Lowe Museum, University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida.

Glexis Novoa: Emptiness

Cities, like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else. — Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

Like Calvino's imagined cities, artist Glexis Novoa's oeuvre is an artful blend of emotion, ideology, and memory. Born in Havana in 1964, Novoa was part of the first generation of Cuban artists to have grown up under the Castro regime; the so-called "80s Generation." His experiences during that time—which were marked by equal measures of hope and privation, desire and oppression—left an indelible mark on his art.

Novoa's youthful Etapa romántica, or "Romantic Period," dates to the 1980s and is notable for its fresh idealism and relative freedom from technical strictures. (fig. 1) After this early phase, which included a significant performative aspect, the artist entered what he later came to refer to as his Etapa práctica, or "Practical Period," with art that was marked by greater introspection, philosophical reflection, and ideological sophistication. (fig. 2) It was also during this time—the early '90s—that Novoa left Cuba to take up residence in Mexico, before ultimately settling in Miami in 1995.

While in Mexico, Novoa began incorporating architecture and urbanism into his expressive lexicon. In particular, he started experimenting with hybridized cityscapes and combining recognizable monuments with structures entirely of his own invention. These works were initially executed in graphite on canvas (1993-95) though one— Novoa's 1994 contribution to the Daño (Damage) exhibition at Espacio Aglutinador in Havana—was in situ. In 2000, Novoa made his first site-specific drawing on marble for Spain's Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB). These works frequently incorporated clear one-point perspective and a strong horizon line; all characteristics that are showcased in Emptiness, Novoa's intervention/exhibition at the University of Miami's Lowe Art Museum (on view June 19-

October 1, 2015).

In Emptiness Novoa's "canvas" is the Lowe's entire Friends of Art Gallery, which the artist converted into an imaginary urban landscape over the course of five days in mid- June, 2015. To do so he first drew a continuous line on the gallery walls, 5' above the floor. From this "horizon," he conjured a new cityscape, crafted entirely in graphite and drawn directly onto the surface of the museum's immaculate walls. (fig. 3) The resulting works draw viewers into an imagined reality, hovering mirage-like before their very eyes. It also invites them—subtly but effectively—to reflect on modern socio-political realities and the ephemeral nature of life itself.

Novoa's cityscapes tend towards the melancholic and brooding and, like the iconic paintings of the early Netherlandish painter, Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450-1516), speak to a post-Apocalytpic world in which mankind has engineered his own decline and,

ultimately, demise. (fig. 4) At the Lowe, for instance, the artist confronts his viewers with an image of a vast plane grounded by a lacy web of wires. A flagged-topped tower stands nearby, clearly resembling the iconic Tour Eiffel but entirely dwarfed by the airliner to which it is tethered by tensile threads. (fig. 5) Scale is also manipulated to great effect in Novoa's silhouette of a towering sculpture, which calls to mind the famed United States Marine Corps War Memorial (the "Iwo Jima Memorial"). Here, though, the monument's size is vastly increased while the number of figures is greatly reduced. Additionally, it is marked by a certain precariousness as the monolith seemingly teeters backwards, sinking beneath the horizon into some unseen primordial ooze that reclaims it ("Dust to dust."). (fig. 6) Again the image, which we can only imagine represents the forgotten heroes of a lost civilization, is constrained by an intricate web whose source is unclear but whose tenor is unsettling and more than a little menacing.

The vestiges of an urban and industrial world abound in Novoa's works, including his drawing of what look like twisted I-beams, lorded over by the simple word "OBJECTS." This image is infused with interpretative ambiguity, as the term may be read as both as noun—referencing,

perhaps, contemporary Western society's materialistic focus—and a verb—alluding, possibly, to a protestation against such consumerism. (fig. 7) Novoa foregrounds this same interest in the communicative power of shape and language in his image of Zeppelin-like crafts, each of which is anchored to the ground by a single cord. They hang precariously above the horizon line, threatening either to fall to the ground in a catastrophic heap or to break free, floating off into the unseen and unknown. Counter-balancing these provocative objects are the letters "F-O-R-M-S," which when united may again be interpreted as either a noun or a verb. (fig. 8) Like the neighboring airships, the letters are blown towards oblivion by an unseen but palpable force, which has already begun to erode its graphic integrity. The interpretive complexity of this image is compounded by the rendering of the word itself, the Cyrillic angularity of which harkens back to Novoa's "Practical Period." (fig. 2)

Though the human figure is almost entirely absent from Novoa's work (reinforcing the notion that we are bearing witness to our own bleak future), his renderings make viewers feel as if they are being watched from afar. This is a fascinating inversion of logic, which dictates that one should stand in the midst of Emptiness as an onlooker—a voyeur, really. Yet, ultimately, it is we who feel as though we are being surveilled. This sense is heightened by the artist's use of circular motifs in his work, which can be read as photographic lenses or other types of surveillance equipment, suggesting to viewers that the all-knowing, all-seeing eyes of Orwell's "Big Brother" are trained upon them.

Novoa's work also calls to mind the writings of the 18th-century English philosopher Jeremy Bentham, for whom the circle played an essential role in his conception of an idealized reform system: the panopticon. Rendered famous by Michel Foucault's Discipline and Punish (1977), the panopticon is designed to maximize surveillance and control. Its distinguishing feature is a centrally located circular tower surrounded by a concentric wall into which individual cells are set. From this impenetrable tower,

authoritarian figures can maintain "order" while remaining beyond the reach of the surveyed (including criminals, the insane, and school children), who have no option but to submit to the intrusive oversight and oppressive authority of their nameless, faceless overlords.

According to Bentham, the panopticon was intended to achieve manifold goals: “Morals reformed—health preserved—industry invigorated—instruction diffused—public burthens [sic] lightened—Economy seated, as it were, upon a rock— the [G]ordian knot of the Poor-Laws not cut, but untied—all by a simple idea in Architecture!” In reality, though, the panopticon is a dystopian prescription, destined to destroy civilized systems of laws and governance and interrupt channels of meaningful civic engagement. Novoa communicates this latent power, endemic to the built environment through his powerful drawings, which reference humanity’s capacity to breach the porous membrane separating civic reform and totalitarian oppression through the very structures they design and build. (fig. 9)

Novoa’s fascination with the circle is evident throughout his work. This makes sense as the circle, a perfect form, is symmetrical in all directions, and has neither a beginning nor an ending. In this it is a poetic metaphor for the cyclical nature of human existence, among other things. The artist uses this motif to great effect in Emptiness, which includes perfectly rendered circles crafted in both the positive (as a potent graphite disk) and the negative (as void surrounded by the haze of destruction). (figs. 10a and 10b) Juxtaposed within the confines of the gallery, the forms bring to mind the sun and the moon—the Alpha and the Omega of our Universe—as well as more abstract polarities, including generation/destruction, good/evil, and conservation/dissipation. Similarly, the half-circle that stands alone on a single free-standing wall, is twinned by its phantom lower half: an image that can be read as a promise of restored order and harmony or, its counterpart, the erosion of perfection. (cover)

Underlining the ephemeral nature of both life and art, Novoa’s exhibition will close with a public ceremony on October 1, 2015 during which the artist, at his request, will witness his Lowe cityscapes being permanently effaced as they are covered over with pure white paint. This poetic act is an apt reminder of the ephemeral nature of all of mankind’s endeavors and a particularly potent reminder of the brevity—and relative insignificance—of our passage through this life. The permanent erasure of Novoa’s fictive city is all the more poignant as it turns on its ear the notion that while life is short, art endures (Ars longa, vita brevis), throwing into high relief mortal and material truths. We are left understanding that, in the end, it is only memory—both individual and collective—that endures. For as Calvino writes:

“Only in Marco Polo’s account was Kublai Khan able to discern, through the walls and towers destined to crumble, the tracery of a pattern so subtle it could escape the termites’ gnawing.”

Jill Deupi, JD, PhD
Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator

Q&A | with Glexis Novoa (GN) and Dr. Jill Deupi (JD)

JD: Who are your artist “heroes”?
GN: Leonardo Da Vinci the wise, Christo Javacheff and Jeanne-Claude, Antoni Miralda, and all the artists who have impressed me with their ingenuity.

JD: Who are your life “heroes”?
GN: My grandfather Enrique Vian Ruiz, a man that took me on an adventure through bedtime stories every night. My mother Ivette Vian, a brave woman who still is looking for happiness in the simplest aspects of life.

JD: Can you please talk a bit about the horizon line that is so much a part of your oeuvre? What does it represent to you and what was the genesis and/or evolution of this particular motif?
GN: It comes from my experience as a diver. Floating in the sea is one of the few opportunities to see the horizon at eye level. Although drawing the line on the wall, formally speaking, came as an extension of the horizon line coming out from landscapes on canvas. I started extending the line onto the wall, and then I removed the paintings and became totally focused on the space and what happens in that space. Today the line is like a guiding thread, which I use as a tool to shift viewers’ awareness to the space.

JD: The scale of the works in Emptiness has diminished compared to some of your earlier wall drawings. Was this intentional and, if so, what were your aesthetic and intellectual goals in decreasing the size of your remarkable images?

GN: The fundamental reason is to emphasize the contrast between space and the drawings, to focus on the space and what happens there. When the dimension of the drawings becomes smaller, regardless of the size of space, intuitively viewers' attention goes towards the empty space and that's when they contemplate the space and therefore their own actions. It's like the difference between dancing at a carnival among hundreds of people and dancing solo on the stage of a theater in front of hundreds of people. In a museum where there are more than twenty works hung on the wall and several sculptures installed on the floor, chances are that the audience pays little attention to space or his own actions and quite possibly even to many of the works of art. We are fascinated with objects, and to pay attention to the space involves intellectual work. That is my intention in my site-specific wall drawings.

JD: How would you respond to viewers who feel that they have to "work" to see and process your imagery?
GN: I intend to create a layered and encrypted language of communication, and it requires effort for the viewer to read the message. Even if it looks aesthetically beautiful, there are many details that are not necessarily easy to engage with. Understanding the

strangeness of such details is precisely the task that remains for the viewers. I want people to reflect on the time that they spent in the space.

JD: Many people are shocked when they learn that at the close of Emptiness your entire project in the Lowe will be painted over, expunging it from the material world forever. Tell me about your motives in choosing such an ephemeral path.
GN: "Emptiness is form, form is emptiness" expresses a Buddhist concept, but it is also a scientific statement that could describe the space inside an atom. Therefore, my choice to leave a museum gallery literally empty of objects is also a response to the fixation that we have with artifacts and how art institutions perceive them. Kind of a romantic gesture of retaliation.

JD: Much of your imagery is very potent and, in the eyes of critics, laden with allegory and metaphor. Is this intentional or are your drawings more spontaneous?

GN: There is spontaneity in the production of the drawings, but there is always an intention to reveal subliminal messages coded into the iconography and architecture of power. There is a basic idea of dismantling the mechanisms of those languages, which are almost always related to religious, ideological, economic, corporate or military institutions, and have been consciously and consistently developed for the purpose of control. I was originally trying to understand the mechanisms of autocracy and later applied the same concepts to understanding how global systems function.

JD: The human figure is noticeably absent from your drawings. Why is that?
GN: As we live in a megalomaniac society where humans have minimal significance, the viewer is the sole witness and protagonist. Perhaps a pessimistic view to contemplate the bleak and the beautiful.

JD: I know that enveloping space plays a critical role in your thought process and your creative practice. Can you talk a little bit about that?
GN: The interest in space was an intuition that grew out of my creative process. I always start from a structured idea, and I think that's the bottom line when it comes to creativity, but process is also very important. My early aspiration to become a filmmaker developed into being a visual artist, with forays into installation and performance, processes involving time and space. I have also been extensively investigating the history of performance art in Cuba. Without a doubt, that has been a big influence on my interest in actions and space.

JD: Last year you revisited your earlier Etapa práctica, or "Practical Period," in your solo exhibition in Wynwood. (fig. 1) Yet for the Lowe you returned to the meticulous wall drawings for which you are so well-known. Where do you see your work going from here?

GN: I have always developed several bodies of work in parallel. But in this case I was taking advantage of my recurring trips to the island to return to a pictorial period that was left unfinished by my migration. "Practical Period" refers to the local phenomena of

Cuban society of the late eighties. Now Cuba is a new panorama of a country in uncertainty.

And that is where I find my inspiration to return to painting, discovering the new society, the growing interest in the liberal world and the free market, everything changes and new values appear all over. Even the words take on new meanings and ancient symbols of power are occupied by the new practices of trade. It was as if I had returned to discover a new country.

JD: In the transition from the Etapa práctica to Emptiness you seem to have moved from a more confrontational aesthetic language to a lexicon of quiet revolution, which challenges people's perceptions of reality, accepted norms, and contemporary priorities in much more subtle – if equally impactful – ways. What do you think about this observation?
GN: In my "Practical Period," which began in Havana in 1989, I tried to create an aesthetic dialogue with the social context of that historical period, more specifically with the apparatus of political power. Communicating within the ideological stream still made sense at the time. Political principles were a fundamental part of society and the possibility of participating in the revolutionary process seemed a reality for us, the artists. So I designed a code to express my ideas as an artist and a citizen. I was seeing an imminent loss of meaning in the official ideology—it was becoming obsolete.
My working method has not changed much since then, but I'm influenced by my context and my work changes with my transitions. Time has passed; I have assimilated the past as experience. At this point, my interests are more focused on myself as an individual and therefore on my context. I am no longer subjected to dictatorial structures and I can choose to pay more attention to my inner self.

JD: I understand that you are a practicing Buddhist. I'm curious to know how you see your meditative practices as well as the Dhamma impacting or infusing your work.
GN: Buddhism is a practice that involves study and work. Besides the fact that it can be practiced as a religion, in reality it serves as an educational system. I have practiced meditation for a long time and, recently, Buddhism as a way of life. That obviously affects every aspect of my life, and has had a great influence on my recent work, particularly the concepts of time, space, and impermanence that are clearly described by the Dhamma (the Buddhist teachings).

JD: As a professional artist who splits his time between Havana and Miami, what are your predictions about contemporary art in Cuba?
GN: Cuba has a vibrant contemporary art scene that attracts attention from all over the world and is home to a huge number of artists who share their time living and working abroad. I have recently noticed an increase in artists on the island who show interest in participating in Miami's cultural scene. That is a natural phenomenon; the 45-minute flight between Havana and Miami is the most convenient connection between Cuba and the U.S. Infrastructures have already been established on both sides and there is already a cultural bridge. That is the current reality and it suggests the future of Cuban contemporary art. And Havana will again be a natural destination for Cuban artists living

all over the world. All seems to get back to normal. The culture should not be divided by geographic boundaries, much less by ideological differences.

JD: And here in Miami?
GN: Contemporary art in Miami is like a living element that assimilates fresh cultures, which grow and rot together to become part of this fertile swamp. Nothing, not even the power of ignorance, can stop this natural force. Art fairs are the mirage; art fairs do not create culture. They are here because a strong culture is already rooted here. And when I say "culture" I mean an authentic community of artists, not the glare of money and vanity. I include both the ancient cultures carried by immigrant artists from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as the flow of artists who come and go from all over the world and fall into fascination with the emanations of the swamp.