

Platforms X Portals: Martin Durazo's Lurid Ontologies

Sometimes,
reality is too complex
To be conveyed
by the spoken word.
Legend remolds it
into a form
That can be spread
all across the world

– Jean Luc Godard *Alphaville*

One of the first things you were taught in most late-modern academies of painting (Lord knows what they're teaching those kids today!) is "No Dayglo!" It appeared to be one thing that everyone from the Ab-Exers on – except for Franks Stella and a few other delinquents – could agree. The issue seemed to be one of equating amplified optical excitation with pandering to the lowest common denominator: the dreaded Kitsch.

It is this very equation that acts as a red cape waved in the face of el toro in question, Martin Durazo, and a quintessential example of the litanies of deliberate faux pas that run through the artist's oeuvre like a vein of fluorescent ore through the gloomy Art World mineshaft. One litany is pretty much formalist – there are longtime painterly proscriptions against dayglo (as well as suspiciously luminous phthalos, quinacridones, alizarin crimson, etc), spraypaint, stencils, and iridescent surfaces – not to mention the blacklights, fiber optics, and fun fur of his installations, which violate an entirely different set of protocols.

The other litany is content-driven: the appropriation of popular culture visual language outside what can be plausibly interpreted as the normative mainstream, with a notable emphasis on collectively authored subcultural vernaculars. Historically, the Beat era was the point of divergence – Beats that embraced the concurrent Abstract Expressionist pantheon were granted a modicum of legitimacy, while those that sought voice of their own rooted in the proto-psychedelic abjectivities of North Beach and Venice were relegated to footnote status.

This semiotic stratification escalated through the Hippie, Punk, Rave, and Goth eras, forging a new Academicism that fancied itself – with Orwellian contortion – to occupy the vanguard of transgressiveness. While a few chinks began to appear in the 1980s with the collapse of the Greenberg Figuration Wall, the idea of keeping the Fine Art reservoir pure and contaminant-free remained central enough that Durazo's borrowings – macrame, spirit catchers, Sid & Nancy, mandalas, smurfs, beanbag chairs, the Black Flag logo, mirror balls, bondage gear, erotic fliers, black velvet posters, mass-produced exotic rugs, and on and on – still had the power to rock the aesthetic boat.

Two of the artist's other source pools are less associated with youth countercultures, but have similar genealogies of exclusion: industrial building materials/mass produced furnishings and Mexican pop culture – bearing significant connotations of classist and racist erasure almost

entirely absent from the predominantly white middle-class dissenters mentioned above, and expanding Durazo's critical framework considerably.

The result is a fairly comprehensive ideological pictorial, aimed at disrupting and drawing attention to a coded elitism in The Art World that passes itself off as "good taste" and "connoisseurship" when Occam's razor suggests that what's being excised from the conversation is more along the lines of hedonistic, anti-authoritarian, tribal, humorous, sexy, spiritual voices – improvisational, heuristic, and materially poor, displaying little investment in Western Civilization, let alone The Art World. So far so good!

You may have noticed that my brief catalog of Durazo's visual appropriations refers mostly to 3-dimensional artifacts incorporated in his installations and assemblage sculptures, when we were originally talking about painting conventions. Although work such as his early grids of discarded fishtanks (filled with colored liquid) make obvious allusions to Modernism, it wasn't until Durazo took up the paintbrush (and can and squeegee) that he really started working both sides of the street, exclusivity-wise.

While lurid light effects and offensive content have been more or less successfully kept at bay from the upper sanctums of the culture, gestural abstraction probably accounted for the biggest real estate grab in that swell neck of the woods in the history of American art. When Durazo began stamping, splashing, staining, stenciling, and squeegeeing canvases in the early 21st century, he was channeling the lingua franca of heroic explorers who had first claimed that castle keep for America. Americans. Certain Americans.

There's a little cognitive lacuna at play here – since the ascendancy of Johns and Rauschenberg, Stella, Warhol, Martin, Hesse, and so on, painterly gestural abstraction's place in the confines of contemporary art culture progressed from eminence grise to bete noire to demented uncle babbling in the corner in a puddle of urine. Over that same period, the seriousness Americans accorded Art diminished proportionally. Mere coincidence? To this day, the Abstract Expressionists are generally perceived to be the last authentic art movement, before the advent of The Put-On (though some would argue they were the first salvo in the Irony Wars.) That's 65 years of critical baggage invisible to the uninitiated, with a splash of the sarcasm found in paintings by the likes of Paul McCarthy, Jim Shaw, or Albert Oehlen.

This is what brings to mind Jean Luc Godard. Because in spite of the fact that Durazo sneaks into the role of the Old Master Painter from a side exit propped open – a product of the churning self referential history of contemporary art that defined itself by its distance from the improvised brushstroke, with unpaid dues in the sincerity fields of Postmodern Abstraction (which had generated such credible practitioners as Peter Halley, Jonathan Lasker, and Jessica Stockholder) – somehow it clicks, and Durazo knocks out a series of works that adamantly dismantle the very mechanisms by which they are constructed and are operating while embodying the language with clarity and beauty.

Godard had a similar relationship to cinema, bending and mocking conventions, or leaving them out entirely to see if the thing would still stand – much of it invisible to those who hadn't actually spent most of the waking hours of their life viewing and analyzing films. Godard's jump-cuts, self-conscious color manipulation, jarring musical interludes, intertextual references, faux-verite

camerawork, and breaking of the fourth wall were direct taunts to the cinematic status quo, but added up to some of the most arresting and influential movies of the early 60s.

In reading Godard's texts (or more consistently the critical writing about his work) one gets the impression that aesthetics are fundamentally invariably means to an ideological end. But watching Godard's films is a different experience, with ideology and aesthetics taking turns as equivalent and mutually interpenetrating domains, mutually deconstructive, oscillating between portal and platform: a strobing ontology between a place to stand and an opening to another place. A tightly vibrating dialectic between sensation and rationalization, contemplation and praxis.

Our introductory aphorism – also the opening lines from Godard's *Alphaville*, spoken by the surveillance AI Alpha 60 (which appears, incidentally, as a strobing light) – hints at the synthesis at the end of the mineshaft – a post-verbal medium (cinema maybe?) that absorbs and transmits reality as it is, or closer anyway: contradictions intact, circumventing narrative to plant an ontological EMP in our chattering monkey minds. “To be or not to be – that is the gggzornonplatt.”

Flickering and careening like random frames from a nightclub scene in an experimental psychedelic porn shot on a faulty iPhone, masterpieces distilled to units of perceptual phenomena, Durazo's paintings – perhaps more than their codependent installation iterations – constitute a deconstructed cinema of collapsed teleology, a platform supporting nothing, a portal leading nowhere. The Revolution will not be televised because the television moves too slow. What you see is what you get. Isn't that enough? How about if it glows in the dark?

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