

Fernando Varela

The Perennial Condition of Being

There has long been the belief that a purer, or higher, or more universal form of reality in the creation of art is revealed through the elimination of the inessential; thus “essentialism” has reigned as the discursive premise for artists intent on capturing the essence of life: the perennial condition of being and reason for existence. Inspired by numerous philosophical constructs, including the Platonic idea that there are fundamental entities or universals, artists of the last one-hundred years (or more) have pursued an abstract form of art as a way of penetrating the veil of material existence in order to reveal a spiritual reality, often inspired by the markings and artifacts of the most ancient of societies. This reality may also be located in philosophical and aesthetic thought based on the earliest historical (written) tenets, or on contemporary theories that refute the presupposition that the artist is accorded a kind of prophetic role. The latest artist/philosopher dialogues look at the function that process and materials play in the creation of a new and personal form of production that reveals as much about the present as it does about the past. It is in this category of essentialism that the work of Fernando Varela may be placed.

An encounter with the sweeping strokes of pigment that interrupt the richly textured surfaces of Varela’s work is to enter a doorway into a spiritual world reminiscent of that of the caves or a rediscovery of art’s primary sources. His constant engagement with sensuous materials and freedom to manipulate the most essential images on canvas, allow the viewer to experience abstraction as a psychological associative exercise through the raw application of paint that is as primitive as it is modern. Built on dense, sometimes nervously reiterating, painterly strokes interrupted by markings that are often referential to ancient texts, Varela’s canvases and works on paper repeatedly use elemental, quasi-geometric, forms that are transformed into organic notations. These become heroic, soaked in myth yet intimately bound up with human history – beginning with the cave drawings. It is in the caves that the first evidence of humankind begins unequivocally with men’s and women’s activity as artists (or

what we would describe today as artists). For these ancient peoples, their work, descending from the Paleolithic Age, was a matter of necessity and supplies the strongest perennial thread of continuity for a universal language of signs and symbols. These early markings represent the essence of imagery, without the aid of written words and using only the formal language of line and color, yet these prehistoric painters seem to still communicate with us. It has long been argued that the paintings and drawings in the caves of Prehistoric Europe, Africa and Asia were purely ritual activities – with process more significant than the results. It may also be argued that beginning with Action Painting in the 1940s, art has returned to this respect for process, with the inclusion of abstract signs and symbols again defying interpretation. Paleolithic painting is the same curious mixture of the extremely immediate and the ambiguous that appears in Varela's work, also difficult to fathom for meaning due to their complex intellectual basis rooted in generations of signs. Nevertheless, the viewer is always aware that his works represent more than the decorative application of elemental designs on surfaces that range from richly encrusted to soft and elegant. There is always a seriousness of purpose and commitment to expression informing every work, whether oil on canvas or mixed media on paper.

Varela's process represents an addition to the realm of signs, simplified like calligraphic strokes to float atop complex textures layered with references that work like a palimpsest, constantly layering, erasing, working over and over his surfaces to reveal something new emerging from the depths. Like cave drawings that transform innate knowledge and memories into fixed two-dimensional images, with no regard for continuous narration or perspective, Varela's process depends on multi-levels of intuitive markings and what is finally revealed is a visual language read beneath the newest layer. Words, letters, glyphs, drawn from a variety of sources, including the most direct, the alphabet, to the most complete, sacred texts of the Holy Book, reappear for many years and reveal his fascination for the simplest to the most erudite of information systems. Always seeking to understand how human beings share knowledge and express emotion, Varela explores signs, letters and words and all their ramifications and implications through time. It is through some kind of a language system that civilizations have emerged out of the darkness of the past, not only to connect with one another, but to also

commune with the unknown. The artist works like a shaman, with special power to communicate with a spirit world; to become the spirit guide assisting the viewer through the multiple layers of meaning present in his works. He also uses images to record spiritual visions that tend to be abstract and based on combinations of natural and geometric forms, with organic and inorganic references.

It is Varela's long fascination with basic shapes and how they interact in time and space that remains basic to all his work over the years. These forms, despite their elemental simplicity, are always imbued with meaning ranging from the spiritual to the secular – from universal significance to the formal. As an artist, Varela may be inspired to a gravitas associated with his interest in the perennial condition of being, but he is also interested in the aesthetic arrangements of his forms within compositions that must succeed artistically. Intellectual concept joins with formal artistic meaning. His entire plastic language is directed by a ritualistic will and metaphysical understanding that transcends time. The perennial condition of being is a drama that led him to analysis through the essentials of visual language. Ovals, circles, and ellipticals become primary forms evincing the great theme of creation, the essence of things. His handling of paint – a combination of hard edges and free, painterly surfaces – registers duality in inspiration and intellection; in male and female harmonious accord; in black and white, good and evil, and positive and negative. Large shapes, or the purely abstract ovoid image, become the most dramatic way to effect simple expressions of complex concepts and processes. Symbolic of the egg, the basis of creation, the oval allows the artist to experiment technically, while never losing sight of its meaning. It is not surprising that Varela calls these images "primary forms." For many years, he has developed a compositional format dominated by large repeated shapes suited to the ideas he wanted to explore. Marked by the dualism of ovoid and angular shapes combined in a number of series, Varela's works on canvas and paper continually explore formal relationships as the basis for intellectual thought.

In other works, Varela continues to combine simplified shapes, or fields of color, with the complex markings that lure the viewer into the depths of his surfaces. The addition of the optical tendencies results from the side-by-side placement of large areas of closely but

contrasting valued hues. Layers of pigment tend to yield a strange complexity to the flatness of the forms, extending the unique language of the artist through time. However minimal the dominant forms, the image always proves resonant, stimulating one to see elemental totemic devices, phalluses, testicles, wombs, megaliths, and other shapes. Its visual language is as basic as the tribal rhythms of primitive peoples and as elegant as the calligraphic style that has long captured the imagination of the Western world. Now replaced by long, wide gestures gliding across the canvas to leave broad swaths of lustrous ink or paint over the rich surface, Varela's calligraphic markings add resonance to the poetic and lyrical mood of his works.

The combination of expansive brushwork, bold forms and dense surfaces evinces a sense of archaism and mystery that is fundamental to the artist's intention to reveal a spiritual content within each work, and his search for a shamanic process of communication through the media of painting and drawing. His keen sense of line, basic to all his work, sets the stage for other media and is always the means to reveal the essence of his subjects. Drawing creates the marks that become the message. Painting operates through signs which are not so abstract as to be unintelligible. We may not know exactly what the oval means, or the peculiar split mark that also appears in his work, but we know they are symbols for something, and not mere decoration. We can derive personal meaning for each, from the obvious references to the origin of creation in the ovoid/egg form, to the concepts of duality, represented by his other most familiar sign, a bi-form notation. The signs that Varela creates allow his paintings to go further than mere words or text could do in approaching the mysteries of life, and considering the perennial condition of being. His works can conjure things through signs that link to all that was, and still is in the present. Painting is a more immediate and direct method of communication for expressing his inner voices, and searching for meaning in life, the *raison d'être*.

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