

BEAUTIFUL/DECAY

BOOK 2: WHAT A MESS! 2009



JOSÉ LERMA

ARTICLE BY
ALLISON GIBSON

IMAGES COURTESY
OF ANDREA ROSEN
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THE PAINTINGS OF SPANISH-BORN, BROOKLYN-BASED JOSÉ LERMA SUGGEST THE TRADITION OF PORTRAITURE, THOUGH IT IS UNCERTAIN WHETHER THE SUBJECT OF THE PORTRAIT IS THE SITTER OR THE ARTIST'S CHOSEN MEDIUM ITSELF. DENSE LAYERS THAT SEEM TO BE MELTING ONTO THE SURFACE CREATE GATHERINGS WHERE COLOR AND TEXTURE MINGLE TOGETHER COYLY UNDERNEATH A CEILING OF FINAL, SPLATTERED BLOBS. THE PAINTINGS ARE AT ONCE MISCHIEVOUS AND WRYLY UPFRONT, FINDING THEMSELVES IN A UNIQUE NICHE SOMEWHERE BETWEEN 17TH CENTURY NOBLE PORTRAITURE AND WILD ABSTRACTIONISM.

WITH ACADEMIC FORAYS INTO POLITICAL SCIENCE AND LAW, AND AN MFA IN PAINTING, LERMA IS AN INTERNATIONALLY EXHIBITING ARTIST WITH AN UPCOMING SOLO SHOW IN BERLIN, PAST SOLO PRESENTATIONS IN KOREA, NEW YORK, BELGIUM, AND ITALY, AND RESIDENCIES IN PUERTO RICO, WITH NEW YORK'S SKOWHEGAN PROGRAM, AND AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON.

I RECENTLY LISTENED, OVER A SYMPHONY OF NEW YORK TRAFFIC BUZZING BY IN THE BACKGROUND ON HIS END, AS JOSÉ LERMA THOUGHTFULLY, HONESTLY, AND PLAYFULLY DESCRIBED HIS ART HISTORICAL INSPIRATIONS, HIS FEELINGS ABOUT INTERPRETATION, AND HIS QUIETLY REBELLIOUS SPIRIT TO CREATE PAINTINGS THAT HIGHLIGHT THE VERY NATURE OF THE MEDIUM—EVEN WHEN IT WAS AT TIMES “UNCOOL” TO ATTEMPT ANYTHING SO OUTRAGEOUS AS TO SIMPLY PAINT.

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Your paintings suggest portraiture, yet they lack those explicit characteristics usually found in portraits—namely, facial features. Some of them evoke Louis XIV-era characterizations, with vague impressions of long curled wigs and ruffled collars. What are these pieces about?

I'm always stealing from other work that I've done before, or from things that I liked before I was a painter. I shot a lot of pictures in the early 90's of busts of bankers at The Met. One day [after I became a painter], I was looking through the pictures again, and there were about thirty of these busts, and they looked great. I tend not to question; if I pick something up at one point, it must be good enough to be included [in my art]. So I started painting these judges—really, they're bankers from the 17th century. I call them "abstract portraits—they carry all the signs of a portrait, with format and a kind of figure in there, but they don't have likeness, which is the essence.

I read that some time ago, you immersed yourself in the study of Abstract Expressionism and that (according to Andrea Rosen Gallery) you disputed the widely held assumption that abstraction is inherently aggressive because of a supposed frenzied activity, and wagered that abstracting actually derives from extremely quiet and slow painting. Since we're exploring what it means to be a "messy" artist, I would note that your work has a tactile messiness, yet it seems that your process of working is conversely subtle. So, would you consider your work messy?



LEFT
“UNTITLED,” 2007
OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS.
80” X 68”

OPPOSITE
“UNTITLED,” 2006
OIL ON CANVAS.
24” X 20”

WHAT A MESS!





ABOVE
“UNTITLED,” 2006
OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS.
76” X 64” X 2”

OPPOSITE
“UNTITLED #1,” 2007
LITHOGRAPHY, WOODCUT ON RIVES BFK
AND HANDMADE PAPER. 44” X 38”
EDITION 1 OF 12.

WHAT A MESS!

That's actually the description that I give people. Whenever someone asks about my work, and I know they don't have, maybe, an art reference, I just say "messy." It's like this old Willem de Kooning thing where he painted like a madman for a TV crew once, but in reality, he painted very slowly. He just sort of sat there and kind of passed the brush. That's really very boring to watch; people wanted to see the trace of the brush being related to a frenzied activity.

People want to imagine that you wail on the canvas like Pollock did?

Exactly, and I also want to tie it into these sort of subtle shifts and permutations of the pastel colors, so that the paintings have a very quick, tactile read and also a really slowed-down read in terms of colorship.

Can you talk a little more about your process? How did you begin working with that thick application and in those layers?

I remember it all starting in school, where I was a multimedia artist, and I just decided that I was going to make a painting. At that point, there was so much emphasis at the school [University of Wisconsin-Madison] of medium specificity. They seemed to be like, "Why are you making a painting?" Like it was really uncool to paint at that point. There had to be a lot of explanation; like you had to make some kind of abstraction that was codified in some other way and then that would stand in for a painting. But at some point, I decided I was going to make a painting and it was just going to be about paint-about things that only paint could do very well. So I just started applying it very thick.

It's also about working from memory, having no actual reference. I decided to go just straight from my mind to my hand and into the work. It's a very simple way of going about it. Everyone else seemed to be stuck in this sort of simulation thing, and for me, it was liberating to do these very dumb images, but painted in a somewhat sophisticated way, but I still just laid it on thick. You couldn't get too precious with it or it was going to go nowhere.

What other artists' work are you interested in, or perhaps inspired by?

I guess not anymore, but for a while I liked Phillip Guston; that was pretty obvious at the beginning. So I had to work on getting rid of that influence. But I still like Morandi quite a bit. I still like artists like Piero Della Francesca. I will always like that work; that work is amazing. Mostly, I like conceptual artists. I grew up really liking Bruce Nauman's work much more than anything else. I just like the freedom that they had.

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What else outside of the realm of art history or contemporary art inspires your work?

Pretty much anything, really. I make works that are paintings, but I also make these works that are about paintings. For a while, I was framing spaces that had some significance to me. Almost anything that happens to you where you can determine the aesthetics of it is good enough to be either art or a painting—wherever your first kiss was, for instance. Those are the elements that you should look at, build a painting around—not necessarily what happened, but what it looked like. You have to force yourself constantly to use parts of your life to make a painting that you haven't seen before. Other people do it very differently or it comes very naturally to them, but I was a real painting nerd [when I began]. I had real worship things with some painters, so I had to force myself to go in my own direction.

Since you're drawing on personal narrative, how do you feel about interpretation? Is it out of your hands at a certain point, or do you ever feel protective of your vision?

I find that some critics say things that are amazing, and I go, "Wow, I never thought of that," and then some people say things that are just exactly what I thought that I definitely didn't want to be the interpretation. But then I remember that one guy said something about a piece once that was so beautiful, I kept using it after that. So, it's a bit transformative. But most of the time, I have no control. I try not to title the pieces for that reason. If I do, I try to make



them as ambiguous as possible. But one rule I've always had is this idea of tying in the personal with art historical references. I think that tends to anchor it in for the viewer, but also brings in an idiosyncratic voice.

What are you working on now?

I am making some paintings with towels right now, and rugs. Again, it's mostly about the same subjects and stealing from the same ideas, but now done with different materials. Also, I was painting on cardboard with mud—the cheapest paintings I could make. So I think the next show is going to be varied—some airbrush paintings on rugs, mud on cardboard paintings, towel and washcloth paintings, and probably some cabinets that I've done before with very thick paint on them.

There's this idea that you can take any object and apply a solvent to it, take off the paint from it, and create another painting. I did that for a long time, so I wanted a sort of reverse version of that. It gets sort of complicated, but I started using the towel because I thought it had sort of this inductive relationship to the body and it would wrap around the body or an object and carry something, and I thought that was kind of beautiful.

But I was never making abstractions, just kind of goofy stuff. I don't know how to make a serious painting. Once it starts becoming too much about ideas, I tend to sabotage it so that it's not about ideas explicitly in the content. So I make it overly cartoonish. I think that's just my nature.

LEFT
“UNTITLED.” 2007
OIL AND ACRYLIC ON CANVAS.
96” X 72”

WHAT A MESS!



ABOVE
“THE GOLDEN SEA,” 2006
OIL, CHARCOAL, PEN, AND PENCIL ON CANVAS.
80” X 72”