



ARMANDO MARIÑO
Recent Paintings
from the Year
of the Protester

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Untitled, 2012, oil on paper, 40 x 26 in.



Recent Paintings from the Year of the Prosester, 2012, oil on paper, 30 x 44 in.

The best thing that can happen to painting in our time is for it to be unapologetically self-conscious of its duplicitous nature. However, such a reductionist and transparent approach to art should not be merely an exercise in empty rhetoric. Instead, it should aim to provoke a productive dialogue that exposes painting's limitations as well as its responsibilities as a fictitious mode, a human construction, and a representation. Once we arrive at this particular "ground zero," we are left with no other choice than to openly admit and even proudly proclaim the fundamentally "symbolic status" of art. Only through an open recognition of art's independent nature, its capacity to simultaneously make perfect sense and be completely senseless, can it become legitimate.

In my opinion, this boldness and honesty has been the guiding characteristic of the artistic career of Armando Mariño, regardless of the varied and always-evolving styles in which he has worked. For this reason, over the past two decades his work has been able to transcend its particular style and essential visually moving successively from *Ausencia de obra* ("Work's Absence," oil, 1996), to name one work from the end of the 20th century, through his solo exhibition *Amsterdam* (2005), to the present work, *Recent Paintings from the Year of the Prosester* (2012). Mariño is well aware that his paintings attempt to seize a last minute of glory from art, or better yet, from creation itself. This desire is coupled with his recognition of painting's right to remain among contemporary art practices as legitimate, capable of historicizing what simultaneously historicizes us.¹ Art that is able to become competent within its own context can only be produced by an artist who continually challenges painting through the curious act of challenging himself.

It has been common for artists of Mariño's generation to consciously create art that references the major themes and indelible images of the canonical works from the history of art. Especially common is the appropriation of fragments from Renaissance and Baroque painting, using that symbolic legacy as an allegorical language with which they can comment on Cuba's long-taboo ethno-racial issues² and the "end of history" as a meta-narrative. Using painting as a tool with which to efficiently represent Cuba's changing reality, Mariño made his appearance in 1995 taking first

prize at the First Exhibition of Contemporary Cuban Art that year with his *Relato sobre el fin de la utopía* (Tale of the End of Utopia). Mariño's postmodern pastiche immediately placed him in the critical spotlight of both curators and art students, who found his work to be the best example of both prevailing neo-historicist trends as well as neo-baroque fashions of the mid-nineties.

Mariño's work is saturated with references to and "quotations" from canonical works from the Academy and well-known treatises on Art. His paintings critically examine long-dominant pedagogical traditions as well as the role of the artist as a member of the so-called "metaphorical illuminati" – which includes their conscious theatricality and the deliberate "staging" of their work. Because of this eagerness to emphasize the "tyranny of the signifier" in his works, Mariño is able to not only challenge artistic representation as a fictional and arbitrary construct but also – and above all – as a space of elitist exclusion.

Now largely removed both temporally and geographically from his original Havana context, Mariño has changed the focus of his work by reducing the interest in narrative and altering the compositional syntax of his paintings. Nevertheless, he continues to recycle the visual codes embedded in the pictorial tradition in order to insist on the immanence of art – its nature and reach – as an unparalleled tool of efficient, if symbolic, communication.

In turn, he has begun to move beyond his past focus on racism toward an expanded political consciousness that includes ecology, economic crisis, and war, with their concomitant quotas of violence. Reaching this point in his career, his former obsession with artistic citation has begun to dissolve despite its continued subtle presence in his work. Mariño's approach to the issue of social unrest departs from that of a reporter in search of a tragic storyline or a sensational scoop. Rather, as an artist, his vocation is to convert the raw material reality provides into spectacle, through his own imagination and creativity.

"If I transform violence into fireworks, into spectacle," asserts Valeriano Bozal, "at that very moment the most fundamental aspect of violence – its destructive aspect – disappears and we are left with the fog of agitated movements of people and objects."³

Achille Bonito Oliva described the manner in which we consumed the media coverage of the Iraq war, especially the bombing of Baghdad, as an innocuous "dew of war." The ethical dilemma signaled by the aestheticization or domestication of such a violent event – from the moment it becomes "breaking news" to its subsequent conversion to art – constitutes the axis of the recent work of Armando Mariño.

By appropriating images – whose authorship and authority has become less important (ordinary, everyday) and to which the masses have instant access via the web or print media, Mariño launches a new kind of neo-historicism. He atomizes his sources (which is no longer sacred) and the process is made evident through the method of pictorial distancing. In this distortion of a distortion, the original referent is lost, the images are bastardized, and their true



We are living in a time of the aestheticization of violence, 2012, oil on paper, 44 x 20 in.



Revolution in the House of Colors, 2011, oil on fabric, 83 x 47 in x 2 ft.

lineage remains unknown. The paintings carry a mysterious aura due to the conversion, extraction, and sublimation of their origins.

Mariño covertly manipulates his "found material," and creates images that verge on complete abstraction. He alters the initial, literal sense of the image and confuses the spectator with a beautiful effigy where the essential element is very often exactly what we cannot see. We are forced to rely on our other senses to fill the discrepancies. Due to this pictorial treatment, the "epicness" of the image overtakes us as an evocation, rather than as evidence. Thus, we realize in our perception of the image there is an element missing, an element whose very absence hints at the fact that we are viewing an alteration.⁴ Moreover, Mariño's chromatic treatment – bright pigments and fluorescent colors in tune with these times – leaves us with a visual residue that is hedonistic, even perverse. In short, these paintings should not only be seen, but also felt in all their fragmentation.

This conscious exile of the evidence (or dissolution of the referent) becomes, by extension, a critique of our political apathy and indifference, prompted by our living passively with sublimated and naturalized violence. Its very everydayness makes it invisible. However, Armando Mariño's entire artistic *modus operandi* is also a commentary on painting itself. Once again, his discursive substance reappears: The representational capacity of the illustration, its responsibility as guarantor of topical ambiguity, and its keen ability to deal both in the arena of the art world and beyond.

As the artist himself has said: "Once again, I am playing with the symbolic status of painting and its capacity to, at once, monumentalize and trivialize human drama."

3. "We are living in a time of the aestheticization of violence," Valeriano Bozal, interviewed by Urikai Salaberrena.

4. Mariño is not necessarily interested in interior or central conflicts but instead in borders and margins, in collateral damage, nothing of the main event but yes to the side-show.

1. To paraphrase Heidegger.
2. A topic that was not adequately addressed by Cuban art of the 1980s.