the discovery of the chrome in a sight over the *Laguna de Aculeo* of Onofre Jarpa in which you can hardly perceive a fragment of mountain. All is worth for that fragment. Because one picture remits to another picture, a matter of settling accounts with the continuity of a non specific tradition of the Chilean landscape. In this case, the work of Patricio de la O points to a specificity, at least one, from the recuperation of the photographic reproductions of the *Revista del Domingo* (Sunday Magazine). Because the true Chilean landscape is the landscape constituted by the said magazine and not by the painting.

The institution of a landscape which is re-taken by painting to be thoughtfully transformed according to artificial transcription procedures where the cutting of the planes and the gradation of tints and values evidence its systematic and repetitive character.

Importance of referring to the photoscopic enlargement of the manual tracing of a photograph or an arrangement of several photographs. This is, their transformation *into a line*. However, retraction of mechanics to the manuality of an iconic alteration to patently enlarge thereafter the detail of "*the modifications*". Then, puncture of the line and elaboration of the punctured pattern which allows, by powdering with English red pigment, the tracing of the compound design, that is basic repetition of gestures already socialized by the regime of a routine graphic work akin to fresco paintings. The calculated respect of an *agreed figuration* which makes the transition viable through stages of one system of visibility to another: from the photograph already diagrammed and printed on the newspaper to a picture devoid of metaphors that doesn't risk going *beyond* in the transcoding of its iconographic reserve.

Now in the composition and design of the second *mountains ranges* the graphic colonization of the surface of the picture seems to have the appearance of irreversibility which in regard to his exhibition in 1984 in Galería Arte Actual Patricio de la O writes: "*The oldest work exhibited here Viva la Cordillera de los Andes belongs to 1981. For this triptych, I structured for the first time a direct vision, with parts of photographs from newspapers. These, re-*

squared and organized over backgrounds, acquired a new depth, a distance and an environmet all their own". (Patricio de la O, PAINTED IN MACUL - 1984).

The paintings of Patricio de la O are seen as mere representations. They are realized pretending to repeat some photographs. A revengeful manner of undertaking the mechanical image occupying rights and duties in measured as well as arbitrary marks; incomplete repetitions (from one tree to another, some differences) and breaks of planes controlled from the sovereign and fixed eye of the painter, evoked partially in some paintings by a silhouette which denotes his position in a nearness which is the position of a god that creates all things beginning by establishing the distance of a separation between the window and himself and then train the eye of the *other*, the spectator, the subordinate, raising the chromatic rationality of the successive and or diffusive framing.

Patricio de la O is a narrative painter. The risk of being one today resides in the rapid dominance of the primitive self in the fragile young painting of Santiago. The importance resides not in what is narrated but how it is narrated. It is a solution. Starting from the comic seems to be the rhetoric norm which reticulates the childish impressions of the individual. But Patricio de la O is on his way back in regard to the present and youthful demands. His only knowledge: painting is a sedimentation. From that certainty he gets the perseverance of re-evaluating the acceptability of his career: the career of a true painter.

The word career will be taken in two senses. What a career of painting means in Chile, determined in its general features by a state conception of the relation artist-society. Relation, the latter, which has become the symbolic axis around which evidences of all kinds turn; the best known, that which seeks to assert, at any price, and internal rationality for each epoch according to the particular way the *spirit of the century* has of presenting itself.

The notion of career, then, compels one to talk of the conditions of the pictorial market and the strange mutations of a vague purchasing power, yet, nonetheless existent; a visible sign of the variations of a taste whose basis is shared by groups of diverse

social and political origin. Moreover, the market exists in a parallel manner, and some times independent from the group organizations of the *artistic common sense* actually operant in the panorama of Santiago. I would even say, that it exists ignoring its problematic stories of constitution and deflation. Patricio de la O's career, in this context, presents anomalies worth being retained, since they position him in an ambiguous ground in which he has established a micro-market and a micro-public structured regarding two matters which seem anachronic to the agents of the present modernizations: the landscape and the portrait. Both of them, acceptably perverted by and extremely reasoned use of the *window effect*. And I daresay that in the history of the Chilean plastic sensibility, the purchasing power is linked to the reproduction of such an effect as essential myth of the picture.

The truth is that next to the subtleties of conceptualism and neo-expressionism, the perversion of Patricio de la O's painting has its bond in a negotiated consideration of a certain classicism when dealing with pictorialism.

Now, what is wished for as purchasing power? You wish to own a picture, to dispose entirely of a simulated window.

Because the picture is in a great measure a *window to the world*. To the world of the possible, of one's own and acknowledged fiction. Classifying fiction of the frame, ready to preserve —freeze— a fragment of the world. And each one keeps it as he wishes. The notion of picture is not separate from the idea of wrapping. The wrapping of a sensitive fraction which installs a *false exit* in the inner habitat.

Patricio de la O's pertinence is rooted, in the unencumbered treatment with that falsehood. Nothing more false than painting, nothing more simulating, because as I have previously said, a painting does not represent reality even though it gives the illusion of preserving a world; since that which it pretends to keep and expect is the simulacrum of a landscape. Then, the problem lies in the social constitution of an idea of the landscape. The landscape, in painting, is a formal construction which must be thought of in the path of these last thirty years. The landscape, in Patricio de la O, being an invention of iconic language which reduces the myth of an ingenuous observation of nature.

What today means direct observation, when our eye has been educated by the mechanism of photography and cinema; finally, by the electronic image. Most of the painting of these last years is overdetermined by photography and mechanical reproduction, being one of the characteristics of the transformation of the beautiful in society. Transformation which does not carry with itself denial of representativity. The painting of Patricio de la O could not be free from this typical phenomenon in what it implies disproving a history of successive improvements repositioning the subject of the picture and the illusion. It is in virtue of this repositioning that this painting must give a particular index of social efficacy. This is, cultural efficacy in its formal-political resolutions. The second sense I assign to the notion of career has to do with the long-range voyages. That is, the organization of a work programme which has known formation (1965), stationary (1972), and a re-starting periods (1980).

Chrono (picto) logy which I will abruptly denominate *programme of depth*. As a matter of depth, in the way that I do not only acknowledge in Patricio de la O a *painter of depth* but a painter of successive dimensional backgrounds over whose weight, he will trim the enigmatic pose, the filleted silhouette, the chinese shadow of the scarce figural referents. It is the fissure of a system, essentially re-squared by partial segmentation of the window taken as *general advantage of work*. Figurative scarcity, rather, a solution of simplicity which he draws with scissors –to the edge– on black bristol –school exercise– the silhouette of a body, lessening its definition by covering (ex) tense planes with diagonal hatchings whose direction –from the top down, from right to left– consigns a compulsive gesture which tries to cover a lack.

What is lacking? Necessity of displacing the silhouettes plane by plane according to the index of efficacy judged and played for each picture. What is there, programmed, is a covenant depth; successive planes where the outlined silhouette organizes the reading of the levels.

In one of the paintings of a tree with the silhouette of a reader on a bench in a park, the lattice is bound as a drawing operating a redundant pressure –the window in the window, a trellised picture–. Here, the silhouette is inter-medial.

In other paintings, on the other hand, the silhouette occupies the first plane producing the fiction of a distance between the frame of the picture and the frame of the window effectively painted, through which the illusory hole in the walled canvas is founded, vainly resisting to visibility. Yet the lines and the hatching hinder the escape *inwards* retaining the depth of field; going from a feign (fictive) depth to the plane, from an effect of a non perceivable depth to the cutting of the densities of zone allowing one to concentrate on the whole.

A whole, furthermore, urbanized by the varied modalities of inlay and interjection which allow one to declare the hegemonic zones starting from the vehement and regular distinction of red and yellow traits which over / reticulate the network of the figural organization of the picture. These last traits situate the picture in the picture, and determine the limits beyond which a silhouette advances from and out of field, entering the picture under the condition of crossing the *strip of nobody* from an out of previous picture made on purpose. Inlaid work allows the combination of visual procedures, which coming from the photographs and painting, are articulated by the graphic space, space which nevertheless, inclines the balance in favour of the pictorial, liberating the strange and particular energy of a visionary who works with the *trick* used in the serial production of images.

- (1) *Veinte jóvenes pintores chilenos*, Edith Pollner, Design Nelson Leiva, Sponsorship: Sociedad Chilena de Arte Contemporáneo y Editorial Universitaria, Santiago de Chile, 1968. With a bio-pictographic card of: Carmen Aldunate, Ana María Balmaceda, René Bernau, Wenceslao Bravo, Francisco Brugnoli, Adolfo Couve, Enrique Castro Cid, Patricio de la O, Eugenio Dittborn, María Virginia Errázuriz, Antonia Ferreiro, Ernesto Fontecilla, Patricia Israel, Nelson Leiva, María Mohor, Gloria Ortiz, René Poblete, Lucy Rosas, José Samith, Eugenio Téllez.
- (2) It must be emphasized that of these 20 painters, nine were professors of the Fac. of Fine Arts. Only Adolfo Couve remains... but as a professor of Theory.

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