

Field of Vision, By Joselina Cruz

(texte original en Anglais pour l'exposition individuelle d'Alberto Reguera à Madrid, galerie Antonio Machon).

The roots of landscape art came from the desire to grasp the world within the fences of the frame, to contain 'as far as the eye could see' a pictographic account of topographical detail. Simon Schama looks to Joachim Patinir and Pieter Bruegel the Elder as the first masters of one of the ancestral branches of site specificity, installation, and urban research. For these artists the earth could be at their disposal with a glance, never mind that the immensity was made minute to fit the finite confines of their given canvas. Within this practice (and desire) to capture land, and sea, and sky, were established the increments made in perspectival drawing, and thus, possess a more realistic survey of how the eye could own. It was initially a spectator-led practice, and would continue to be despite the onslaught of contemporary conceptual thinking.

It was the Romantic excursions of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, J.M.W. Turner, John Constable and Gustav Courbet that manifest ambiguities began within the rendering of landscape art. In some works, specific subject matter was doubtful, if not absent; this led to comparisons with impressionism. Landscape as impression imagines fleeting moments, of slight shifts made expeditiously, of framed landscapes rushing past, of quickening views. The initial clutch of the eye has been overlaid with time's accumulation of seconds, of the impossibility of standing still. This refusal of landscape to cooperate, to become a still life, or even, to sit (still or down) for the painter's hand to engender, spawned its slip from within the frames.

By the 1960s, Earth and Land art defied the realms, not only of the canvas, but also of the museum and/or gallery that held them. Smithson's "The Spiral Jetty" (1970) had taken on dimensions of land that had to be travelled through (or seen from above) for one to experience the immensity and the true nature of the work. Dennis Oppenheim once said that "I see the earth as a sculpture—where flying over the earth is like viewing existing painted areas or pictorial, painterly surfaces. While on the ground it is more volumatic. It's like walking through sculpture." That the works of these pioneers of earth and land art took on the veritable land, sea, and sky of landscape painting, saw a projection from the eye to the body. For these artists, whether through Robert Smithson, Richard Long, or Walter de Maria, land (or in some cases, land/scape) dominated the artist and his experience of it. One entered it not only visually, but physically. It was treated as material, with nature being re-formed from the ground up.

The work of Alberto Reguera complicates this linear historical development. Whereas the practitioners of earth and land art sought to create sites—landscape art within the land—out of the gallery's non-site, Reguera does exactly the opposite. His abstract landscape paintings are installed on the ground that the experience of land seeps out of the frame's boundaries. The spaces we ramble about are mini sites. Sites where the mind's imagination fills in the areas that Reguera's canvases have left off. Gaston Bachelard writes, "Far from the immensities of sea and land, merely through memory, we can recapture, by means of meditation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur. But is this really memory? Isn't imagination alone able to enlarge indefinitely the image of immensity?" This intimate immensity that Bachelard speaks of resonates within the current exhibition of Reguera's landscapes that dot the gallery's horizon. His work collapses internal locutions with that of external vistas. Reguera's sustained dialogue with

landscape touches on his continued preoccupation with the subject as impulse; it has for him enough intellectual and visual material so as to be thought and re-thought again.

But there is another aspect to Reguera's work that allows for the idea of landscape to thread a consistent path through his practice. Reguera's initial works of abstract landscapes have evolved into cubic objects that blur the boundaries between sculpture and painting. The simple recovery of painting as object, but this time not necessarily hung, has allowed the works to balance on the precipice of the 'either-or', teetering on their now ambiguous categorization, or perhaps, lack of. The artist's exploration of 'something', which is surely a painting, but at the same time verges on becoming an object. Such a consideration opens up challenges as to the direction that 'painting as object' is headed for.

As paintings, the works are painstakingly accomplished. Whether hung on the wall, or part of the installation, each canvas reveals a luminosity from within. Layer upon layer of paint allows for texture to reveal from within, each brush line of paint seemingly minutely turning. There are no large swathes of color to pull us in. Suggestions of another, farther, deeper perspective in the work preoccupy our eye, and mind, as hints of color glimmer from within. Are these intimations of imagined perspectives forsaken by traditional landscape painting to give way to abstraction in landscape?

The artist points out in his work *Maritime Fragments* (2008) as being a gesture referencing Caspar David Friedrich's opus *Monk by the Sea* (1809), one of the early landscapes to veer away from landscape painting's traditional composition. Instead of creating a perspective, horizontal bands of color dominate the field of vision, with the 19th-century painter inserting the monk as the single staffage looking intently at a spot in the ocean. By extension, Reguera's work leads us into Caspar David Friedrich's frame with the hopes of discerning, perhaps, the monk's object of contemplation. Reguera elegantly lifts an obscure part of this picture—a point within the dark, turmoil of the sea—and with a lyrical layering of Prussian blue, amidst peeping flecks of russet, meditates on its sentiment. This work places us solidly within Reguera's sustained discourse of the possibilities of the painted landscape.

Reguera's works are thus, securely planted within the act of painting itself. He suffuses his works with color, and concerns himself with strokes and unity, depth and luminosity. His is not to create shaped canvases, destroy canvases, remove them from their frame, or lay them like discarded material within a space, all these actions being mere censure against the finitude of painting on a square format. Instead he confirms painting's very "paintingness," and bound by the fullness of its prescriptive history, inquires into its possibilities. As single units, his works continue abstraction as landscape where the rule of traditional painting foundered. But his explorations in painting endeavor to expand the horizon of the mind's eye as presented by a single canvas, to one that seeks to involve its immediate site. In this exhibition, one sees how the artist tries to subsume the space outside of the canvas. *Mendelssohn's Melodies* (2008), which makes a poetic allusion to music's fluidity, already seeps out of the cubic object onto another surface. From this it was only a small step for Reguera to venture into what he calls his pictorial installations.

Using the floor space as a foil for his works, Reguera chose to position his paintings upright on the ground rather than the wall. Thus, the spectator is greeted with a group of landscapes with which to navigate through. Such movement creates a pictorial allusion, as it unwittingly draws in

not only the gaze of the viewer but also their physiological geography. Distinguishing this exhibition from earlier shows are paintings that take on a more decisive, solid, three-dimensional form. Whereas earlier work continued on the more conventional line of a regular painting being set upright on the floor, Reguera created a more solid, and thicker slice (the object itself is less than a cube, but definitely more than a sliver) to create paintings to be viewed in the round. Should we decide to gaze back, another painted scape is there to meet ours. One physically enters Reguera's landscapes, similar to walking into the visual field of, for example, an expanse of sandy beach. His are images of landscapes seen in his mind's eye, each turning into a precisely positioned element to create a grander fictive landscape. The artist expands the role of landscape painting within the landscape itself—collapsing their divergent historical threads into a single intertwined expression: installation.

Reguera himself expresses his desire for this practice to “transform the idea of traditional flat painting to co-exist with the space which surrounds it. It's important to remember that the pictorial installations are ephemeral, or temporary. In contrast, each individually created painting is long-lasting. The pictorial installation is carried out only for a specific exhibition space.” The artist with this action weaves painting, landscape art, the idea of site/non-site, into a definable territory for re-thinking each category, with its own specific histories, and that of current practice. Reguera collapses these diverse threads onto a single spatial panorama, enabling the imagination and the gaze to assume a single experience. It is when we step into this site that we find ourselves subsumed by the ‘intimate immensity’ described by Bachelard. Single internal landscapes, those deeply intimate—*Cosmic Fragments* (2008), *Nocturnal Territories* (2008), and *Transparent Darkness* (2008)—come together and fuse into a field of imagination. “Immensity is within ourselves,” writes Bachelard. Reguera shares the intimacy of his landscapes, each one a different expression of his soul, an almost poetic singing of paint, and locates each one within the vast site of physical and imaginary locations. Unlike the material-based work of those artists who worked on earth and land art, Reguera's material (aside from the obvious paint and canvas) is that of the stretch of mind and imagination; similar to their expansive concepts however, Reguera imbues his practice with the task of site. In Robert Smithson's 1968 essay ‘A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects,’ he writes of the earth surface coalescing with that of the mind: “The earth's surface and the figments of the mind have a way of disintegrating into discrete regions of art. Various agents, both fictional and real, somehow trade places with each other—one cannot avoid muddy thinking when it comes to earth projects of what I will call “abstract geology.” One's mind and the art are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason.” For Alberto Reguera, his pictures come together to dilate the mind towards reality (sans visual tricks), allowing contraries to come together into theoretical cohesion. In this, his current equation of the landscape, the initial aspiration to ‘own’ what we gaze upon, becomes picayune. Faced with an abstract geology, we, together with the artist, travel through internal and external vistas, our views un-stilled, wholly meandering within a landscape—one as fictive as it is real.

(*) Joselina Cruz is an independent curator currently working on projects in Manila and Singapore, where she was co-curator of the Singapore Biennial in 2008. She was formerly a curator at the Singapore Art Museum and the Lopez Museum in Manila. She has curated numerous exhibitions and writes essays, reviews and criticism for catalogues, newspapers and magazines.

She has a degree in Art History from a university in the Philippines and holds an MA in Curating and Commissioning Contemporary Art from the Royal College of Art (RCA), London, UK.