

THEMSELVES, IN MOTION

by Scott Roben

The exhibition opens with an orientation: *From This Day Forward*. Arturo Herrera chose the title years ago, but, like a collage fragment that's been waiting to be picked up, its sense has shifted with the arrival of new ground.

Over the past year, moving forward, even thinking forward, has become anything but a straightforward enterprise. I'm writing from Berlin, where, like so many other places across the globe, we seem to be frozen in place: either in the midst of a lockdown or under the shadow of one that could arrive any time. The frames of reference that used to help me mark time seem to have partly liquified. I think this feeling is familiar to most. Time seems to be running fast and slow, even backwards, if you stand back to survey the wider social landscape. From this angle, Herrera's title has a hint of a phenomenological provocation: what happens to the path forward when spatial and temporal coordinates start to dissipate, when origin and aim seem to be themselves in motion?

Herrera's work makes me think that, at some level, this is a question of collage. Or at least a question that Herrera's brand of collage-making, in which excerpts of found materials fuse with a language of formal abstraction, is uniquely positioned to think through. Accumulation and disorientation, and the loss of clear reference are among his work's underlying features. It defers the apprehension of any singular whole. Instead, dislocated bits of printed matter, no matter where they land, always carry with them a sense of absence, a quality extended by frequent play between positive and negative shape. As the poet Anne Carson - not a collagist in a strict sense but an accomplished trafficker in fragments - might say: "There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of." ¹

I wonder if the suspensions that now permeate day-to-day experience might encourage us to be keener viewers of such work, to be newly receptive to qualities that were already there. Or to hear a quiet urgency in the hum of ambiguities that Herrera composes throughout it, and which keep it in motion. After all, one of composition's greatest potentials is its ability to open a viewer to particular ways of perceiving relations.

¹ Anne Carson interviewed by Will Aitken, "The Art of Poetry No. 88," *The Paris Review*, No. 171, Fall 2004.

In Herrera's case, composition is always also decomposition - a word that itself feels inevitably of the moment. If decomposition can be seen to reflect the social, political, or even environmental dissolution in which we find ourselves implicated, however, then it should also be said that there's a flip-side to it: a reparative possibility. From this angle, the question then becomes: why and what to decompose, and what to do with the pieces that result?

In one ear, I hear Herrera himself, quoted in the announcement for this exhibition: "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?" In the other, I hear, like a far-off echo, the writer and theorizer of Relation, Edouard Glissant. Born in Martinique and steeped in French culture that arrived in that land by way of colonization, Glissant recognized a need to decompose the mythos of root-based identity, imagined to stem from a single source and carrying the danger of totalitarian thought. In its place he offers a picture of a much more intricate and open-ended network of social and cultural entanglements, one that can't be easily deciphered: a condition he calls Relation.

The difficulty is that trying to map or explain Relation, which is constantly in flux, would mean imposing back on it the logic of the monolithic root. Instead, Glissant makes a call for poetics as a way of approaching the imagination of this concept. In his seminal text, *Poetics of Relation*, he offers a de-scription that reads almost like a collagist's manual: the poetics of Relation "senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms the thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion." "Destructure these facts," he continues, shifting into the imperative, "declare them void, replace them, reinvent their music: totality's imagination is inexhaustible ..."² Of the countless applications and take-aways that could follow from this call, one is a case for the productive possibility of taking a thing apart - for decomposing.

Viewers of the exhibition are invited to page through a copy of *From This Day Forward*, an artist book that Herrera produced in 56 unique editions, by hand. Each is composed of parts of preexisting books the artist collected that have been unbound, their variously sized pages remixed, and bound anew. Despite Herrera's title, each book can be read forwards, or backwards, or in any other sequence. Every page has been silkscreened with a unique shape in black ink. The matte black interrupts the polyphony of the book's remixed pages, embedding itself on each glossy sheet with a silence that seems to emanate from another dimension. The sixteen collages that accompany the book in the exhibition build on its logic. When turning the book's pages you're actually building two stacks, side-by-side; the irregularly sized pages fall variously on top of one

² Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 95.

another, creating a cascade of margins. The collages transpose this phenomenon to the plane: each one emerges from a stack of elements that narrow toward its center (or two adjacent central points, like double spreads of a book). Yet if the book is held in motion by the continual possibility of turning the page, the collages do this by promising and then refusing the stability of the center: they coalesce and come undone at the same time.

The shapes that figure in both the book and collages sit in some kind of middle space, existing as at once non-referential forms and discrete, brushstroke-like gestures. This is in keeping with a hallmark of Herrera's image-making in general, which approaches and even incorporates painting while always remaining slightly oblique to it. Painting finds its way into the works in the exhibition as cut-out silhouettes of brushstrokes that suggest fluidity and velocity; as fragments of actual painterly incident that become collage pieces; and through reproductions of paintings, culled from monographs or auction catalogues. As it appears in Herrera's works, painting often behaves like a fragment itself. It makes its appearance at the same time that it signals its own absence. In this way the medium is able to join in the fray of relations, like another cut-out passing through the pictorial field - leaving behind spaces where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of.

In their empty flatness, the black forms marking each page of Herrera's book are a case in point. They act like placeholders open to projection. There's a pleasure to be had in following the metamorphoses that take shape from one page to the next. Leafing through them recalls for me Matisse's famous late work *The Swimming Pool*, in which flat blue cut-out forms on a long, horizontal white ground become swimmers, leaping and diving in and out of water, their abstracted forms expanding and condensing within the surrounding negative space. Yet a crucial distinguishing feature of Herrera's *From This Day Forward* is that the shifts of its black shapes occur in lockstep with their shifting grounds. In fact, these changing grounds - the excerpted spreads of cookbooks, exhibition catalogues, ballet instruction books, and popular magazines - play a determining role in the sense (the feeling, really) of the contours spread across them. The grounds don't just change in formal terms but in cultural ones as well - from erudite to kitsch, vintage to contemporary, instructional to promotional. They offer suggestions of scale, orientation, and depth that the empty black shapes lack on their own. Precisely how shape and ground combine in each instance is suggestive of a range of relationships unfolding in a present-continuous tense: obscuring, blotting out, entwining, embedding, extending, claiming, hovering, redacting, rhyming, eliding, and so on.

Turning the book's pages brings an often overlooked truth to mind: that the identity of any shape isn't firmly rooted or fixed, but contingent, mutable, entwined within the specifics of context. This won't come as a surprise to repeat viewers of Herrera's work, in which contoured forms often

reappear from one piece to the next - including in this show, where some from the books have been blown up to the scale of a wall mural. In fact the relationality of shape isn't so unlike the more familiar relationality of color that Josef Albers devoted his career to elaborating, and which Herrera deftly employs through-out his work.³ Shapes, like colors, are slippery things, marked (to borrow Albers' formulation) by a "dis-crepancy between physical fact and psychic effect."⁴ How one person sees a form might be ultimately inexplicable or opaque to another. If cultural context is also a determining factor in perceiving shape, as *From This Day Forward's* changing figure/ground relationships suggest, then the kind of relationality that Albers famously posited moves a bit closer to Glissant's upper-case Relationality.

Maybe this is all just a roundabout way of saying that the pull of Herrera's work is grounded in its interweaving of formal elements - contour, color, gesture - with the cultural specificity of the materials from which his objects are made. There's a complex give-and-take between these aspects that's easy to experience but hard to pin down. Entering Hererra's work doesn't mean trying to grasp it as a whole but becoming sensitive to the texture and give of its weave. In this sense, encountering his compositions is not so distant from following the unfolding movements of a dance, observing and tracing the ongoing shape-shifting of a body in space.

Which moments stick in your mind, and which recede in memory, is probably highly personal. But I'll come to an end with one that sticks for me - a collage on the wall, an all-over tangle of fragments of gestural, painterly marks that opens partially at the center onto the torso of a male model posed in a German underwear ad. The face of this anonymous, Adonis-like figure is obscured by a cut-out, his hips draped in contrapposto. I think again of Carson, who explains how the Greek word *eris* actually denotes what is absent, and how, by classical convention, desire is a circuit triangulating between three structural components - "lover, beloved, and that which comes between them."⁵ The shapes that surround and cover the faceless figure - which twist and vibrate against one another, build up and peel away - ambiguously seem to fulfill all three roles at once, until they're cut off at picture's edges by the rasterized, pink flushes of a blown up photographic print. If absence is usually tinged with melancholy, here such a sense is mitigated by the picture's bright reds, violets, greens, and yellows, all of which vibrate with warm, frenetic energy. It calls to mind the way that absences both separate and connect - which is, somehow, another peculiar theme of these times.

³ The connection of shapes to Albers' color theory is raised by Amy Sillman in "Shapes," *The OG*, vol. 14, Spring 2020.

⁴ Josef Albers, *The Interaction of Color* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013), 2.

⁵ Anne Carson, *Eros the Bittersweet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 36.