

National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana 2016

The Landscape and the Window

Once I heard the great musician Hernán López-Nussa say that there was room in his art, along with academic studies and the classical tradition, for the music that came in through the window. I have always been inspired by the clarity of that image. He alluded to something that just happened, naturally, everyday. And I imagined the island, the burning afternoons, the windows desperately breathing in the breeze from the northeast... and, with the breeze, the song of the moment, the piercing shouts, the kids' latest slang, and the redoubled calls of the street vendors.

When I visited Glexis Novoa recently in his new studio in Havana, I realized that the same thing had happened to the painter: he was listening to the music coming in through the windows. Some artists do feel that polyphony of the streets and they open up towards the landscapes of being. Fernando Pessoa wrote about it: art lives on the same street as life, only in different places.

In shifting towards a new living and working situation in Havana, Glexis has been surprised by an avalanche of visual and sonorous landscapes very different from what he heard in Monterrey, Mexico City or Miami, if you can hear such things from inside hermetically closed and air conditioned rooms. The new works in this exhibition emanate from those unheard panoramas that cross the shutters, doors, skylights, rooftops, discreet curtains and ventilation shafts of any house in Havana.

The painter tells that friends, neighbors and passersby also speak another language. Of course it is the same Spanish as always, American Spanish, and also Cuban Spanish. But Glexis listens to the sounds of speech that is continually modified by life, always attuned to the changing experience of the social body. The new sound landscape that comes into his studio brings words like revolico, tomates, ceucé, guachineo, discotemba, almendrón, carretilla, americanos...¹ And the street vendors don't just sell the traditional hot maní or

peanuts anymore, you can hear them every day offering a new inventory of strings of onions, ground Chilean garlic and mended cushions along with clotheslines and handmade metal jars.

Just like Ruperto, the famous character in the popular Cuban television program *Vivir del cuento*, who has been in a coma for many years, Glexis skipped the Cuban

1 *Revolico*: a state of disorder, also a website for selling/buying any manner of things; *ceucé*: the Cuban Convertible Peso or CUC; *guachineo*: popular song and dance form; *discotemba*: a discoteque for older people, as *temba* means old in the language of the street; *almendrón*: a vintage American car used as a taxi; *carretilla*: street vendor of fruit and other food.

“Special Period,” and like Ruperto, has problems figuring out the present, as much as everyone tries to explain it to him. The memory of words, symbols and transformed scenes that the artist is discovering in his latest stay in Havana fascinates him in the way that perhaps Levi Strauss felt walking around the New York of the ‘40s, full of tremendous incongruences and very varied cultures.²

The attention to these new sonorous and urban landscapes that the painter hears in Havana, that music that comes in through the window, is the result of an anthropological inclination that is consistent in the tradition of contemporary Cuban art. The world of a creator like Glexis, who began his career in the late ‘80s, was chiefly under the influence of the strong ideological currents that dominated at that time in the country. Many of the cultural practices revolved around politics, the cultural confrontation with the art institution, the passionate desire to perfect social utopias, and by a dynamic functioning among groups of artists. After our “national coma,” however, the artist sees a radical shift towards individual success, the art market, the waning of utopias, the appearance of new social-economic relationships and new social values not seen for many decades and even unknown to several generations of Cubans. This kind of concern transpires in these recent paintings.

Linguistics, so dear to anthropology, rules in these paintings. Here are words that come from

the spoken language, with meanings that are important to Cuban society today. "Only the knowledge of the language allows penetration into the system of logical categories and moral values [of a society] different from the systems of the observer."³ And the observer's system is that of Glexis Novoa, who sharing that same language, but seeing its meanings so changed, focuses his system with anthropological intelligence upon the observed, today's Cuba, where he has appeared after a long hiatus.

This all happens silently in this series of simple words painted on expansive canvases. Garaicoa, for example, is painted with a spectacular typeface, carefully thought out to express the success of an artist, his exquisite aesthetic aura and

2 In New York in 1941 (1985), Levi Strauss writes: "I walked up and down the avenues of Manhattan, those deep abysses with amazing fantastic cliffs created by skyscrapers. I wandered aimlessly along the cross streets, whose physiognomy changed drastically from one block to another: sometimes oppressed by poverty, others middle class or provincial, most frequently chaotic. New York was not entirely the ultramodern metropolis that I expected, rather an immense disarray, horizontal and vertical, attributable to some spontaneous lifting of the urban crust before the deliberate plans of the builders."

3 Claude Lévi Strauss, *Antropología estructural*, Ed. Ciencias Sociales, La Habana, 1970. Pg. 332

everything that it could symbolize in our environment: the access of a creator to a certain international position with exhibitions, circulation and markets. Here are perplexity and fine irony accompanying a change in perspective that the observer Glexis Novoa discovers in the transformation of interests and values in the national artistic scene, far from what he had known almost two decades ago, when perhaps success could be measured in the commotion and censure an exhibition could provoke. A new paradigm of success is transported in the letters of the name Garaicoa, in a composition of yellow letters on brilliant red, to produce the sensation that he is already classic, established, famous and worthy.

In other works, Glexis elaborates a rapid associative syntax, typical of the banners that run

on the web or on television. Contradictory and chaotic juxtapositions appear, phrases that in their incoherence are able to characterize on the fly a state of affairs, everyday and concrete situations that any Cuban can understand. Latas de carne/boligrafos/luz brillante/Peter Kilchman/traqueteo⁴ (canned meat/ballpoint pens/ kerosene /Peter Kilchman/coming and going) is a sequence of words painted on canvas that, without any apparent and immediate relationship, structures a meaning for locals. It evokes scarcities, incongruences in daily practices, and, if one belongs to the elite artistic circuit, recalls the name of the gallerist who represents Los Carpinteros.

Similarly, when we read them silently to ourselves in the exhibition, we will listen to the sounds of the words that so obsess us. Nothing will need to be explained to the countryman; the foreigner will find them difficult. An entire planar, colorful spelling book will appear as we read and listen to these sounds that have jumped from the window to the museum, like urban folklore landscapes, visually connected to a graphic tradition that the artist has cultivated since he was very young; still almost an adolescent, he used to attend the Graphic Workshop in the Cathedral Plaza.

If this entire grouping of canvases speaks to us of the artist-observer who tries to decode a new social “sonority” through language, a sculptural-pictorial group of works in the show gives us an intermediate perspective where the observer’s system is united with that of the observed.

Because a very different kind of landscape comes with the eleven delicate drawings executed in graphite on fragments of ruined walls.⁵ Extracted from an old building,

4 Traqueteo: Literally shaking, stimulation, movement, action. Cuban slang to identify the informal art merchant’s activities.

5 These drawings were made on the fallen walls of a building located on Havana’s Malecón, and exhibited in the Detrás del muro (Behind the Wall) project, Havana May-June 2015.

the supports are in themselves architectures upon which the artist has painted very fine

horizon lines with fictional panoramas. Urban fiction in which there are monuments and buildings known and invented; sometimes standing alone, other times mixed together. Many of these scenes memorialize social utopias and politics that are familiar to Cubans (Mayakovski, Lenin), others show the silhouette of cities that the artist has seen or imagined, while the sculptures of Tatlin or Brancusi can appear, lonely and real, in any part of the world.

With this architectural chimera, in which the artist keeps his insatiable irony well in hand with the reins of nostalgia, Glexis reveals his time away from Cuba, his peregrination through diverse lands with their heterogeneous people and dreams. A band of ecumenical brotherhood embracing all kinds of social experience can be detected in the totality of these horizons, realized from a perspective that attenuates the upper limits of the political struggle he carried out in his works in the '80s, and which favors a more expansive and thoughtful appreciation of the society. It is as if the increase in the number of panoramas the artists lived and experienced deepened society's shared horizon.

In his greater interest of approaching the object itself, enriching it, modeling it and endowing it with special connotations, Glexis has immersed himself in the creation of custom made pedestals for these wall fragments. He means to associate them with a decades old tradition of Cuban sculpture, and has designed a base for each of the eleven wall drawings, in the spirit of the sculpture salon, referring to masters such as Florencio Gelabert and Mateo Torriente. At the same time, these bases reveal his liking for the decorative and construction styles of the historic city of Havana, and also for the naïve, popular touch of some vernacular architecture or neighborhood monuments. They are shapes that raise the horizon lines up to our eye level, and which have been carefully molded as sculptures using traditional materials and techniques. The directly poured cement confabulates with the wall fragments to create a whole, where the delicate charcoal drawings are diffused like the marks time leaves on the ruins of a destroyed building. To stroll through these landscapes raised from pictorial-architectural vestiges, where we can see cities and monuments built in dissimilar geographical, historical and political environments will be like seeing the archaeology of all utopias and dreams.

Whether it cannily sneaks in, or it is imagined, the landscape awaits outside the window.

Corina Matamoros Havana, March 2016