

TEXTS

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*PAINTING BEYOND PAINTING. A conversation between Breixo Viejo and Adrián Navarro.*

*"Implosion is the process by which objects are destroyed collapsing upon themselves, concentrating matter and energy"*

Breixo Viejo: Right now you're working on two sets of works. On the one hand, pictures in which the images appear framed in an oval; on the other, a series of four paintings of spheres.

Adrián Navarro: Both sets are the main feature of my most recent exhibition, which I call 'Implosion'. The satisfaction of these works arises from finding a pictorial space that is independent from the orthogonal architecture of painting. In the ovals, the observer maintains a cinemascopic experience with the work, through the presence of the frame which, instead of being rectangular, is curved. I'm interested in maximising the vision from afar of the picture, reaffirming the illusory condition of painting. However, the function of these frames or windows is to precipitate the observer's vision into the pictorial space, absorbing and channelling it towards the interior of the picture. The Spheres are a step closer to the three-dimensional experience. The painting is trapped inside a virtual container: a weightless, spherical volume. The distance between the observer and the work becomes irretrievable, in other words, the observer remains literally outside the realm of the painting. Perhaps in a slightly ironic way. After all, what is the pictorial space like? It's a sphere. Observing the world is a circular experience...

BV: And producing a painting is a process similar to observing the world. Your Spheres project out of the painting via the optical effect which the geometric figure itself generates. I'm convinced that, when they're on show to the public, people will go up to the painting to see if you have cambered the canvas. But they also present an image seen from behind the eye. The eye is like a sphere which, for a short moment, serves to contain the image of the world.

AN: The sphere serves as a container and a filter through which you can make out what's happening inside. It's a way of showing that the intimacy degree of a painting is relative, that there is always an observer, someone alien to the reality it represents, who looks from afar. Sphere 01 came to me when I decided to encapsulate the painting and render visible the container of this illusion. Taking a step back, looking from afar, in order to observe the nature of the absolute pictorial space. The observer remains completely outside the painting; I let him glimpse through at what's happening inside the painting, so that he understands that it's an illusion. In order to incorporate the observer within the painting, this enigmatic place, I have to expel him first.

BV: Sphere 02 operates in different ways: in the first place, it creates an optical illusion of depth; in the second place, it represents an internal explosion of colour at close proximity; and in the third place,

it enshrouds the immediacy of this movement with a white filter, which in turn creates distance between the observer and the colour. You create three directions in the painting for the eye of the observer, who looks round the painting as if it were a sculptural space.

AN: In Sphere 02 the container is covered by a latticework of circles allowing you to glimpse through and make out what's inside. This internal explosion of colours which you mention is related to research that I've been carrying out in parallel, based on installations with strips of cloth suspended from the ceiling of my studio.

BV: ...a world inhabited by strips of colour and arabesques moving freely between the paintings.

AN: I'm interested in the experience of observing the colours, textures and prints on the strips of cloth floating weightlessly in space. The arabesque formed by the strips of cloth functions as a reference point and creates a rhythmic structure in the montage of the installation. In seeking the same effect, I've transferred this structure into the painting by means of digital screen-printing. In the same way, the installation which I did in Utrophia Space, London, along with the experimental theatre artist Miguel Guzmán, turned out to be very interesting. The idea was to generate, through improvisation, a character to inhabit these strips of colour. I realized that in the end, his movements and gestures worked in a similar way to my movements and my gestures in the painting. And that Alma, his alter ego, was the analogous character inhabiting my sphere, from which he'll never be able to escape.

BV: This impossibility of escape is reminiscent of the claustrophobic spaces of film-makers such as Jancsó or Kubrick, who have also researched the expressive power of white.

AN: The idea of overlaying the painting with this flickering halo arises from prior work, such as White Light (2007), which was literally bathed in a series of swirls of white paint. As a next step, in 2008 I did a painting which I called White Light (Sphere), where I fragmented the light into a series of points that suggested the shape of a sphere. Producing Spheres as a series has arisen from this.

BV: Throughout the history of art, the sphere has been related to the ideal of perfection which, in turn, has often been linked to the physical power of light.

AN: There are fascinating cases in the history of painting of this physical power of light. Manet's painting 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergères', with those two lights that hover mysteriously, beaming in on the waitress and producing astonishing light reverberations.

BV: A great painting is one which presents the most complex enigma, both in terms of space and time. In music and film, as a listener and spectator, you have to follow time in a sequential manner. In painting, however, time seems to pass simultaneously or at any rate, proceeds from the movement of the eye as it travels across the distinct parts of the painting.

AN: As a painter, when you stop to look at your work-in-progress, you have to become an active observer, never passive, and that's when time begins to function. There's a time hierarchy, stemming from the actions which happen inside the painting, within the pictorial space. A painting

where depth is activated through time intends the gaze to pass through filters, through the gaps between the figures. My paintings are conceived on the basis of superimposed layers which generate perspective. Your gaze has to traverse these and lose itself within the painting, and this requires the active participation of the eye.

BV: Maybe the influence of Mondrian weighs too heavily on certain contemporary painters. Mondrian reduced the spatial scope of the painting to a maximum in order to develop the temporal. But today certain abstract artists reduce the spatial without activating time within the painting, leaving the work empty of form and content.

AN: Mondrian is an artist who develops the two-dimensional in painting and that makes me think of the attitude towards space in contemporary abstraction, the excessive way of thinking that everything happens on the surface of the painting. But what does that actually mean? Painting is an illusion, and its surface is just one plane of the many planes the mind can create. Abstraction today tends to disregard any trace of spatial perspective. The surface is worked at with great intensity, but there is no depth of space. The function of tradition is maybe the following: to demonstrate how painting can work at different spatial levels.

BV: Tradition also shows us that what is successful in one art-form is not so successful in another. One common fault in film is the excess of literality. The novel that is too similar to script also fails, as does the poem which becomes a short story. Maybe the relation between different art-forms is never one of conjunction, but only of approximation. There are points of contact, places where one art-form takes over from another. In what contact zone would your painting be placed? Firstly, there is an approximation in your paintings to dance...

AN: ...and secondly towards architecture. I trained as an architect. That's where my interest in space comes from. At first it took me a long time to understand the relation between architecture and painting. How can my arm cross the pictorial space? How can I embrace it? It's complicated and, all in all, necessary: we need to approach space once more from painting, not surrender it to the two-dimensional. Painting beyond painting is that which abandons the field of the two-dimensional plane in order to move on to the three-dimensional and, ultimately, to the virtual plane.

BV: How do your paintings relate to scale?

AN: Scale is related to vision. I perceive the work as a fragment where I'm cutting out a segment of reality or a distant view of that reality. In Implosion I take on the view from afar, although, paradoxically, the Spheres relate to the individual on a human scale, they contain it, thus functioning on a scale of 1:1 with the observer. This view from afar is activated when I consider that the work can stand alone, that it has its own life. It's then that I situate myself outside of the painting; I literally remove myself from the pictorial space and observe it.

BV: Why?

AN: Because when I act as an observer, I can perceive what I have painted with greater precision. I think that painting is a representation of ourselves. Man is an alienated being who thinks he is free. The same thing happens in painting, it is a free and expressive medium whose objective is to convey a view of the world where that freedom is not possible. This is the paradox which I try to represent. We are trapped in

an invisible network of circumstances and relations. That's why those works that are painted all over, including at the edges, seem so obscene to me. Painting the corners is like saying 'look how free I am'. I can understand it if you want to depict a fragment of reality. But not when it renders a false impression of the world in its totality.

BV: In the paintings with oval frames, there is a reference to the image seen through binoculars, to observing the world through a lens...

AN: The few landscapes Morandi ever painted, he did using binoculars. The same thing happens with those painters who used the camera obscura as an aid, such as Vermeer. Everything about them is a bit unreal, because of the lenses. Painting has often been understood as a window within a window. That's why so many painters have included windows in their paintings. And behind the window, a marvellous landscape is often represented. In these cases painting is always presented as an illusion. In the twentieth century, there has been a tendency to deny that illusion. The painting as a spatial container, as developed by perspective throughout the history of painting, is suddenly disregarded, and everything has to expand as if the painting were an infinite space. But that notion of total space is false. That's why in the Spheres I don't do an explosion, but an implosion, an inward explosion.

BV: There are historical reasons for this disregard of perspective. The twentieth century was the bloodiest of centuries: two world wars, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the napalm bombs, the Balkan war... It's as if history had slammed the door and shuttered the window. The denial of the three-dimensional arises. It's an expression of suffocation. I think of Rothko, in his series of black paintings, and how he then decides to open up a horizon. Maybe he was conscious that, after having blackened the space, he needed to reclaim it.

AN: Rothko's paintings can be embraced insofar as the forms inhabiting his works float within them. Space tends to be disregarded in those painters obsessed with surface. This emphasis on surface produces wonderful sensations, but prevents the gaze from penetrating beyond this wall of sensations. Abstract painting is on its way to becoming an opaque wall and dying of asphyxiation in the process.

BV: Richter's painting presents this denial of pictorial space through an ironic reflection on the photographic image. There's a small painting by Degas in the National Gallery, the Portrait of Princess Pauline of Metternich, whose face is painted in a scale of greys with a tinge of yellow against an odd background, a weft of floral patterns. There you can see that Degas doesn't paint photography, but what photography does to the image of this woman. It's a painting about the photographic act and retains a degree of veiled criticism regarding photography as an artistic medium.

AN: Painting often comes dangerously close to representing ghosts which fade away. Excess of imagination is always decadent. That's the reason why I believe a connection to the appearance of the subject is necessary. This link exists in all my works: photography is my reference point to the plane of reality, one of the many planes which make up the perception of the pictorial work.

BV: Photography deals with appearance as a register, relieving painting of this duty.

AN: It's the gaze that we'll never be able to free ourselves from. There is no way to represent the gaze without the eye. It's impossible. The eye is an organ, let's say, it's already abstract. There is no metaphor for the eye in painting. Anyhow, the isolated eye that hovers in space would become a metonym for the subject portrayed. A fascinating topic, the energy field of the gaze...

BV: ...painting does not seem to exist without this field. There is no painting without the gaze of the painter, or of the observer, or of the painting itself which mirrors the gaze. A trivial object gives nothing in return, nor is it alive and nor does it have depth. It's flat. The painter tries to make visible what is invisible; he gives visual form to something that only he has seen. He has placed himself at a crossroads: giving life to the inert and rendering visible what cannot be seen.

AN: The invisible is inexplicable. Obviously, you can theorize and say what you've done in hindsight. What we've said about painting being encapsulated as a metaphor for ourselves trapped in a virtual web from which there is no escape, is just a suggestion for a possible interpretation. I can't say what I think of contemporary man; I can only try and convey an image of his condition.

BV: And colour?

AN: Colour is a theme that is too intuitive in me. I can verbalize my ideas on other themes, but with colour I can't. It's very tricky; colour for me is... too quick. I can't describe it. It's too difficult to describe.

BV: But you do tend to use light colours, pale colours, like pastels...

AN: I don't like using thick colour. I make sure it's a very thin film, letting the light shine through. The more luminous it is, the better. But that's as far as I can go on colour. The process by which a world of sensations is created in painting is complicated and very strange. You come to painting, not on account of its usefulness, it's more a question of coincidence. You get ill, you start to draw, somebody gives you a box of watercolours... And then, through colour, you start discovering sensations. Sensations which, ultimately, you only get through painting; you couldn't do it through any other medium. If you could, painting would have disappeared long ago.

BV: Questions of technique often eclipse what is really important in art. Technique is essential, but it's infuriating to talk just about that area as if mastering technique was the ultimate aim.

AN: I think you have to paint spontaneously. It's like dancing: music enters good dancers through their fingers and toes, and they start dancing in a natural way. For me, painting flows harmoniously. Anyway, if you master technique, you become a virtuoso and being a virtuoso is fantastic. If you never become a virtuoso, there's always going to be something missing. Technique helps you to overcome this problem.

BV: In one of the first films I saw as a boy, Scaramouche by George Sydney, there's a fencing master who says: 'The handle of the foil is like a bird: if you hold on too tight, you'll suffocate it; if you don't hold on tight enough, it'll break free and fly off'. In art, the materials, if you're too free, will riot. But don't be too tight either as you might kill the work.

AN: Great painters know how to achieve this balance, this harmony of contrasts. They're capable of painting, letting themselves go with the gesture, both in a natural and organic way. That's where the difficulty lies. It's like walking the tightrope. Each artist does his own research. De Kooning, for example, is a generous painter as he teaches you to use your body, your movements, in the painting, without having to refer to any type of anatomy, which would be tedious. Feeling before seeing. His works that most influence me are the lighter paintings, in turn influenced by Matisse. I'm referring to his latest works that he produced in the 1980s, when the body becomes landscape and his classical rough texture turns into a silkier one. By thinning down the surface, the line, suddenly, floats free and begins to dance. I suppose that in this sense De Kooning is a master fencer.

BV: I wonder what Eisenstein would have thought if he could have seen what film is able to do today, if he could see how the planets disintegrate in science fiction films..

AN: I'm curious to see how people will be painting in fifty years time with children who've only seen computer screens and virtual drawings. How are these kids going to be painting? I'd like to see that. Maybe we'll have to put on glasses and sensors to see their virtual paintings, to penetrate their world of three-dimensional sensations..

Breixo Viejo is an experimental filmmaker and video artist currently living and working in London.

This dialogue took place in Adrian Navarro's studio located in an old brick factory in the London borough of Hackney Wick on the 21st August 2009.