

Fernando Varela: Progression, Permanence, Abundance

For over three decades, Fernando Varela, a methodical and exacting artist, known for conceptualizing and persistence, has emerged as one of the few talents of his decade who is committed to contemporary art. Another feature that brings him close to younger artists is that he is a versatile creator who excels in painting, sculpture, drawing, printmaking, ceramics and installation art.

Overall, his exceptional personality is revealed in his exhibition of palimpsests at the Museum of Modern Art. Relocated ancestral images, which could be defined as primal, externalize the Judeo-Christian linkages into a kind of "Early Christian" language, a neologism used by Joseph Beuys, aesthetic paradigm of the Dominican artist. Drawn from the Scriptures, pages of inspirational verses nourished the lyrical abstraction of the detailed tableaux: we could recall the works of the painter Marc Chagall, saying that the Bible "seems the greatest source of poetry of all time." We consider the set of works as unquestionably significant, symbolic and foreboding of future production.

Fernando Varela has created palimpsests in several semantic meanings, perhaps not entirely consciously. While palimpsest is most frequently used to refer to a scroll, where text from the first manuscript page has been erased so it can be used again, in his work this has occurred metaphorically. The artist has kept the sacred origin of the pages torn from the Holy Book and converted them into an aesthetic medium for his work. First, although a correlation of content or something equivalent to the ancient original texts was not sought, the desired symbolic and literal recovery was achieved. All in the evocative framework of a prehistoric architecture... The exhibition sparked uproar among critics: a new Fernando Varela had just emerged. A combination of conceptualism and depth, for most observers, faith and a "metaphysical" never since denied.

There isn't a critique of Fernando Varela's work without a reference to repeated "spirituality" as an essential element of his art. The mention often does not explain the concept. Now, even without knowing what inspired the work, we perceive a deep religious feeling, not necessarily identified with a particular dogma. And not infrequently, critics have sought beyond a rough and intuitive reading, grounded in faith and the source of their convictions until Fernando Varela himself has revealed his sources and meditations.

Conceptual background

"Whoever wants to verify the truth of my words, should seek confirmation in the depths of his own being," said the man who is considered the intellectual mentor of Fernando Varela, German artist and writer Bo Yin Ra, aka Joseph Anton Schneiderfranken, whose thoughts have had limited dissemination despite their depth

and tolerance – or maybe for this reason? In fact, the prolific philosophical work is about the communication of experiences that may be found in all forms of religious belief, provided there is no denial of supra-terrestrial evidence. The premise is less about teachings and rather culminates in an exemplary practice, valid for all domains of life. According to this thinker, there is continuity between the brief existence on earth and the perennial condition of being in eternity, and one must act according to this premise. Because all knowledge or belief is worthless if it does not define personal conduct that seeks the spiritual light and adheres to a mysterious external force. In the artistic realm, all creation of forms in the outside world will refer to the structure of the eternal spirit and the manifestation of the divine life, taken to concrete expressions, will give the work a real sense of values.

To be "above the mundane" means to go to the state of eternity. Now, that doctrine did not call for renouncing happiness. On the contrary, it is a duty to conquer all earthly happiness that is attainable. Finally, the main, if not the only purpose, of the writings of Bo Yin Ra was to serve as a medium of guidance to others on the path towards eternal reality, recognizing the union of the earthly word and the eternal soul. A disciple of this ideological awakening, Fernando Varela reached a prominent position in Dominican art and has been known, till the present time, as a builder not only of forms, but of signs and symbols, of cosmologies and universes.

Early on, the artist did not embody that inner world turned artistic world, nor has he evolved by leaps and without clear linkages between series and stages. He has never stopped looking until he has found the exact spot that his artistic life demanded at that creative moment, and observing his prolific career, we are aware that two- and three-dimensional works are interconnected, while varying and repeating their artistic formulation. Necessarily involved in the perception of his work – even a simple spectator would be - we will analyze the components in successive chapters: space, figures, shapes and colors.

The Space

In the space of Fernando Varela, we appreciate perfect structures, meticulous drawing, and chromatic harmonies. It is a space that vibrates, treated as the essential component of the work. These qualities are repeated in the figurative language as in almost minimalist abstractions: in all dimensions and whatever the background, the artist always brings up a clear pictorial surface. Paper, canvas, terracotta or other materials, powerful artistic expressiveness carries the concept. His term marked by the exhibition "Curator Curated" – where he also played the role of commissioner - then the theme of migrations and the labyrinth, emphasize the geographical-spatial sphere as part of research and spiritual requirements.

In Varela's work, a static construction prevails, where the overall shape is as important as the detail of the figures, and the big picture is seen at the first look. As early as 1994, in "The Basin of the Consciousness", Delia Blanco focused precisely on this perception of "a shared space, organized and divided into sections in respect to the totality and the whole."

Then when the eye enters the space, the inner elements come forth, they multiply themselves, and one sees within figures, artifacts, signs: these features prevail in the evolution of the work.

The objects and subjects can be grouped on the surface, thus "Laislaaisla" -- or activating a flat but disturbed surface, scattering letters in "Unspoken words" -- but the "reader" is free to form meaningful words! Today, repeated and simplified morphologies shorten the distances and communicate another dimension. It is as if space had them under arrest... Abstractions or "neo-figures," open-ended, although the artist maintains the same intellectual rigor and a quiet way of introspection.

The Figures

Positioned between the austerity of the perfectionist and subtle sensitivity, Fernando Varela's paintings go about losing their secrecy the longer one looks at them. The resulting image, following the "internal model" --ideal paradigm for Octavio Paz-- communicates a strong emotional aesthetic to which, except stubbornly negative attitudes to this kind of imagery, the viewer cannot resist...

Viewing delivers pleasure and silence, discreetly transmitted by the formal harmonies and a system of allusions: a representation of reality is never observed there. The description does not dominate, nor can Fernando Varela be placed in any school, and especially not compartmentalized together with his great fellow citizen of origin, Joaquin Torres Garcia!

He created in a time without place, in a place without time, perhaps seeking the infinite... until he focused on the Caribbean, already in the third millennium, and matched individuals with the islands.

Since they appeared around the 1990s, we have been drawn in by his characters, symbols-figures; man and woman possessed by an unknown force. They had almost no relationship to human models, although we are reluctant to describe them as humanoids. Nor do we see them as stereotypes, but a conjugated projection of the human condition and the eternal spirit, which Fernando Varela turns into reality, incidentally abolishing the law of gravity. They could be states of consciousness and an approximation to the unknown through a physical form, like, based on the unattainable and the music of Erik Satie in particular, is made into "language of form and color" – as the artist himself, who is also a music lover, asserts.

A phenomenon of genesis occurs that we relate to a postulation by Joseph Beuys: "The spirit, the idea, the personal aspect, the soul, intellect and thoughts resort to the body to express themselves." The embodiment that is redefined by Fernando Varela is those enigmatic characters that populate his work and practically do not change nor act...

At the same time, they are constantly changing as the years go by and his series/research, from those two profiles of giant faces in 1997 to the suggestion of a cramped galley of a sailboat, feet to head, an iconographic reminiscent of the slave trade, when the Caribbean – and hence Haiti or Hispaniola – was at the center of a bid for identity. Anyway, the man and woman, in a plane of absolute equality, share the same existential and spiritual destiny.

We have said, when submerging ourselves into The Journey: "For Fernando Varela, these men and women, still, alternating, opposing, communicating without touching, express the duality of body and spirit, the continued banishment in each conscience, from Adam and Eve, sometimes unnamed guests in these paintings."

That interpretation of our exodus, a volunteer in the pursuit of happiness, fatal and irremediable on transfer to slavery, is one of several decipherments of the "opera aperta" of the painter – as described by Maria Luisa Borrás.

Now Fernando Varela's world not only unfolds through these undeniably fascinating creatures. He accompanies them (or replaces them) with other signs --and we will momentarily defer referring to letters and numbers-- such as the chalice, the heart, hands, brain, map, palm, pod, the boat, the altar, the cross, the arrow... as these in disorder spring to mind, each endowed with a symbolic correlation, if not several as in the case of the heart.

In this regard, we will again evoke the ownership -- in the best sense of dialogue and recreation – of Joseph Beuys by Fernando Varela. If he appropriates signs and Beuysian approaches, he recreates a work of his unmistakable authorship: lines and proportions, an organic state and construction, intellectual engagement and metaphor, beauty (ugliness of the German). Then he shows how very small formats, arranged in polyptych, acquire a connotation of monumental tribute, based on carefully selected elements, that Beuys appropriated, from nature, rose, thorns and leaves, from animals, the coyote and dead hare, from raw materials, references to the felt and fat.

In the same exhibition, there was a very important three-dimensional work, the great heart cleft in ceramics, dramatic if not funerary, containing rolls with a text by Bo Yin Ra text that those attending could discretely perceive, in addition to reading it on the wall. Another tribute! Worth noting is that the rose and the thorns... the flower and the nails, already covered the intensely poetic installation that Fernando Varela presented in 1997, as part of the collective "Inside" by Kassel.

Shapes and Colors

We have analyzed certain signal components – a more complete analysis is needed! - Because an appreciation of Fernando Varela's work, based solely on the unobjectionable proportion of the spaces and the optimal formal balance, the careful dosing of tones and the refined surface textures, would reduce its expressive dimension. Nevertheless, in a reading one could consider that the artist bestows a relatively autonomous plastic life on shapes, not only as lines, outlines and areas, but as one or the essential contribution to his commitment, throughout all his artistic career.

Therefore, in this reflection, we will avoid linking the figurative and abstract aspects, but will remember Fernando Varela's very personal geometry, which began with simple and archaeological morphologies, and has been enriched by the passing of the years, without losing its "sensitive" quality. Divided surface, point, square, circle (and sphere --in the third dimension--), ovals, square and curvilinear geometric orders, did not stop being the plastic background, but the spiral, the labyrinth, mosaic, and diverse graphics became increasingly important. Beyond an interior design, of permanent balance --whatever the proportions and the symmetry—these contain their own messages of peace, order and elevation. The evocation of the mandala, a cosmic symbol of supreme harmony, is inescapable.

The letter, the alphabet, writings, have had an ongoing relevance in Fernando Varela's creations, ever since he glued pages and fragments of the Holy Book, with the printed word, according to Maria Luisa Borrás, "an attempt to communicate a thought, to give plastic form to an idea." The letters --of similar font—became religious quotes, phrases and messages, almost reaching the ideogram, until they systematically loosened up, "color field" signs and tingling in "The Unspoken Word", his most difficult pictorial series -- although the process of liberating lyricist had started much earlier. Soon we will give up trying to order them semantically and invent, rather than try to decipher, we react, witness the expressive flow, while others will see a mystery there, the link before thought and language developed in the chain of creation or later... as we understand it now.

If the color is inseparable from what is formal, in the work of Fernando Varela, while not being the preponderant value, it contributes, from the beginning, to strengthen his painting and enhance the efficiency both of the shape as of the spiritual treatise. It is a moderate but austere chromaticity, where influenced ranges dominate in the pursuit of the right hue, not a muted one, with the exception of the effects of fear. When the color is intense as, for example, vermillion, crimson red or a deep black, it acquires a symbolic function and is not in pursuit of a vibrant intrinsic light. However, the Caribbean took Fernando Varela to show direct concern for nature and the preservation of the flora. His beautiful compositions of forests were illuminated... the

climax of clarity placed in the respective installation of the formidable white alligators, an endangered species.

Coda

Fernando Varela is definitely one of the top-ranking Dominican artists: an output that has matured over three decades, places him among the masters, a title that does not particularly please him... Intense emotion, aesthetic pleasure and spiritual introspection are states of mind to which the necessarily prolonged contemplation of a singular work leads us, work we would like to soon see displayed within the framework of a great retrospective.

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