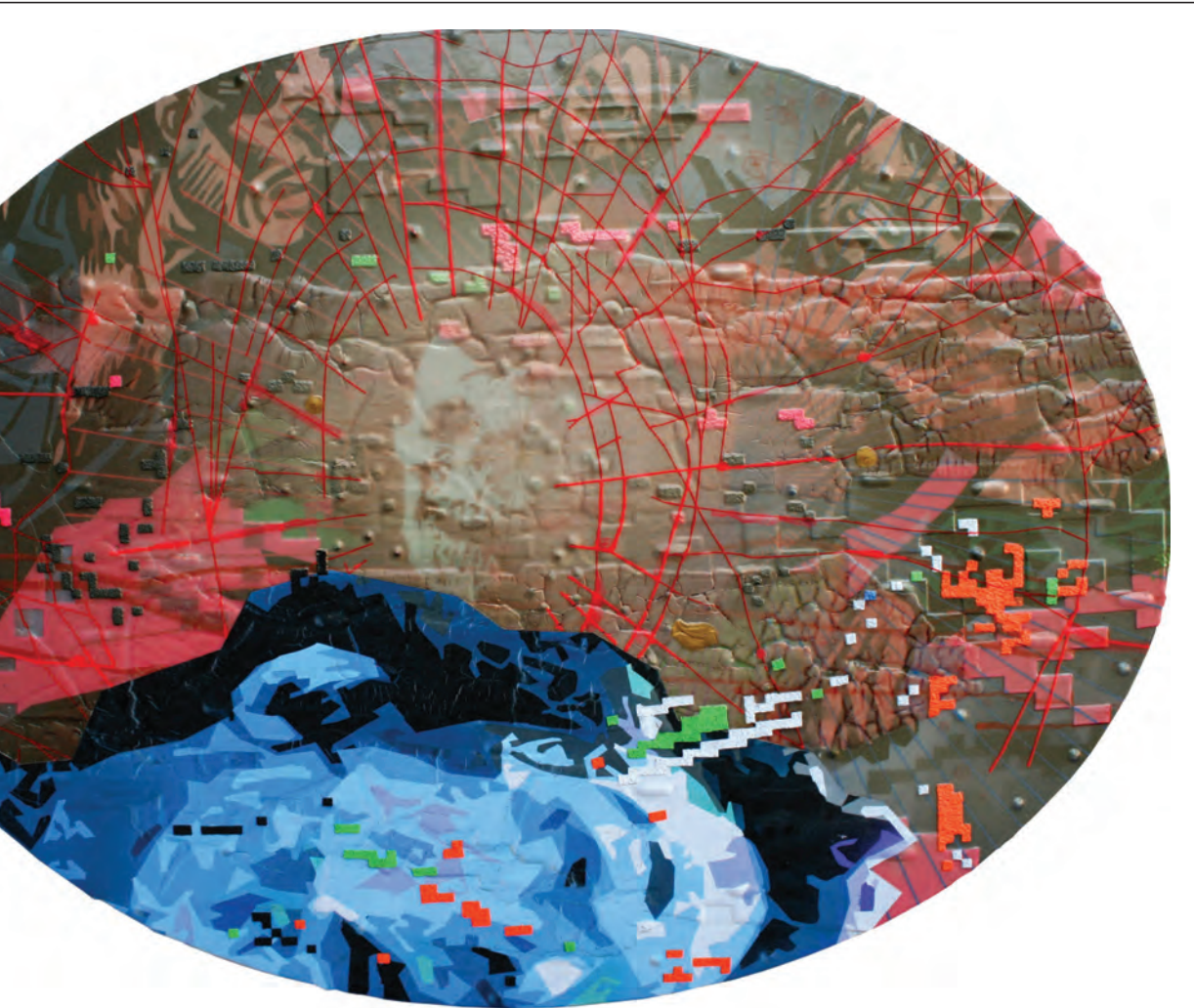


Barbeito



Pedro Barbeito: Pop Violence

July 15 to September 30, 2012

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

Pedro Barbeito: Pop Violence



Fighting Yank, 2007
Courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami, and Galerie Richard, Paris

Spanish-born, New York-based artist Pedro Barbeito's exhibition at The Aldrich presents a series of works produced between 2005 and the present. The paintings in *Pop Violence* are informed by images of war drawn from American entertainment and 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. Drawing 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 conflict in Iraq and the Abu Ghraib images of torture, for example), these canvases materialize through painting the ubiquitous command found in most NYC transportation hubs: "If you see something, say something."

"Painting, since the beginning of history, has been the representation of the world through pictures," explains Barbeito, "and as such, my paintings represent our current world, exploring the relationship between digital imaging, culture at large, and the history of painting." His images are particularly informed by the artist's interest in the traditions of popularized depictions of violence, from early superhero comics (Fighting Yank/Captain America/Battle Brady) and video game imagery (Gears of War/Halo 3) to the portrayal of violence and jingoism in movies and on television. These are all powerful popular forms that testify to the workings of violence in America, yet do so in often beautiful and visually inventive ways. The layering of images, paired with the physicality of the paint application on the canvas, typifies the presentation of violence in our contemporary era, speaking to the cacophony of voices in communications media overloaded by often-contradictory information: flag waving, horror, and glamour.

This particular emphasis on war/violence and present-day subject matter is a recent development in Barbeito's career. Generally, he has taken his references from a look to the future or the past. Renowned for early paintings that explored the phenomena of the universe—hence his use of oval canvases that present digital-looking depictions of black holes, stellar births, and complex molecules—Barbeito was keen to return to the NASA website and *Scientific American* magazine as sources, looking for "images that could only be made visible through technology."¹ With the objective of introducing into the system of artistic representation new visual interpretations of our world that he based upon scientific representation, Barbeito abandoned the practice of making preparatory sketches on paper for his paintings. As a result of having taken 2-D/3-D digital image-making software classes while studying at Yale University in 1995, he was able to move on to drawing on the computer. The outcome of this process is a series of paintings that have a sci-fi and futuristic feeling, and yet do not lose their lush and painterly characteristics.

The works are highly tactile, given the combination of dense layering of paint and 2-D and 3-D printed images on the canvas. They also embrace visual and technological excess, in concept and format. Given the saturation of imagery in our modern information age, explains the artist, the competitive aspect of image making has increased: ". . . one has to try to visually differentiate oneself from one's competition in order to maintain interest" in addition to contending with the moving images



Battle Brady, 2007
Courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami, and Galerie Richard, Paris

increasingly prevalent in the digital and online world. Barbeito's paintings are loud, layered, intense, and dramatic, and maintain our attention by taking an optimistic approach to technology and a research-oriented position with regard to the overflow of images in our mediated world:

*"We can look at images of the war in Iraq in The New York Times and we can also look at different images of the same incidents on the Al Jazeera website. This cross examining of event and of commercial products that's available to us allows for a greater truth than was available 50 years ago; we end up just having to search deeper for it."*²

The idea of looking at the same source of information from different points of view is an aspect of the work of Cubist painter Pablo Picasso that Barbeito admires as he turns to the past for ideas on conflating information systems into one pictorial field. Looking back and making connections is important for Barbeito. He endeavors to make sense of the history of representation and our current ways of presenting imagery and tries to imagine what it was like for Picasso and his fellow Spanish painter Diego Velázquez; he compares the visual strategy of the 1600s painter to the digital zoom in and zoom out allowed by current technology:

“If you look at Velázquez’s paintings, you realize how aware he was of how vision works; it’s almost scientific. The blurring and focusing of imagery, from how one form mysteriously blends into another form when looked at close up to how they separate and come into focus when looked at from a distance.”³

As to the premier avant-garde Cubist painter of the twentieth century, Barbeito ponders his understanding of vision as well:

“Picasso’s work is similar [to Velázquez] in that he was also reinterpreting the way we see, whether it was through using the model of African sculpture as an alternate way of seeing and representing or through attempting to portray an image from multiple perspectives—Cubism. Without a doubt these artists would have examined in depth the potential of technology and computers as tools for painting.”⁴

The shift in content in Barbeito’s work—away from the future and scientific imagery, from the past with its explorations of visuality, to the present and the state of violence today—occurred naturally, as the artist moved towards the use of images he was seeing in video games. By exploring the new phenomenon initiated by the PlayStation and Game Cube devices that came out in the mid 1990s—most specifically the quality of the graphics, which were highly detailed and realistic in shape and form—Barbeito found new and quite unique material.



Captain Baghdad, 2012
Courtesy of the artist

*“The realism of the violence I saw in a lot of the games explained their popularity. A virtual beating up of your foe—everyone could now be a bully, thug or action hero. I downloaded stills from these games and juxtaposed them with art historical images of similar subjects. My goal was to make paintings by breaking down these two kinds of images into pixels and vector lines—to deconstruct them using a digital language on the computer—and then using that outcome to reconstruct them on canvas using applications of paint that referred to and held the aesthetic of the digital. The outcome seemed odd and visually new to me since they were painted and spoke to painting, yet had the look and feel of a digital space.”*⁵

Soon after his research with video game imagery initiated, 9/11 took place. The digital images of war and devastation with which Barbeito had worked were suddenly matched by those he found reporting the event on the Internet. The various sources where he found these images, which provided a contrast to the highly pixilated ones that he had used previously, became his new interest and main suppliers of material:

*“Beheadings, explosions and death had a new and devastating face. Due to the graphic content, some of the images were displayed in lower resolutions; some were censored; the quality of others suffered due to the type of camera used. How and why these images were or were not being distributed and the possibility of finding other truths/realities of what was happening through alternate websites (ogrish.com was one I used) and foreign news websites became interesting to me.”*⁶

These tremendously charged images are ultimately rendered abstract, and even on occasion censored, by mainstream media. Perhaps our inability to comprehend destruction does not allow us to accept highly detailed visions of it. Barbeito respects our need for distance, for safety, and continues to present work that inhabits both abstraction and figuration. Fundamentally, his work is tantalizing, somewhat illegible. 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 loaded, violent works of uncanny and popular beauty.

Mónica Ramírez-Montagut, curator

1 Interview of Pedro Barbeito by Paco Barragán published in *ArtPulse* magazine (Fall/October, 2009), p. 25.

2 *ArtPulse*, p. 25.

3 *ArtPulse*, p. 27.

4 *ArtPulse*, p. 28.

5 *ArtPulse*, p. 26.

6 *ArtPulse*, p. 26.



look. look again.

The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum

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Pedro Barbeito: Pop Violence is part of *united states*, a semester of solo exhibitions and artist's projects that approach both the nature of the United States as a country and "united states" as the notion of uniting separate forms, entities, or conditions of being. Timed to coincide with the 2012 American election season, *united states* also includes solo exhibitions by Jonathan Brand, Brody Condon, Brad Kahlhamer, Brian Knep, Erik Parker, and Hank Willis Thomas, and projects by Jane Benson, Alison Crocetta, Celeste Fichter, Erika Harrsch, Nina Katchadourian, Matthew Northridge, Risa Puno, John Stoney, Sui Jianguo, Frances Trombly, Rosemary Williams, and Jenny Yurshansky.



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Far Flung, 2007
Courtesy of the artist and Charest-Weinberg Gallery, Miami, and Galerie Richard, Paris

