

Jaime Gili Vs. Jesús Fuenmayor

This conversation took place at 2 pm. on the 9th of August 2006

JF: For me, it is important to point out at the references included in your work. On the one hand, there is a reference to high culture and high art in your references to Venezuelan kineticism – because in some way or another an explosion seems to appear in your paintings, as if somebody had thrown a bomb into a work by Cruz Diez; on the other hand, there's the reference to how that kinetic, geometric and abstract tradition has been assimilated by popular cultures. Both references coexist in your painting – an environment in which boundaries are not visible, because one can't tell which of the two references prevail. I'm making this introduction because it is my interest to point out at what we have talked about before, the idea of “translation”; it was said that in Venezuela, your work needs a different kind of translation than the one it would require in London. But what I wanted to ponder was whether your work needs this entire elaborated preface or if it rather has an existence beyond these references we have mentioned. I have the feeling that your work can actually exist beyond these references that I mentioned – references which I consider to be an account of the relation between painting and its' documentary use. And now for my specific question: what other thing can your painting turn into when you abandon references?

JG: It is true I have recently been thinking about translation because of the amount of knowledge we have here in Venezuela about the history of our abstraction, which does

not coincide with the amount of knowledge and references they have in Britain, where I live. To this necessary “translation” we could add the problem of the British people’s relation with modernity in general – their distance, if not phobia, to the subject, although things are changing recently, the type of urban interventions so commonly found in Caracas since the 60’s, and also even the common use of concrete in buildings, are still very harshly received by British audiences. So on the one hand, there is the problem of how the British see modernity and on the other, that of how I explain my own work.

JF: May be we are beginning to see the differences between how to show your work in England and how to do it here. It occurs to me that in Venezuela, when talking about modern age’s failure, there still may be some nostalgia; but in England, the topic generates a clear rejection: over there, modernity’s failure is not considered to be a loss, instead, the fact that modernity does not exist anymore is thought of as something rather good.

JG: In Britain everything seems to have happened before; something like our modernity came with the Industrial Revolution, with the use of iron and architecture, with the consumerism of the Victorians and the strong influence of the resources that came from the colonies – accounting for the exploitation of Africa’s and Latin America’s resources. That was a huge change in the world, but a less aesthetic one perhaps. Modernity happened long before our 20th Century clean international style modern, and had already influenced architecture, ways of building and ways of living. The British didn’t need to embrace the ways that appeared later, which I would say had quite continental origins.

The few examples of a fully modern architecture found in England still look like something foreign, as it is obvious that over here a way of building not very tall buildings, with red brick – not concrete blocks, has prevailed. It is the same in the visual arts: painting tradition in England is a tradition that comes from the landscape, and the few abstract painters found over there have never been mainstream.

JF: There are two things that I want to try and put together; basically I want to insist in the question of whether your painting becomes something else beyond the references you include in it. There seem to be two antagonistic ideas right about now: it seems that in order to be able to talk about this work of yours, one has to put it within its' political context because it needs to be seen in relation with certain historical circumstances. But instead, if your work does indeed exist beyond any reference, one would then have to stop seeing it in relation to its' political context.

JG: There are so many components. In a public lecture recently I was talking about all the projects me and other artists made in Puerto Rico and Argentina; projects that took place in the streets and with very local things, speaking with the local people, putting together objects found right at the place. In the lecture I projected many images of my work that are not paintings on canvas and also an array of images of works by other artists. Everything was very diverse and even funny, but when pictures of my paintings came through and I had to talk about them I suddenly didn't know how to explain my own work. I found it difficult to talk about paintings among those other works that were more directly related to the street, more relational. At that point this sentence just came to

me: "...and this is the painting I make in England in order to explain where I come from." Perhaps everything I do has something to do with a certain context; my painting has to do with the context of where I currently am, not because it is directly influenced by this context; but on the contrary, because this context makes me distill what I bring inside of me so that I can explain the layers, my present and my past. If this was true, then we could say that my painting itself is the translation we have been talking about. But it is also true that my painting has – as a part of modern painting – an organic development in which whatever you have painted will tell you what to paint next.

JF: There is one thing that calls my attention, it is how your painting has evolved. There's a first part: some paintings that precede your current ones, as you said, those previous paintings seem to be more programmatic and calculated, they could even be preconfigured in the computer, paintings of which you knew the results even before being put on canvas; but with the passage of time you have gotten rid of all these instruments that allowed you to paint like this, and now you have begun to enter into a certain amount of spontaneity and expressivity in your compositions – into a more subjective way of approaching painting.

JG: Maybe the difference is not so radical.

JF: Why do you think it isn't?

JG: For the first painting of this cycle – a cycle that may end some day opening the path for a new cycle – I put a rule on myself, a basic structure. The rule was “I am going to prepare a white canvas; then I am going to paint an irregular black star; then I am going to paint a white star on top of the black one; then another black one and another white one, and the last star in the end is going to be white.” This will leave residues and the points of the visible black stars outside of the center. This was a rule that lasted for approximately four paintings, because after that, the colors began to take their part and it wasn’t “star shapes” anymore, because this directly allowed me to go straight to the fragments. In the beginning, it was as if I had thrown a stone to the center of a whole glass but now, I’m rather collecting the little pieces lost around my workshop and building something with them. The color has entered progressively from the black and white paintings at the beginning of the cycle. And about the use of the computer... I should say that it has been present in all the stages. Sometimes, I happen to have a half finished painting and I take a picture of it, then I put this picture into my computer and I work in it in order to decide a next step. I use the computer as a drawing tool that allows me to test certain things.

JF: I understand. It wasn’t that much programmatic before and it isn’t so spontaneous now either, even though it might appear that way. In that apparent evolution what I see is an inverse process to the historic process of the so called “geometric painting” which in it’s beginnings was less refined and afterwards rationality increased until it arrived to the bigger synthesis of Modrian’s horizontal and vertical. Although you might feel that your process is not similar, you are indeed taking the chances allowing it to seem that way.

What I feel – not from the painting’s backstage which is your side – but from this side, right in front of the painting which is the spectator’s side, is that the painting seems to be saying that there is also a certain joy in it, certain possibilities of establishing a merely aesthetic and contemplative relationship with it, without having to inquire references.

JG: Possibly.

JF: There is a principle used by Hal Foster to dismantle Peter Burger’s idea that there is a moment in the avant-garde which is original and impossible to repeat; therefore considering futile any attempt to repeat the avant-garde. I’m talking about the principle of retroactivity. For Foster it is not true that in the avant-garde there is an original moment: an artist like Marcel Duchamp is understood to be avant-garde only retrospectively, because it was with the passage of time that we built his image as one of the high peaks of art in the 20th century, but in his beginning he was not that. That’s what I feel to be happening with your work: you are building a retrospective synthesis, therefore, It seems natural to me that yours is an inverse path, and in that inverse path – like you were saying before – the issue is not anymore about a bomb thrown at a work by Cruz-Diez, but about how the explosion is produced from within the artistic work itself; now it seems that your own painting is imploding and not exploding.

JG: There is an exhibition being prepared by Matthew Higgs at Barbara Gladstone in New York; it is called “deconstruction” and its’ thesis is somehow that game of reconstructing loose fragments, although I’m not necessarily saying that this is a fact, a

special trend happening at this moment in time, I only think it applies very well to what we are talking about. It exploded, it broke and now we are trying to put it back together with what remains of it.

The history of modernity may have had to much to do with the way the world's economy moves and has moved – I accept that – but it also has something to do with the fact that the artist cannot be idle without wanting to build something, without wanting to build a better society or trying to see beyond his or her nose. I think the artist always may want to help the architect or even the politician.

JF: What allows your artistic work to do something on behalf of these things?

JG: Maybe it is a dead end. The utopia is in itself impossible to build, but one has to be pointing that way.

JF: Your work also has a presence outside of the institutional context of the arts; as seen on the work you recently made for the London Architecture Biennial on the façade of a building. This work was outside of the institutional context because you didn't constrain yourself only to painting, but it also acquired a dimension which made it exist in an infinite manner on street signs, shopping windows and even in the exhibition at Oficina#1 - ('Desconfia', August, 2006.). Such things resist to be assimilated as an object and these gestures keep a certain tension on your work.

JG: Of course, I also think that painting cannot limit itself to canvas only. I have always said that everything I do is painting, even though I make a piece out of surfboards or photography; what I do is ‘painting’ and what interests me is painting, in any manner.

JF: Speaking of context, although I’m not very clear about it, I saw it when you showed me this invitation card to the exhibition “Indica” at Rifleman. (London, November, 2006.) It seemed to me as if there was the need of seeing these things, this part of modernity, as some kind of anachronism. In London, part of the charming attributes people can find in your work is that anachronism.

JG: You should also remember the English irony. They not only see that you are working in a kind of anachronism, but they also see your work as something foreign, exotic; something whose history, for many of them, led to failure. Here the problem of needing some sort of translation comes back: the fact that here, such abstraction is only lightly alive would be a problem for my work; because I’m seeing my own work putting into consideration everything that has happened since the sixties. If there still are people who see continuity between A and B without passing through a deep review, that is – in some way – a problem. There can be different points of view, but the irony is important.

JF: There are two points to end this conversation. One refers to a review about Eugenio Espinoza written by Julieta González in which she said that Venezuelan critics who see Espinoza’s *Impenetrables* as a sign of irony are mistaken; for there is no rupture but continuity between the work of Espinoza and that of the abstract art *maestros*. The

problem there is how you conceive irony. Duchamp – for instance – didn't use irony as a way of rupture, but what it meant for him was that he was seeing things in a different way, a twist that not necessarily meant to break with everything that came before. I think this is an interesting example because Duchamp's work has many branches and cannot easily be put into a lineal history. That is a problem to think about: How is irony conceived? The other point has to do with the text you sent me about landscape art, in which you say that you don't necessarily need to conceive modernism as a failure but rather as something that can make some kind of contribution.

JG: One shouldn't only see things that are easy to see about the end of modernity – those things which represent the failure of the modernist dream, the impossible part of the utopia – but that one should also see the positive parts there have been, the contributions which outlined solutions that have not been carried out yet. One of the positive things near to us is the idea of Economy of means to make things and build, and another one is that the artists should work with the architects from the very beginning of the projects – as it happened with Villanueva in the campus of our Central University of Venezuela – something that is not happening so much nowadays. Architects nowadays leave a blank space – if anything – in their projects, so that someone comes afterwards to put something there; but it is always better to work together in something rather thought over. There are thousands of details of modernity that not only don't mean failure, but instead we keep using them; and many others that we have never put to use but maybe we should.