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HUU interviews FEDERICO HERRERO

HUU: How did you get into painting?

FH: I have no memory of the very beginning. But my mother always told me that when I was a little child, I was always on the floor, drawing and painting. Since I was a kid, I've had this very strong connection to painting: in school, in High School, I've always been either painting or drawing. So I think this is something that's inside of me.

HUU: So everything started long before you went to art school

FH: Totally. But I've never been to an art school because in my family there are no artists. They are all engineers or into numbers so it had been, not a fight, but I couldn't decide to go in art school. Painting was seen as something that I could do only as a hobby.

HUU: So what did you study?

FH: Lots of things, a bit of architecture and the last thing I studied was education. I wanted to become a professor in an elementary school. I decided that I wanted to do that because I've always liked the idea of working with children. In a way, I wanted to be able to introduce art into the educational system. And I'm still interested in that

HUU: To change the system?

FH: Yes but at the time I thought it was better to be inside the system to operate. Not I'm outside and things can be done differently I guess.

HUU: And what was your first show as a professional artist, so to speak?

FH: My first solo exhibition was one year and a half ago in a gallery in Costa Rica, n what is basically the only gallery that works there. It was surely a great experience for me.

HUO: What kind of work did you do for this exhibition?

FH: What you see on those slides is very close to what I was doing then. Its more or less always the same idea, in pictorial terms.

HUO: You said that you didnt come from art school. So youre more in an autodidactic approach. What kind of influences do you have? When I saw your painting for the first time, in Venice, and this incredibly big wall-painting of yours done in a very improvised way and developed afterwards, I wondered what kind of influences, what kind of painters, were behind this approach?

FH: At the beginning, I think I was very much influenced by Roberto Matta, in a very basic way, by his mentality about painting, and by such things that he said like just start with the white and then it will appear. When I start to work, these are the things that I do, in this very improvised way.

HUO: Would you also say in a self-organized way?

FH: Somehow, in a fluent way, with the idea in mind that things will start to go if you let them flow. When I began to be much aware of contemporary art, I was influenced a great deal by Gabriel Orozco for example.

HUO: What aspect of his work influenced you?

FH: Im not very sure, but I think it was the process of being more sensible on which his approach is based. And also the way he uses the reality as a way not to create but to take. Instead of making a sculpture, you point at it. I was very interested in this particular way of working. And Im still interested in that. I began to think about how this could be directed towards painting because painting has always been my motto. So Ive looked a lot at the lines in the streets, at all the painted signs. And for example at the yellow no parking line which I began to see as a monochrome painting. And also at the workers, who are hired as painters, who paint these monochrome yellow lines in the streets.

HUO: So its the whole street that you see like a painting, like Maiakovski?

FH: Yes, but I was focused on this idea of the monochrome painting a lot. For example in this museum you hire people to paint the walls white. They are monochrome painters but they are hired as painters. Its interesting when you think of the place that they occupy in society.

HUO: To go back to Matta, what I found very interesting about Matta is the

articulation in his work between construction and automatism. On one hand you could describe his painting as an automatic painting (like there is automatic writing) but on the other hand one should be aware of the fact that he was trained as an urbanist and architect. So his whole work is somehow between construction and automatism. And this is something that immediately came to my mind when I saw your wall painting in Venice. It looked as if the painting had written itself in the space and in the same time as if it was very controlled and elaborated.

FH: These paintings are like, not a prophecy, but in some way something you ask for. Like Matta who speaks about these worlds, these other realities that are happening. I'm doing signs about situations that are not going to happen and then I place them in the street. These are like publicity for fictional things. Something very strange happened one day: what I had announced happened to me later on. This situation is linked to the situation of the painters in the caves, to the shaman painting the animals they were going to hunt.

HUO: And about these fictional signs you put in the streets, are they kinds of urban disturbances or détournements? Are they designed to mislead the public to some kind of fictionality?

FH: Yes and then this fictionality happens like when I was announcing some type of situations that really happened to me. Say if I put something on a certain day announcing something for a week after, the week after I remember what I had announced this day and realize that it really happened. I think that Matta's work also deals with this issue.

HUO: It's not very surprising that you also mentioned Orozco because it really is the idea of using the street like a studio. It's something that Maiakovski also developed, something that came out of the rhetorics of the Russian Revolution. And you've also painted on mobile structures such as buses in Japan. Can you tell me about these different interactions with the street as a studio, a post-studio practice, that you've had in Costa Rica and then in Japan or now in Paris?

FH: I think that it is equally important to work in a studio, to make a painting on canvas, and to work in the street. On a canvas, I feel that the restrictions of the frame, these kinds of limits, are important. And it's important as long as you can break it also. As long as you can say: it's maybe more useful to cancel yourself. The idea of canceling yourself is very important for me. You can cancel your own ideas, your own beliefs. You destroy them. In the street the main idea is to develop a state of consciousness or sensibility through which you realize that you don't need to go to a museum or

to go to any other place to see art or to look for art. Its much more a situation in which you can develop a sensorial aspect on yourself. You take rather than you construct. I feel that it is maybe unnecessary to construct so much anymore. I have no problem with the idea of doing a painting here that is going to be erased in two months. Its not so necessary to build up new things, and much more to try to arrange them somehow. Because there are so many already done. In this society, there are so many objects, so many situations. I feel its much more necessary to arrange these objects or situations in new ways.

HUO: You dont want to add new objects to a world already full of objects, nor paintings.

FH: This is the very reason why I have no problem with the idea of erasing my paintings. There are so many paintings already. As for Japan, we have worked on community buses in Tokyo. We painted the entire bus all around and then it operated like a travelling painting across the city. The idea was all the more interesting that in some ways the city is very conservative. And many people asked why someone from Costa Rica was doing this. I really liked this exchange of viewpoints and sensibilities. And it was the perfect way to break with the idea of the painting as static and inside-based genre.

HUO: What did you paint on the buses?

FH: For the first time, I have been drawing these signs on a computer. It was a great experience for me also to be introduced to a new media. And the people from Tokyo have produced a printed version from these signs and then they put it inside and all over the bus. But what I wanted to say is that I get influenced only after Ive left the place. I didnt feel the influence of Tokyo right there in Tokyo but now that I am in Paris doing this mural painting. At the moment I am probably thinking more about Tokyo than about Paris. But then, when I will leave for India

HUO: Its a kind of contextual delay.

FH: Yes. Its too soon you just cannot go to a place and work under the immediate influence of its environment, there is no such thing. You have to wait until you are actually affected by what youve experienced or seen. In my case, its better to wait until the next step.

HUO: Are there some other example of post-studio works?

FH: In Puerto Rico, I have been working on and with the sounds of the city and of the streets. Recording and making different type of sounds. And I also did sculptures that are related to the forms that I see in the street. These

are
sculptures that operate like transit or traffic signs. I usually like to
create
new signs that dont really have a function in the place where I put them.

HUO: And you also did some billboards or rather anti-billboards?

FH: Well I dont paint on billboards, I am just documenting them. Its
different
from the signs, for which there are some that I document and some that I
paint
myself. This project started while walking in the street I noticed that
most of
these signs needed to be repainted because they were too old and the painting
had
almost disappeared. So Ive renewed or repaired some of the signs in the
street.
I somehow re-functionalized those signs.

HUO: This brings us back to what you said before about the fact that you
didnt
want to add new objects to a world already full of objects. And as you are
repairing signs, there is a medical analogy here, its also about healing,
isnt
it?

FH: Yes, somehow, because if I dont do it probably another person will do
it.
Im just working in the interstice. Ive also worked in the bathroom of the
Museum of contemporary art in Costa Rica. The bathroom of the museum was
very
old and very dark and disgusting. It was incredible that there was such a
place
in a museum. So similarly to other works, my main intention first was to
rebuild and to repair and to repaint the space. Ive thought that I would do
it
in a very clinical sense, without painting any forms or signs. But through
the
process I realized that it had a very nice shape, it looked almost like a
church, and so I decided to do a mural on the ceiling. And it came out to
be
very funny because in the end you have the sensation that you are in a
church
but you are in a bathroom.

HUO: Is the notion of interdisciplinarity an important notion for you? Did
the
fact that you were trained as an architect influence your work?

FH: I studied very little of architecture and so I wouldnt say that I was
trained as an architect. But nevertheless I can link this feeling of being
able
or capable to sense the realities, to be sensible to things that are
dealing
with architectural concerns to a true interest for architecture. We are
always
dealing with architecture in our daily life, either inside or outside. This
work that consist of rearrangements between elements in the street has
obviously a lot to do with an interest for architecture. As for other
disciplines, like I told you, Im very interested in educational matters. It
is
maybe another aspect of the influence of Gabriel Orozco or Rikrit
Tiravanija on
my work. When they do these things with the total reality, when for example
Gabriel Orozco makes his space out of a parking lot, these relations with

daily

life as something that you can take. That's something that I sense I am very open to in the future. I want to develop this in the future. I'd like to work with a school and I'd like to be not capable to distinguish whether it is a work of art, like other aspects of my work, or something else, something very real.

HUO: It's the idea of the blurring of art and life.

FH: Yes. I think that the issue is not the issue of the connection with another discipline but it's to be able to work in another discipline in a very functional way. About teaching, I had not at all the feeling that I was teaching art but I had the feeling that I was teaching science or mathematics but just in another way, in a more functional way.

HUO: Can you think about an unrealized project or utopic project that you have?
A project that would be a kind of dreamland.

FH: I've been having some small and also some not so small experiences with things in the space, in the sky. Every time I look at the sky I can see things happening. As a project, it would be around this idea or feeling that these things are going to happen in a stronger way in the future. In this area where I live in Costa Rica, it is quite a strong place for UFOs and such things. And I'm absolutely crazy about the question of what's going on up there or not necessarily so much up there because I feel it's already going on everywhere. So in a way many of my ideas are beginning to be connected to this idea of communication with these people who are visiting us. And this is maybe something that also brings us back to Matta. When I watch the shapes of the beings that he is painting, and also when I watch the pictorial documentation of various people who lived in caves or in the woods, like the very complex drawings of this man who lived isolated for many years in the woods in North America who was portraying these beings, I can find many similarities and it was clear that they didn't know each other's work. I think that we will see these things in a much clearer way very soon. So it's not necessarily a project but something that I look towards or that I look forward to.