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Manglar

Juan Tessi

18.01.19 – 09.03.19

Opening 19h – 22h, 18.01.19

About Juan Tessi's *Manglar* [Mangrove]

Up until now every piece and exhibition by Juan Tessi (Lima, Peru, 1972) has been conceived around narrative forms. However, the artist is not interested in subordinating images to storytelling. To a greater or lesser extent, he has rejected the narrative source. It is the suspicion as to its existence that leads us to a deciphering possibility. In fact, every work urges us to exercise a conceptual muscle that is activated in the presence of “figurative abstractions”: canvases that replace abstract forms with figures, which in some cases take over everything. As a precursor to this method, César Aira suggests Giorgio De Chirico's plotless novel *Hebdomeros*, which can be read as if it actually had a storyline. Resorting to a similar logic of accumulation, Tessi paints most of what appears in his visual field. Furniture, vases, mahogany sculptures or interior spaces awash in comfort. He does not try to persuade us that these objects' degree of importance should be reviewed in the world of things. And it is also unclear when to present them as conduits for broader stories. It is about painting from discoveries and unforeseen intersections with everyday objects, but also with film, with the Internet or with how the wind catches a lock of hair in a marine painting. An example is the discovery of a makeup tutorial narrated by actress Donna Mills on YouTube. Tessi eliminated the images and kept the audio, which he converted into a fragmented manual of pictorial instructions. The result is the opposite of a narration. Using Mills' instructions, like “continue blurring with your brush until the line around your eyes is more like a smudge than a line”, Tessi manages to draw by un-drawing.

His pieces are seldom presented in a self-sufficient manner. For his first solo exhibition in a museum, (*Cameo*, MALBA, Buenos Aires, 2016) the parking lot, offices and terrace of the institution hosted the paintings, whose images were captured by twelve security cameras. The film was then shown live to visitors in a space converted into a monitoring room. Museums, terraces and public buildings are either inhabitable or desolate depending on their spatial politics. To intervene on the architectural logic through art objects erodes its directionality. The act of scattering a group of works around spaces that are unprepared to receive them destabilizes the unconscious functionality, which we incorporate in the visual regime.

Unlike any exercise of reification, Tessi's pictorial series never cease to be active. In recent years, a sort of expansive will, closer to the ludic than to the investigative, has managed to unblock some of the protocols of pictorial language. The amalgamation of paint with other materials, such as ceramic, feathers, acrylic or iron has allowed him to expand the boundaries of the canvas. This expansion enables him to substitute paint for canvas. The flat, dimly coloured backgrounds, on which sprawl his silhouettes with enamelled ceramic heads, are not the result of soaking the canvas in oil. Tessi arrives at colour through the overlapping of different monochrome cotton fabrics, which he subtracts from his stock of canvases. His pictorial work is akin to signage, occurring through the conjunction of just a few elements: a sheet of coloured acrylic holding pictorial matter removed from its original support over basted linen. Even though these are fixed structures, Tessi imparts a certain molecular logic to the confinement that painting seems to display. In the web of stimuli and reactions that precede it, a painting continues into another. But the chain of entanglement is not just limited to the works; instead it reflects the whole life of the studio. In fact, as Bruno Latour points out, “there is no doubt that kettles boil water and knives cut meat, etc. But how could the introduction of those humble, mundane and ubiquitous activities ever say anything new? That is, nevertheless, what they do”. This philosopher considers

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any element, whose incidence changes the course of events (such as these paintings, or social elements) as “an actor or, if figuration is not yet present, an actant”. Tessi’s paintings and sculptures enable relationships not only between objects and people, but also between people that are present in another time and absent from our daily existence. Henri Rousseau, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Marsden Hartley or Cookie Mueller are more than a referential field: their effect is as binding as it is elusive, like the light of the room where Tessi creates his works.

The paintings, drawings and vases that constitute *Manglar* belong to the genre of situated works: they are located along a precise geographic and temporal axis. In this case, however, they are not to be found in a country, in a continent or in a neighbourhood, but in one of those areas that the great tides flood in seawater and in whose marshes thrive trees and all kinds of species. A mangrove is the habitat for a vast botanical diversity and also for hundreds of species in their juvenile stage, which are capable of developing a biologic intelligence and undergoing various anatomical adaptations. The mangrove is open, free, welcoming and its bottom is soft. Thus, it is not hard to visualize this “high productivity” estuary (according to Wikipedia) as the zone in which are located Tessi’s painted, moulded and drawn corporealities. His entities are seldom complete. In fact, many of them propose a new order in which the feet, the hands and the head occupy an indeterminate place. His interest in building that group of corporealities with lines, while not taking over the totality of the canvas, is the margin that they require for their development. The corporeal artefacts (never natural, always artificial) avoid any glimmer of realism. These forms, at the service of invention, are experimented by the artist as prototype of a species. Their shapes and volumes change, as does the amount of extremities, which generate an amphibious species. Among such an inventorial abundance, a vase maintains its morphology, but its function has changed or, to be more precise, has been interrupted. *Manglar*’s vases, done in Pedro Pacheco’s Caldas studio, are closed forms, solid blocks in which the ornamenting feathers must negotiate the obstacle posed by the set of sealed lids.

Between device and body, Tessi’s unfinished shapes bring on a certain festive iconography. A raised leg, a hand offering grapes, a pair of waists swaying with feathered miniskirts. The choreographies and movements carried out by their silhouettes are close to ritual and, therefore, to certain ways of narrating, but there is very little to find in them by way of a story. Each of these entities is a muscle moving through an action, telling nothing. These movements have no destination, nor are they determined by pre-existing images. Theirs is a childlike quality: paint is placed on a surface until form appears. And they establish themselves in a state of contagion and contamination, echoing this line by Francis Picabia: “A painting does not exist if it does not know how to push forward all paintings”.

Mariano Mayer, 12.2018

Translation: Rui Parada

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Juan Tessi (Lima, Peru, 1972) lives and works in Buenos Aires, Argentina. He studied painting with Ricardo Garabito in 1989. In 1991 he won a scholarship to study at Maryland Institute, College of Art, Baltimore, where he got a BFA in 1994. He participated in the Yale/Norfolk Summer Residency in 1993 and in 1998 returned to Argentina, where he began to exhibit in both solo and group shows. In 2010 he participated in the Beca Kuitca/UTDT. Between 2009 and 2010 he organized and coordinated, in collaboration with Cristina Schiavi, the project Mark Morgan Perez Garage. Amongst his solo shows: *Frame Section*, Frieze NY, with Nora Fisch Gallery (2018); *Cameo*, Fundación Malba, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2016); *Solo Projects*, ArtBo, Bogotá, Colombia (2015). Selected group exhibitions include: *Ultramar: Fontana, Kuitca, Tessi*, Museo Thyssen, Madrid, Spain (2017); *Premio Braque*, Muntref, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2017); *Praising the surface, chapter II of the spring exhibitions*, Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, EUA (2016); *Empujar un ismo*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2014); *Ultimas tendencias II*, Museo de Arte Moderno, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2012); *Elogio da Diversidade. Arte Contemporanea Argentina*, O Instituto Brasil - Argentina del Consulado General de la Reb. Argentina, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (2010); *Persistência*, Museu de Arte Contemporânea, Porto Alegre, Brazil (2006); *Centro Cultural Ricardo Rojas*, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2000).

Juan Tessi is represented by Nora Fisch Gallery, Buenos Aires, Argentina.