Painting on Canvas: Glexis Novoa's Return to Form and Context

Painting on Canvas, Glexis Novoa's first solo exhibition at Juan Ruiz Gallery in Miami is specifically noteworthy for the following two revisionist's aspects: 1) the artist's re-examination of an early period of his own work that was interrupted by exile in the mid 1990s and 2) the place where the works were executed, which was Havana, where Novoa recently set up a studio after a twenty-year hiatus. His return to the formal qualities of the Etapa práctica [the Practical Stage] and to the specificity of the Cuban context reveals poignant aspects of contemporary Cuban art today and the artist's place in it.

Glexis Novoa has been a pioneering figure in contemporary Cuban art since the late 1980s. He belongs to the younger generation of artists, who along with the group Volumen Uno that preceded them, organized groundbreaking exhibitions challenging the status quo of the Cuban visual arts scene and the government's cultural politics. At times referred to as "the children of the Revolution" for being the first generation of artists to grow up under Fidel Castro's socialist government, Novoa and his contemporaries ushered in contemporary art practices that drew from international trends such as conceptual art, pop and kitsch aesthetics[1]. While committed to art's potential as an agent for social change, the artistic practices of the Volumen Uno group— though unquestionably groundbreaking— remained limited to neat formal and conceptual propositions. Novoa, instead, pushed the envelope further by employing performative and interventionist strategies that with cunning satire went further in contesting the strictures imposed by communist ideologies on the role of art in society. In his personal work, he created an artist persona and planned the development of two bodies of work: Etapa romántica [the Romantic Stage] (mid 1980s) and Etapa práctica (late 1980s to mid 1990s), which follows the artist's transition from one who intentionally created "bad" works of art – poorly executed and lacking any formal decorum – to a practical period in which the artist then purposefully displays his technical dexterity and commercial savvy. In the former series, Novoa often inscribed non-sensical phrases onto works on paper and canvas that appeared to be pronounced by an adolescent rather than by an artist who had received rigorous training in the plastic arts at the ENA (Escuela Nacional de Arte).

Untitled (from the Practical Period), 1989 is an ambitious, large-scale installation that best culminates the work from the period that followed. Initially exhibited at the 3rd Havana Biennial and now in the collection of the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), it comprises several canvases, works on paper and other media populated with abstract forms and structures evoking the Soviet-style aesthetics of political propaganda. Masterfully couched in a visual language that combined expressionism, constructivism and Social Realism, the altar-like arrangement of these various elements adds to the work's visual grandiosity and look of state-sanctioned officialdom. Yet, upon closer inspection the signs and abstract forms that make up the work are empty of any meaning, "turning the impulse and armature of socialism into mere pattern" (Weiss 75). By co-opting a formal language at once familiar and attractive to local and international audiences, Novoa guaranteed his place in the then -burgeoning art market for contemporary Cuban art of the late 1980s, while unequivocally making a subversive, commentary on a communist ideology that was rendered vacuous and bankrupt by the end of the Cold War. Thus, from the Etapa práctica were borne the fundamental elements that have characterized Novoa's work form that point throughout his artistic career: the use of apocryphal symbols to comment on structures of power or what the artist himself refers to as la arquitectura del poder.

Nearly 30 years later, Painting on Canvas draws heavily on the combination of stylistic languages from this earlier period. Here, Novoa abandoned the work in graphite of meticulously rendered imagined urbanscapes on marble and drywall, often as site-specific installations, for which he has become known since permanently settling in Miami in 1994. However, the artist's penchant for the graphic element continues to be present; evidenced in the Brutalist-style solid blocks and typeface that outline forms, letters and symbols in heavy blacks, contributing to the work's dramatic dimension. In this recent series, symbols that address the specificity of post-Soviet Cuba enter into dialogue with other elements equally painted in bold abstraction, which represent the influence of more universal and metaphysical concerns. Each works creates a subtle yet poignant commentary, literally layered with paint and figuratively with meaning, about the contradictory socio-cultural, political and economic realities of both the new Cuban context he encountered and of his

own personal and cultural identities.

Consider the painting in which three letters spell out CUC: the acronym for Cuban Convertible Currency. Unlike the apocryphal symbols from the 1990s, the letters CUC stand for something tangible and real: one of two official currencies that circulate on the island. Yet, the manner in which they are painted, bluntly and strikingly occupying the center of the picture plane, seem an ominous reminder of the complicated socio-political and economic implications they embody. The CUC is the more valuable of the two currencies within the island, although it has no value on the international market and not all Cubans have access to it.[2] As a result, an increasing disparity has ensued creating class divisions within Cuban society, where egalitarian socialist values give way to the rise of arbitrary and contradictory economic measures. Given their unstable meaning, Novoa transforms the letters CUC into abstractions, equally fictitious and decontextualized, characteristic of his overall work.

Novoa revisits the relationship between figuration and abstraction or the reduction of political content to mere form in another recent painting, titled, Screw. The work has its formal and conceptual antecedents in a large-format diptych that Novoa executed in 1991 as part of the series, Logros de la economía [Accomplishments of the Economy], also belonging to the Etapa práctica. Logros aimed to reduce the rhetoric of politics to mere abstraction. In that work, Novoa was referring to Fidel Castro's numerous speeches on the country's state of the economy in which he would cite a litany of exaggerated figures meant to impress upon Cubans their country's progress. The incomprehension of Fidel's repeated and exaggerated pronouncements akin to "one million screws produced in such and such time" – is visually represented as two minimalist, highly abstract versions of a screw. In the recent variant of that work, Novoa further deconstructs the idea of building a new society, to a single image of a screw pointed downward and beautifully painted in an incandescent tone of aqua against the background's heavily applied dark purples and blues. The work's heightened formal qualities reveal the loss of meaning and disconnect between content and rhetoric.

Representing more personal and universal themes are works such as Dharma Wheel or Sutta, which reflect the artist's recent interest in Buddhism. The Dharma Wheel is Buddhism's most

recognizable symbol as a religious and spiritual practice, but on a broader metaphysical level it is also associated with the cyclical nature of life and death. Novoa's Wheel is an abstracted version of the more traditional representations of the symbol, reinforcing the artist's practice of deconstructing and re-interpreting content and meaning into evocative forms. Another reading of the Wheel in the context of Novoa's new work, tempts one to read it as a metaphor for the artist's gestures of return, "coming full circle" to both place and content; with vastly renewed perspectives.

The visual semiotic play that exists between Pesos Convertibles and Deva I provides a cunning example of the interchangeability of sign and signifier present in some of these works. Pesos' takes the form of an eagle-like insignia as its principal figure, flanked on either side by the letters "P" and "C". In Deva I, the Sanskrit name for deity, floating amorphous yet ambiguously recognizable shapes make up the work's overall composition. The horn-like designs the central image echo the winged-like contours of Pesos. The visual equalizing of deity and currency attests to Novoa's interest of deconstructing mechanisms of power and hierarchy beyond their discursive potentiality.

The commingling of these signs also function to situate Novoa in his work as a transitional figure who navigates between two opposing yet increasingly intersecting contexts: Miami and Havana. In a broader sense, his acts of return also reveal the complexities that are operative in the production and consumption of contemporary Cuban art. Like in Etapa práctica, Novoa plays into the power structures of the art market; this time with the market's perception that the legitimacy of Cuban art is contingent upon where it is produced (Cuba), eschewing diasporic productions and increasing transnational relations among Cubans in and outside the island that have been destabilizing previously rigid territorial and ideological demarcations. Novoa both reinforces and challenges those market biases by producing work in Havana intended to circulate outside the specific charge of its conceived site and for the consumption of audiences in Miami. That Cuban artists in Cuba have been doing exactly that for decades now only compounds the ironies and contradictions inherent in such biases but also helps understand Novoa's gestures of return as performative and strategic. Returning to these various aspects, Novoa's new series and its intended functions ultimately

reveal the inherent tensions and inevitable interconnectedness between the local and global in today's cultural production, as well as, the de-territorialization of nation and diaspora.

Elizabeth Cerejido, Independent Curator, Miami, FL., October 2014

[1] Osvaldo Sánchez, "Los hijos de la utopia", in No Man is an Island, Exhibition catalogue. Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, Cuba and Pori Art Museum, Finland, 1990.

[2] The Cuban peso, the other currency, is the one in which Cubans get paid. However, it is valued at roughly 1/20 of the CUC. And while the CUC has no international value, it is used to control the flow of foreign currency within the island.