

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

Josiah McElheny, 'Artists in Conversation: Arturo Herrera', *Bomb Magazine*, 7 March, 2014

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Art : Interview

Arturo Herrera by Josiah McElheny



Arturo Herrera, Untitled, 2004, graphite and ink on paper, 37¼ x 27¼ x 2". All images courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York.

Arturo Herrera's dense and complex abstractions are often associated with the current trend of bringing the world of comic books and animation into the sphere of art. But it is misleading to read a Pop sensibility into his collages, dissections, spills, and constructions. Rather, Herrera is a significant contributor to the project of modernist abstraction. His contribution is to allow profane materials—familiar, commonplace images—to “contaminate” the carefully circumscribed world of the abstract. Along with the sharp-edged but goopy biological shapes that make up a seamless world of form, one recognizes a foot, the turret of a castle, a headless figure. Though Herrera's images are distinctly “flat” when viewed from a distance, up close it is clear that they are very aware of their existence in space: a wall painting cleverly extends the dimensions of the room; a “painting” made from a thick piece of felt, cut almost to tatters, hangs in three dimensions off the wall. It's almost as if these objects are at once sculpture and painting. Above all, Herrera's work has a mysterious quality, a sense that there are narratives to be made, puzzles to put together out of all the pieces.

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Herrera and I have been good friends for many years, and have often discussed artistic issues. But perhaps he has influenced my work the most by his generous introduction to his abiding passions in opera and modernist ballet. If it weren't for our trips to Lincoln Center, I probably wouldn't be currently working on a large sculpture and film based on the décor of those odd 1960s buildings . . .



Arturo Herrera, *Untitled (From the Top), Series B*, 2004, cut colored paper, 1 of 9 parts, each 11 1/2 x 8 1/4".

Josiah McElheny You're working on an animated, abstract film that's inspired by Stravinsky's composition for a ballet, *The Wedding*. We went to see a performance of the ballet together; the score was already one of my favorite pieces of music. I have noticed over the years that you never have much inspirational or reference material on the wall in your studio. But you've always had a picture of Stravinsky up there. Why Stravinsky?

Arturo Herrera He's a mentor. He perfected this idea of precision and clarity, especially at the beginning; he kept pushing his own boundaries, challenging himself. His pieces seem so *barbaric* but they are all connected to history. To me, it's that history that keeps you grounded. If you could actually do this youthful kind of work and then after you get older, keep revisiting, drawing from the past, but always newly conceiving the idea that you are pushing forward . . . Stravinsky actually built *The Wedding* from snatches of song—some vulgar, some poetic—that accompany a wedding ritual.

JM Based on Russian peasant traditions.

AH Yes. The text is carefully constructed through fragmentation and repetition from anthologies of Russian folklore. He built it out perfectly to his specifications, but it's based totally on non-literary verse. So the film will be based also on that kind of arrangement.

JM When you invited me to see one of the Balanchine ballets, I had never been to the ballet before. I found it fascinating simply as a meditation on movement, the kinds of basic forms that movement can create. In Balanchine's ballet we saw, there was a diagonal line of dancers across the stage and they moved in simple geometric formations. There was no coherent narrative, except the one that says: You're looking at an exploration of what you can see in different people moving.

AH There are things that Balanchine in particular deals with involving neoclassicism. He had a very clear understanding of what the body can do, and he allowed the music and the movement to become one. Balanchine uncovered the architecture of the music by using the simplest of geometric forms in his choreography. It is an *analytical* choreography.

JM There was a big show in Paris recently, *Son et lumière* (Sound and Light), and in the United States there is the important traveling show *Visual Music*; both discuss the connection between modernist music and visual abstraction. Is that something that you've been interested in, the history of the ways in which visual abstraction and modernist music are connected?

AH Well, I know about it, and those shows were great. Finding specific nonrepresentational images that corresponded to music was a very serious investigation for these people. And they invented machines, systems, all kinds of theories to explore synesthesia and musical analogies in the visual arts. But I think that the immediate impact that these artists wanted to have never reached its full potential.

JM Why do you think that is?

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AH Color and music are so different, and so powerful in themselves that to be able to fit them into such strict formats would be limiting. It was a valid and important experiment, but it just didn't explode. What it did instead was pollinate among artists and movements to create new hybrids. Its effects can clearly be seen today.



Arturo Herrera, Untitled, 2004, painted MDF relief, 36 1/2 x 27 1/2 x 1 1/2".

JM Let's talk about the forms in your work. I know that you don't like to assign specific meanings, but you use a lot of recognizable forms. Of course, at the same time there is much that might be related to geometric or biomorphic abstraction. In some works, one recognizes a hand or a candle or the turret of a tower. But even in the most relentlessly abstract works, there is a sense of a form to be discovered. As in the felt series, which always reminds me of a glimpse through a dense forest of trees. The dialogue around abstraction has at times taken the form of a question about whether it is a formal advance in terms of image making or a critique of representation, a kind of hermetic exercise that lacks connection to any specific conception of the real world. When you experience an abstract work, can that experience be purely formal, not containing any aspect of recognition?

AH The experience of looking at any artwork is both conceptual and formal at the same time. The formal aspect allows you to get into the conceptual mode, to be able to perceive and understand it. I'm more interested in suggesting than enforcing it.

JM It's exciting for me to hear you say that, because that's what I think about when I make my work: How is the viewer going to enter this? I begin with subject matter that I want to explore; I have a notion of what form it will take. But then I ask myself what kind of atmosphere and what kind of details I can provide that will entice someone to become involved in these ideas.

AH I believe that the best artworks are very rigorous but feel very casual.

JM That brings me to another question. Some people have referred to your work as having, in terms of its image construction, a sense of the classical. There is a sophisticated balance of space, color, and form in your work that seems less about expression and more about creating an experience that has a strong visual-communication aspect to it. In the history of modernism, architecture, graphic design and art are quite connected; that's the history of the Bauhaus, for example. While the history of modernism is not specifically your subject, I associate your work with modernism's attempts to explore and understand graphic space, to create a complex vocabulary of spatial relationships.

AH I try to pay attention to the details, to what I want the image to become. And of course we are connected to modernism; it is part of our background. We are also connected to ancient art, to Minimalism, the Renaissance, medieval art, popular culture. It feels totally natural for me to use a basic architecture of squares, or pyramids, or triangles, or horizontals and verticals as well as current readymade printed matter to build an image and its space. It is a challenge, as powerful abstract images are hard to make.

JM The overarching purpose of a lot of graphic design is advertising, and even if they're using sophisticated constructions, the goal is very limiting, and the images themselves may have little persistence in memory. Would it be appropriate to connect some of your work to specific elements of

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the history of graphic design in the 20th century?

AH It is appropriate because the work is very graphic; I use a lot of elementary forms, monochromatic colors, black and white, paper fragments. But as you say, the graphic has specific messages—it's political, or it's advertising. It is successful if it gets its point across. My work actually tries to discourage a specific message. It tries to free a place up, to clarify through ambiguity. I use strategies of design and placement to enable the viewer to access the image. In other words, it's a bridge, but it is paved with the viewer's own references and associations.

JM It's a visual art that everyone is familiar with.

AH Exactly. So you read the image very easily, but in the end, you are on your own.

JM Well, that is kind of the definition of art, in the sense that if graphic design is to persuade you or to inform you, art is to create a space that you can use for your own purposes.

AH Well, it is more generous to be ambiguous. I'm more interested in that than in dictating. Besides, all our experiences are mediated by memory and desire.

JM You mentioned that Stravinsky, even though he was working in a modernist vein, was also returning to an earlier history. How do you view your own work in relation to the present? Is it in part an historical project? People could connect your work to works from the past of course, from Matisse to Surrealism, but do you think of what you're doing as an extension of the unfinished project of modernism?

AH The modernists, the Surrealists, and countless other artists who have contributed to my education are visionaries with truly specific agendas regarding their visual investigation. Modernism's boundless optimism and idealism created exciting visual realities. Some of these propositions failed or are no longer valid but their achievements are still resonant and influential to contemporary artists. The key is to have a critical dialogue with this legacy.



Arturo Herrera, *Untitled*, 2004, painted MDF relief, 29 1/2 x 21 1/2 x 1 1/2".

JM I am interested in that idea of mentorship in a broad sense, how you learn from what has come before you. For most of my own work I look at a historical moment, not to examine history per se but to absorb and try understand those things for myself and to propose new meanings.

AH You consider your work an investigation of form and the ideas attached to those forms.

JM Yes. My work is an investigation of how material forms become infected with ideas that were used in its making. Not in its interpretation, but in its making. Every artwork is like a map: you can never know the reality, but the map has a one-to-one connection to this reality, and so you use it to invent another reality.

AH The shapes you and I both use are so primal, and people have specific attachments to those forms. They seem to come to them with lingering references. But neither of us is really interested in the clarity of the message that they see. It is about the pliability of content, of grasping relationships.

JM Right. We both rely on the fact that there is something recognizable within the space of our work. We use those recognitions, those bits of memory of something one has seen before, as pieces of a puzzle that the viewer can reassemble in a variety of ways. You have used pieces of familiar

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popularizations of Grimm's tales, even if they are altered, disturbed, consumed. I have sometimes relied on the viewer's memory of design objects, of something from the coffee table. Or at least I am expecting a vague recollection of the shapes of these ubiquitous objects, a visual memory of things that are not usually invested with particular importance.

AH Well, I feel that right now the world seems to be more dependent on objectivity. But I find subjectivity, that area of not knowing, more interesting. Objectivity, rational systems, can reassure people, and subjectivity doesn't, so there is more richness for me in subjectivity.

JM I am interested in the tensions within utopian notions of modernism, of creating a world that has a specific aesthetic logic to it, with aesthetic parameters that are not random or—

AH Contaminated.

JM Right. But actually realizing such a world is by necessity a destructive act. With global capitalism now they talk about "creative destruction." You know, you destroy one thing in order to make another. I have made works that are very seductive and have an extreme, elegant aesthetic, but at the same time they describe something that is to me absolutely repellent: a world in which there is no impurity. Ingrid Schaffner, in her essay about your exhibition at the Centro Galego de Arte Contemporanea in Spain, suggests that you are battling modernism by cutting it or disassembling it. We share an admiration of modernism, and our work both celebrates and critiques it. Do you think that you're cutting modernism, disrespecting it, putting impurities into it?

AH Well, one of the most essential tools in the studio is an X-acto knife. The X-acto knife cuts everything into little bits, fragments that I then use to create new images. These are like little bits of modernism all around me. And the fragments have this hopeful connection to some ideal from before. Dislocating and destroying elements results in a hybrid that recalls and at the same time undercuts its origins. My fragmentation provides another view of the contamination or impurity of modernism.

JM So fragmentation is also a critique of modernism, an acknowledgment of its limits?

AH It might show that modernism's potential for universality can never be realized. For me the act of cutting in order to reconfigure, to create new images, is a new, kind of mixed process, because even though I'm indebted to modernism, I need to address in which ways modernism failed and succeeded. By using the language, by reconfiguring with the X-acto knife or the collages or wall paintings, I recall the failed attempt of this thing. But I'm not putting the modernists down, or laughing at them. I'm just realizing that they had an ideal and that ideal fell short of their expectations.

JM Fragmentation is a kind of humanizing process, because it allows for the fact that we are not able to be the complete person, the complete culture, the complete society that we want to be.

AH There is a touching uncertainty about fragments. Fragmentation in my case deals with the fact that the image has a connection to the past, with multiple and contradictory meanings. What I'm trying to do is create a powerful image, a solid structure, out of fragments.



Arturo Herrera, *Night Before Last* (2L), 2003, cut painted paper, 52A/10 x 42A/10.

JM Your work has often been discussed in terms of collage, but it's been asserted that collage connotes an archaic moment. You know, that collage is 1927, not 1997. That seems to me to be a very strange notion, that in the world of sampling and reassembling that we live in, collage is in the past. Whether

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we are talking about music sampling, or the hypertext on the Internet, isn't this all basically collage? There is nothing old-fashioned about taking preexisting material and cutting, gluing, reassembling, partially obliterating—those are really the metaphors and methods of contemporary creativity.

AH Gluing pieces of paper or other materials has been going on since the beginning of time. It really came into the art world as an established form in about 1912 with Braque and Picasso. That's not very long ago. Collage is a relevant and a malleable technique. Sampling and downloading images—you're right, it's really the same thing; it's based on cutting and juxtaposing available elements to get new ones.

JM That brings us to your use of preexisting material. How do you find an image, or a form, or a piece of paper, and how do you take ownership of it or transform it for use in your work?

AH There are so many images available to us now that we have to be very careful which ones we use. The image you choose dictates the meaning of the work that you build with it. You have to consider all the conceptual, the political, the sociological, the cultural and psychological aspects already inherent in the image, and then consider how to make it your own and make it interesting to the viewer.

JM It's tricky to use existing material, because you can never completely leave behind what that material was. Even if you alter it, without completely and literally destroying it at every level, you cannot remove its connection to its past. Material produced for its own purposes has a power that's undeniable.

AH The challenge is, how can an image so recognizable, like a dwarf, or a cartoon character's foot or nose, or the red and blue specific to Snow White's dress, have another meaning that I impose onto it? Is it possible? Can I make something so clear ambiguous? Can I uproot it? In which ways is the baggage that we bring to the new image relevant to the vivid recollections within our cultural context? I am attracted to juxtaposing invented images and readymade images without establishing explicit relations between elements.



Arturo Herrera, *Get It Right (Pink)*, 2005, painted cut paper on paper, 27 1/2 x 27 1/2"

JM You've never just taken a page of a comic book and put that on a wall and said it's a complete artwork. Perhaps it relates to how Duchamp put the mustache on the *Mona Lisa*, in order to have us see it as something else. I think that relates to what you're talking about: Can you take this artifact that has a very clear identity and make it into something ambiguous? And an evocative image as well? In the past you combined "found" imagery with "imagined" imagery. In your latest series, you've tried something different: instead of using preexisting material, you've commissioned a professional illustrator to create something that *looks like* a found image, but isn't; the difference is infinitesimal, as Duchamp called it, but it's there. You've commissioned the illustrator to make something *as if* he were working for the publication industry. Then you proceed to use this material the same way that you have used the found images. In the case of the recent series of collages and wall paintings, *Keep in Touch*, you've started with the commissioned image of a fairy tale-looking castle staircase and painted over it, altered it in a variety of ways.

AH It is important that they were commissioned to be original paintings based on animated films; they're like empty stage sets. Instead of cutting with a blade, the cutting was done when the painter omitted certain parts. So I would say that it's a bit of a contaminated project. These are images that, like you said, have this memory of the actual printed matter. And then they were obliterated by painted

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and printed fragments that I collaged on top.

JM An important distinction is that in the works where you use preexisting material, the artwork is forever tied to its moment, and I don't mean that in a negative way. Even though you have made them very archival, they will age, and those fragments you use that you did not make will age differently from the fragments that you did make. The viewer will also be conceptually drawn back to the particular time frame of these cultural artifacts. Comic books or coloring books, for example, may not exist as we know them in 30 years. With these new pieces, where you commissioned your own artifacts, I don't think that the same thing will happen. They will age, but it will all represent the age of your moment. Does this new way of working indicate a big shift in your work?

AH The collages that the original paintings were commissioned for close this chapter of using highly referential animation backgrounds. By commissioning paintings, by painting my own fragments and destroying the paintings, by cutting the original paintings and the fragments, I took it to the extreme, and you get a very clear project at the end. In Berlin now, I am working mostly with abstraction. For instance, is it possible to have the same kind of impact with nonfigurative images as with images taken from popular culture?

JM That's an exciting challenge. With the way that you combine recognizable elements with a distinct abstract vocabulary, it makes me wonder if you are changing what abstraction can be. To you, what is abstraction?

AH Abstraction has a variety of meanings and its history is extremely complex. For me abstraction is an intuitive grasping of my own reality. This direct experience is variational and open-ended.

JM That's a beautiful answer. When you make abstraction, is it a specific mental and physical procedure? Is it kind of a system or is it a more malleable practice?

AH It is not based on rules or systems. I continue the same way I did early work—by slowly constructing it—but I am no longer dependent on specific or pre-made forms.



Arturo Herrera, *Untitled (Red)*, 2004, paint on cut paper on paper, 59 1/8 x 97 3/4".

JM You told me quite a number of years ago that the process of constructing your images was very painful. You weren't just saying it was hard work. You seemed to be saying that to find these associations, to fragment these things in the right way, was a painful process. At one point, though, you mentioned to me that it had become less painful. Something changed.

AH I think it's because the early collages dealt more with a private history. For these first pieces, I needed to be a part of the work; I was invested with specific shapes relating to a specific narrative, my personal connection to the images. But now the narrative is no longer part of the project. It's no longer linear.

JM But something nonlinear can be also be a narrative.

AH Right. But a nonlinear narrative is about the impact of uncertainty. It's about not going from A to B but choosing somewhere in the middle. And it is precisely this middle that I'm interested in. Maybe what I am trying to do is to connect object-concepts without set boundaries. And that's why it's a kind of forgery. I have a very set structure. But it doesn't have a specific result.

JM Do you view the cut pieces as two- or three-dimensional? I am referring to, for example, the recent works in which there are two layers of paper, one with holes cut in it, and you see through to the other piece of paper. Or the felt works in which parts are removed and the negative space is the central structure of the image. Are they sculptures? They kind of float on and off the wall.

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AH I glued them on the top or on the sides, as a way of collaging them to the wall. They use the wall as a support system.

JM *Collaging* implies a two-dimensional concept.

AH Even though they are physical objects, I see them as flat.

JM The felts especially have a very flat visual quality. They're like Ad Reinhardts, because they don't reflect any light—but even flatter than his paintings are, because the material is not smooth like canvas. But I think the felts go back and forth between painting and sculpture, and I believe that's an important discussion created by art of the past ten years, a dialogue about the breaking down of two- and three-dimensional space. In the past you've made a number of works that are clearly three-dimensional objects. What are your future plans for sculpture?

AH My move to Berlin has taken me in different directions. It has been good for me. I don't really know what is going to happen with sculpture. But I am going to be entering a new phase of working with materials.



At Your Side, 2000, wool felt, 65 x 240".

JM For me some of your most important work has been sculpture, but most people don't think of you as a sculptor. The coiled, extruded pure color piece from your show at the Renaissance Society; the recent bench sculpture at the Whitney. When I first met you, I came into your studio and among all this interesting stuff, you said, "Let me show you this." You picked up a little piece of paper that was crimped and turned—very small, about three inches by three-sixteenths of an inch—and there was a little hole in the wall, and you stuck this little piece of colored paper in there, and the paper formed an "L" hanging out of the wall. I was very impressed. This little sculpture altered the whole wall. It was relatively flat, visually, but it was a *sculpture*.

AH I want to hear about your upcoming project at the Met.

JM Well, it began when you invited me to the Metropolitan Opera, and I saw the chandeliers in the theater in person for the first time. In the auditorium the chandeliers are raised right before the opening of the curtain; they fly up to the ceiling, creating a very dramatic moment. They are their own performance. We were sitting in the cheap seats, so we had a great view of both these moving chandeliers and of the central cluster of giant chandeliers in the ceiling. When we went out to the upper level of the atrium for a glass of wine during intermission, we were right in front of the biggest chandelier, which is a dramatic starburst, something that is both a space-age and a gilded-age construction. There are not that many spaces other than art galleries where you find a spectacularly over-the-top object that is made for its own sake and not as an expression of authority or nationalism. I started to think about how they might become an artwork. Their glitziness certainly reflects the theatrical nature of the space, but one doesn't generally pay so much attention to them. I wanted to reinvent these objects as sculpture. It took a few years before I had the opportunity to make it happen. I have been working for a year on reconfiguring the design of the largest example, the chandelier in the lobby, in collaboration with a cosmologist. I have also learned a lot about the original designs through my visit with the original manufacturers in the Czech Republic and Vienna. My initial impression of the chandeliers was that they look like a Pop image of the Big Bang, the origin of the universe. They

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were actually designed in 1965, the year that the physical evidence of the creation of the universe, the cosmic microwave background radiation, was discovered.

I later learned that when the Viennese chandelier designer, Hans Harald Rath, came to New York to present his designs, Wallace Harrison, the architect, rejected them all. It was a Friday afternoon, and Harrison handed Mr. Rath a book on the origin of the universe and said to come back on Monday with something fresh. Mr. Rath came back with a *Kartoffel*—a potato—with lots of toothpicks sticking out of it, and hung it like a chandelier in Harrison's model of the Metropolitan Opera House. The results look partly like space-age objects, but since they are made out of 18th-century-style crystal elements they also have a very old-fashioned flavor. In this they reflect the whole concept of the Met, which is a funny hybrid of modernist architecture and gilded-age glamour.

AH A wild and fascinating image full of contradictory meanings.

JM Next week I am making a film about the original chandeliers, treating them as abstract objects. The film will pair live-footage images with animated, graphic drawings of scientific diagrams of the origin of the universe. What's funny is that some of these diagrams look just like the chandeliers at the Met. My whole idea turns out to be kind of circular. The sculpture is going to be about 15 feet by 12 feet around; it hangs six inches off the floor. I think that it will be seductive and intimidating at the same time. For me it represents an end of modernism, an explosion of the meaning of progress. It's as if we worked toward an idea of a perfect abstraction of the most highly reduced form and in the end, the last thing we create an image of is the opposite, an explosion, entropy. It proposes a vision of the history of the world, and it's destined to fail, but that doesn't mean it's any less worth trying.