

Jesus Gastell in the Gravity of an Instant

Jesus Gastell knows that he has been "chosen" to draw. Nevertheless, instead of establishing himself as the master of landscapes he could be, he consciously uses his innate abilities to reveal those hidden connections that even the trained eye ignores or is unable to perceive. He understands the relation between the real and its representation based on a body of knowledge in constant re-formulation. This exercise, as a continuous questioning of models, does not separate itself from intellectual pleasure as an illuminating experience.

At risk of repeating what is commonplace, I must nevertheless argue that there is a series of intertwined reasons why we absolutely cannot ignore the physical and cultural space where Gastell's artwork is produced. This primordial key is the landscape of Pinar del Rio¹, from which everything follows. However, what is born from this vital space is not the basis of a landscapist vision but an investigative attitude that understands aesthetic experimentation as part of life experience and then this as a trance or an essential exercise within the conception of what is artistic. Therefore what emerges from his work is not the landscape or its surroundings but the fulfillment of his experience in this landscape.

Certainly it is a *sine qua non* condition that defines his peculiar affiliation to natural order, not in the way or sense understood by Romantic or Expressionistic artists but as in the genealogy that transforms the perceptual and metaphysical appreciation of space and time among the impressionists and post-impressionists, cubists and surrealists. On the other hand, the impact of eastern philosophies on western culture during the 1960s and its subsequent expansion as a philosophy of life equally returns his work to a special state of contemplation. However this state -apparently irrational, mystical, even for some metaphysical- becomes a technical investigation of the perception of the universe and it acts covertly at different levels of the organization of the artwork. In this regard, the aura or the mystical experience which surrounds his creative process, and which qualifies as a value in his work, is not -as many say- metaphysical but rather an intellectual state of revelation.

The quality with which Gastell as a human being participates in the harmony, serenity and the perpetual slow motion of nature found in the mountainous slopes, the orchidarium and the

¹ Province of Cuba.

waterfall of Soroa -where his studio is nestled in Sierra del Rosario²- explains the nature of his investigation of perceptual and representational models. Visiting him, seeing his artwork and his cultured appearance, isolated and expanded out onto the wilderness, opens up quickly a wealth of sensations that allow one to understand what hides behind his slow smile, his refined sense of humour, his unquestionable modesty and wisdom.

I will not talk about his retreat from the big city because I consider this a situation of conscious distancing more than a disadvantage. His deliberate withdrawal from urban life -apart from other personal and social reasons- places him in a privileged condition: the opportunity to assume the challenge of confronting the contemporary institution of art. All of Gastell's art practice moves towards "discrediting" the sense of legitimacy affirmed in historic progressivism and experimental trends not sustained by processes of personal investigation. Nor would I like to refer to him as a conceptual artist either -what art is not conceptual? I prefer to speak of an exercise of resonances evident in the very act of re-appropriating perceptual experience, from which I fancy and explain multiple and infinite variations of each drawing and painting.

By virtue of loving his environment, living it and investigating it as he would investigate himself, Gastell is filled by a landscape whose revelation is none other than his own and extreme humanity. *"Terrified by everything, I take refuge in you"*, the poet³ would say. Gastell remains held in rapture, bound by greater forces, to discover and describe each of the infinite "shifts in focus" that one can capture there: in proximity and far away, in the infinity and the nearby. A shift that is absolutely unusual in perspective, in its background, depths and heights; a simultaneity, profusion and juxtaposition normally exclusive to Nature. The entire world and all knowledge would appear to be there, and although his representations are almost always frontal, hence his being identified with traditional landscape most of the time, his multiple visions of those problems of perception unleash a profound and instantaneous notion of totality.

That is why the perspectives in his drawings seem to be always altered. As he moves through the original, or through the mental model he develops to recreate it, he encounters the next instants for a new artwork. We perceive as if we could never fully concretize an idea because they continue to emerge, literally, drifting away from reality (or the artwork), generating new models and mysteries within the artist and the viewer. In the same manner, a curatorial proposal of

² Mountainous region in Artemisa, Cuba, formerly part of Pinar del Rio.

³ The world class Cuban poet Jose Marti in his dedication to his son in the poetry book *Ismaelillo*.

Gastell's work never adheres to a unique model but shows us, like in this case, many variants that come from a daily exercise of understanding and perceiving: a reading of right now, of this very instant, which he must evaluate and share.

From the point of view of Gastell's model of investigation, mediums (painting, drawing, photography, new media, etc) do not constitute a tradition except in relation to the context where they are generated. Perhaps this is the reason why, in recent Cuban art history, artists as dissimilar as Pedro Pablo Oliva, Luis Rodríguez, Eduardo Ponjuan, Juan Carlos Rodríguez, Yoemir Alfonso and Jesus Gastell himself, all from Pinar del Rio, can be linked to a common source. Paradoxically, it is drawing that is the common source in their work, hidden behind pictorialism, neo-academism, conceptualism or gestalt, but not as a medium but as a way of thinking. Their concurrence does not reside in appearance but in their visualization of another reality, created to demonstrate that, even in reproduction, the history of mimesis exists but as a development, a becoming, an evolution of a thought. As a result, the models are shared only in a specific space and time -that is to say a context- and their differences are the result of the most personalized interpretation.

Jesus Gastell derives from a legacy that understood, in the classrooms of Escuela de Arte de Pinar de Rio, or the la Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) and the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in Havana, how to make possible the construction of an image through perfecting another one. This key concept can be formulated from different and varied conceptual perspectives. In *The Golden Cage* for example, the rigour, the formal manichaeism, is based on the ecstasy, the pleasure of a recurrent action and thus result cannot be, by far, an objective. Ultimately, it contains an illusion; the simulation of charcoal as burin, or the simulation of the referent, which is no other than memory in the process of studying form, or the simulation of drawing as a structure to enhance volumes, or an illusion in the rules which underlie its excessive neatness and voluptuousness.

"To flow through the experience of perceiving and creating has allowed me to step back from constructive models, appreciating the point where the schema slips into freedom", I hear him say, while through my gaze a group of works are unified, a group as markedly different as similar. His own image is all refracted when he returns to the topic, *"... an in-depth study, prior to a selection of images, a construction of meaning, a selection of the medium, a delight in the mark, in the*

effect, in the search for a result which can bring you to one stance or another... all this is pre-conceived and is so that you visualize it as such"⁴.

In equal measure, Gastell's relationship to his surroundings is the consequence of the psychological effect that nature provokes in him. It is a state of grace in which ideas manifest themselves and are enhanced as a result of, on one hand, doubts generated by what could be an absolute truth, that of the natural world, and on the other hand, the violent exercise of its representation (or the historical models which perpetuate a type of representation). There is nothing more difficult than to question what has become visibly patented or to ignore the evidence of the most elevated logic and visual learning. As an exercise, Gastell introduces a criticism of our western artistic education as a stylistically defined evolution and not as a true ontology of communication or moments in a process.

The turn, the ambiguity, the gentle violence produces glimpses of irony and seduction. In works such as *The Source of Desire*, *The Unfathomable Lightness of Being*, *The Wall*, *The Shape of the Enigma*, *The Golden Cage* or *Parable on the Path*, clouds, rocks, waters, skin, leaves are all made of the same material. They are then placed on the same visual plane, levitating, contrasting each from one another, falsifying their respective places of origin or their place in the hierarchy of composition.

In *The Unfathomable Lightness of Being*, a sort of automatism of connections has been produced which ends by practically excluding consciousness in order to concentrate on the models of representation of form and material, from which a new leap will be made. In *The Wall*, equally, form/material is substituted by the theme, the barter of references from tradition and doubt about the concept itself. In *The Shape of Enigma* and *The Source of Desire*, the casual ordering or the temporal priorities are also inverted in order to induce a search for relations beyond appearance.

In another vein, the viewer always needs the suggestion of an action or an act to imagine what has happened. For example, the calculation preceding the pictorial production may cause a 180-degree turn, which is hardly predictable. A piece like *Illusion of a Paradigm* (a cloud sustained in the roots of a dead tree) has become a perceptual model or experience that leads to a radically opposite work, *City Lights*. The markmaking is now *pixelated*, linking meanings beyond the pieces' appearance, conditioned by the operation from which it originates.

⁴ Informal conversation in his Soroa art studio, where he also has a cultural project.

To close the cycle of his elegant paradoxes, *City Lights* was conceived and created from a landscapist setting and a conceptual framework that uses the notion of the Rural to meaningfully challenge the models of perception he references. But this cycle becomes much richer if we acknowledge a chain of unconscious universal referents and "appropriations" among which come to mind paintings such as *The Heartstrings* (Rene Magritte, 1955), in which a wineglass sustains a cloud⁵; and *Relation* (Tomas Sánchez, 1986)⁶, where the form of a lake is repeated as an island surrounded by the sea and then repeated as a cloud. In their relation, the "cloud" element seems to appear as an elucidation of another string of allusions - for example "water" as the source of life, a path from one dimension to another, or purification. If that is understood, then in the relation *Illusion of a Paradigm-City Lights*, the selection of one element among the many used for landscape representation becomes a source of another archetype, that of "illumination" or "Light" as purification. The operation is resolved by using two models of representation, thus becoming two different interpretations.

All of this game, like roulette, invites us to displace ourselves, to move ourselves in order to understand how it works, what is the suggested notion of space, or how the model is being rebuilt. This game is a sort of "circular ruins" from the Borgian⁷ narrative brought to the encounter of Gastell with himself and the others.

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⁵ Uwe M. Schneede. *Rene Magritte*. Editorial Labor, s.a. 1978, p. 139.

⁶ See "Tomas Sanchez". National Museum of Fine Arts. Cuban Art Collection. Havana, Cuba, 2001, p. 228.

⁷ Jorge Luis Borges. "The Circular Ruins". Selected Works. Collection of Latin American Literature. Casa de Las Americas, Havana, 1988, p.281.