

CHAREST-WEINBERG



Q & A: Pedro Barbeito + Bradley Rubenstein

June 20, 2012

Pedro Barbeito's exhibition *Pop Violence* presents a series of work ranging from 2005 to the present. The paintings are based on images of war taken primarily from the world news media. For Barbeito, these works address the formative role of violence in contemporary life, from a political ethos driven by "terror" and deception, to the aesthetics of visual assault prevailing in popular culture. They draw upon the anxieties of an age when we are afforded, primarily through the Internet, unprecedented visual access to the violence of war and political strife. The complexity of the differing treatment of the various layers and textures, combined with new visuals—some of them computer-generated diagrams, pixilation, patterns, grids, ambiguous forms, confusing plays between foreground and background, surface and depth, fragmented compositions, and striking colors -- all contribute to works of uncanny beauty.

Barbeito has exhibited his work internationally for the past fourteen years. Solo exhibition venues include Basilico Fine Arts and Lehmann Maupin Gallery in New York, Parra-Romero Gallery in Madrid, Charest-Weinberg Gallery in Miami, and Galerie Richard in Paris. He has participated in museum exhibits at the Rose Art Museum in Massachusetts; the Museum of Modern Art in Arnhem, The Netherlands; The Palm Beach Institute of Contemporary Art in Florida; and the Museo Rufino Tamayo in Mexico City, among others. *Pop Violence* will be his first solo museum exhibit. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Bradley Rubenstein: Pedro, you said, "Painting, since the beginning of history, has been the representation of the world through pictures; as such, my paintings represent our current world, exploring the relationship between digital imaging, culture at large, and the history of painting." A lot of your work draws upon very contemporary visual theories and ways of seeing, but a close look at one of your paintings shows a very sophisticated, very craftsman-like working method. Can you talk a little about your process? It is a rather complicated way that you arrive at your painterly destination.



Pedro Barbeito: For the past sixteen years I've been working on five distinct series of paintings, each investigating different meeting points between a painting history and digital imaging in culture today. The various themes I've been working with reference astronomical and scientific imagery, primitive representations of figures as representations of the universe, art historical images in conjunction with video game imagery, war imagery, and cubism—all seen through the lens of the digital and translated to paint on canvas.

Currently I'm working on three of these series, the Aldrich Museum exhibit being one of them. In each series, the tools used in making the works reflects the theme and content of the works. Over the years I've developed ways of applying paint (developing my own tools as well as different processes of application) in order to best define the content and keep each painting series unique. For example, in the science and astronomy themed works, I fabricated a tool to apply the paint to achieve the thin web-like grids that I use as a matrix for the paintings, to mirror the endless space of the universe. Due to the relative smallness of the paint marks in relation to the size of the canvas, these paintings can take up to four months to complete.

CHAREST-WEINBERG

The works from the series I'm exhibiting at the Aldrich are quicker to make, due to the tools I use to create them. These paintings are primarily made using an airbrush, a tool I don't use in the science-informed pieces. The airbrushed representation is thin, lacking physicality, similar to the media images I download as reference material.

The third series I'm currently working on is the primitive-informed series. These paintings are more expressionistic; the paint is brushed, poured, dripped, and splattered on the canvas. The physicality of the medium and its looser, less controlled application references the Boli sculptures and other figurines I've been looking at as reference material. Conceptually, these paintings are a counterpoint to the scientific series and science's assuredness and exclusionary stance in understanding life and the universe.

Initially as I was developing the techniques and conceptual parameters of each series, I was working on them one at a time, moving from one to the other about every two to three years. As of 2011, instead of creating a new series of paintings, I've begun to add works to past series, creating new paintings as I see things around me that speak to that particular body of work. This has been a substantial conceptual break from how I previously thought about making paintings. My approach before was to always keep the work in flux, as soon as I had defined and figured out what I wanted to accomplish with each series, I'd move on to a new one—new content and new techniques of application. The anxiety of leaping constantly into the unknown and leaving a body of work just when it had gelled into a cohesive form is what ultimately has resulted in this change in my creative process. I'm now more interested in a careful reevaluation and re-contextualization of past painting approaches and ideas, as well as seeing how I can better the techniques and add to the content by reflecting on current cultural phenomena. I'm sure this has something to do with me getting older and wanting to control and take ownership of my terrain.

BR: The paintings in the show at the Aldrich Museum are from around 2006 and deal specifically with depictions of war and violence -- media depictions and whatnot filtered through painting. This is a kind of subset of your larger interests. What drew you to this subject matter?

PB: It was around the end of 2005. I had been working on my cubism/digital imaging series for a couple years, and the imagery I was representing in my paintings (my relationship with my wife) was getting more and more tempestuous to the point where I realized the paintings weren't about us anymore. Maybe I was responding to all the imagery I was seeing in the media. Abu Ghraib had just happened, and I discovered ogrish.com (a now defunct site that revealed censored imagery

in the news media in its original form). I was looking at a lot of new video games that dealt with violence and war imagery -- *Gears of War*, *Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto*, *Medal of Honor*. That was when I also discovered that game developers in the 1990s worked with the military in developing a lot of cross-platform (military and gaming) software and hardware, so facilitating a move from flying a fighter jet on a game console in one's bedroom after school to a few years later flying a drone aircraft in Iraq....



BR: That is interesting. I don't know if you ever saw the movie *The Color of Money*, but Tom Cruise talks about that happening -- video games training teenagers how to fly planes and launch missiles -- in one scene. There is a sense in your work of it being somewhere between a critique of media and being a part of the media. Your painting methods in some ways are a reflection of how we look at things now, like HD television, iPads, 3D film. Do you see your process as evolving out of this relationship with pop culture?

PB: I've also always enjoyed looking at Golden Age, early superhero comic books -- *War*, *Captain America*, *Fighting Yank*, *Captain Marvel*, *Superman*, *Daredevil*, *Bullet Man* -- all of which, back in the early 1940s, were used as propaganda to create a pro-war mentality. Today the U.S. military publishes Iraqi superhero comic books and distributes them to Iraqi and Afghani youth to similarly turn them against the enemy (Taliban, Al Qaeda) while building nationalistic pride. All these things -- as well as my affinity for horror movies, particularly zombie flicks; George Romero I've always

CHAREST-WEINBERG

appreciated for his mix of politics and camp—further involved me in this content. His crew of bloodthirsty, stop-at-nothing, we-need-viscera, consumerist Zombies are fantastic. Once I started researching all these popular forms of depicting violence, I was hooked. The similarities and contradictions that emerged in response to what I was watching in the news were fascinating. I was also intrigued with how digital technologies were being used to capture these events in the news. Abu Ghraib was documented by the propagators themselves in a reality television, look-at-me-I'm-a-superhero kind of way. The seduction of performing, of fame, outweighed any potential repercussions. The ease with which we can upload imagery to the internet allows for anyone to make news, even at the expense of one's freedom. The media use digital technologies to censor -- lower the resolution, pixelate, blur, make the images smaller -- all to protect us from the horrors of war. Media in other countries do this to varying degrees. The BBC edits and censors less than CNN and Fox News but more than Greek media (I'm half Greek). Al Jazeera censors even less. The media in the US censor and edit these horrors, yet they remain ubiquitous within our culture, from being beautifully rendered in early comic books, to movies and video games where blood and guts captivate us with their beauty and detail. The game developers and special effects teams that create these images constantly strive to improve the realism of their imagery.

The paintings in their fractured, multi-layered compositions also reflect the access to and speed at which we are seeing and processing this imagery. Depending on our choice of media outlet, the representations are similar; the message, though, is different. The censored or uncensored imagery is used to promote outrage toward the shown atrocities, to minimize the outrage, or even to promote the rationale behind the atrocities. The paintings in the Aldrich exhibit represent popular cultural images of horror in ways analogous to how the news media reveal wartime atrocities. The viewer is protected from these cultural horrors -- the imagery is beautiful, candy-like in color, simplified enough so that all is okay on the surface; our youth and innocence remains intact. A recent painting, "Zombie Parts," that's in the Aldrich exhibit, references the recent imagery from Afghanistan where U.S. soldiers posed with blown-up, dismembered enemy body parts.

BR: There are a lot of references to historical precedents -- "Guernica," for example. Do you see these works as being political or primarily aesthetic explorations?

PB: I'm not sure I separate the two. One without the other would be meaningless as far as the paintings are concerned. Once I decided on what I wanted to paint and why, I had to and wanted to take ownership of both the political and aesthetic aspects of making the work. The pleasure for me is finding,

through the creative process, a perfect coexistence between the content and the medium. In a way that's the challenge: how to keep the painting vibrant and alive -- good composition, good color, good drawing, intelligent use of the medium -- while bringing across a narrative that's specific yet mysterious enough to unfold at a slow speed that is similar to how the painting visually unfolds.

"Guernica" is one of the greatest paintings ever made because of its footing in both these terrains. It's not more political than aesthetically beautiful; one allows the other to exist. The choice of, or lack of, color and the forms and composition help define the content and vice versa.

- Bradley Rubenstein

--

Pictured:

From the science/astronomy series:

"James Webb I" (2012), acrylic and pigment printout on canvas, 50" x 72"

From the primitive series:

"Blue Large PK" (2012), acrylic on canvas, 85" x 71"

Pedro Barbeito's Pop Violence will be at The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, Ridgefield, CT, July 15–September 30, 2012.