

Masquerade

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There will be time, there will be time

To prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet

—T.S. Eliot

Like all languages, works of art involve codes. Sometimes we choose to unlock them outright. For example, when a viewer steps back from one of Claude Monet's *Nymphéas* paintings to realize that the thickly clotted brush marks are ciphers that, viewed at the right distance, become flowers, rippling water and so forth. This is one way we respond to the creative process that E. H. Gombrich in his landmark survey, *The Story of Art* (1950), described as "matching and making"—a progressive refinement by Western artists of the pictorial schemata used to achieve a representation of reality. At other times, the codes seem more cryptic or arbitrary, as in "analytical" Cubism, where a linear scroll shape becomes a convention that stands for a violin. Going still further, the play between signifier and signified can turn altogether ambiguous or opaque. Think of Francis Bacon's brutally smeared impasto facture and Jackson's Pollock's skeins of enamel paint. Are they figurative shapes manqué, symbols or just material entities unto themselves? The answer is they may be all or none of these things insofar as they possess no inherent "meaning"; instead, what they denote hinges upon their context and the interrelationships between the signs. This precept has been in debate ever since the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) argued that the structural connections, notably the differences, between terms generate signification. In a nutshell, the word "good" has no meaning without "bad". Such binary oppositions structure José Ciria's art.

The notion of binary oppositions may at first suggest simple polarities, an either/or situation. The twist is that nothing looks further from this cut-and-dried antithetical scenario than Ciria's complexities, in which the very terms that he orchestrates, let alone their colloquy, are shifting, ambivalent and paradoxical. Rather than either/or choices, his progressions are more like—to recall Dore Ashton's neat phrase for Philip Guston's alternations between abstraction and representation—a "yes/but..." momentum. The visual lexicon circles back on itself in permutations that change even as it remains the same. Moreover, at the root of codes stands a disjunction. Namely, that a code's superficies are objective, regular and impersonal (letters, numbers, gestures, etcetera), whereas the content that is encoded often tends, almost by definition, to be subjective, charged and personal. Otherwise, what is the point of resorting to any code?

Thus, the monotonous tables of letters generated by the wartime Enigma machine held secrets that boded existential matters of life and death. Ciria's theories and even his work have a touch of this polarization. Like the ciphers of a code, they appear obsessive and repetitious, a secondary revision of less orderly initial material. We intuit this aspect from the tone of, say, a single sentence in the artist's observation about his recent output: "Letting the series unfold in three blocks of works, like a kind of polynomial with three discursive possibilities as a first round in my hungry return to abstraction." A single word, "hungry," latent with overtones of desire and urges, speaks volumes. Encoded into Ciria's cool xonomysystems is a strongly emotional life world.

Even before Ciria left his spacious Manhattan studio on La Guardia Place in 2012 to return to Madrid, his imagery had grown darker. This shift occurred especially in his Rorschach Heads series from 2009 onwards. Although Ciria had featured "heads" before—sporadically and as early as 2000, then again in 2005—the Rorschach ones were unprecedentedly alarming. Indeed, the art historian and psychoanalyst Donald Kuspit has justifiably called these grimacing physiognomies "an abstract expression of anxiety—a catastrophe of consciousness (1)". Underlying this change were personal circumstances that made the Heads into a work of mourning. To wit, Ciria's father died from a brain tumor in 2010—an event that inevitably traumatized the artist—and the previous year he had visited Easter Island and was struck by its monumental, watchful heads. Watching would become a leitmotif, while the motif of the head, the very seat of human thought and life, has grown inseparable from its nemesis, death. Relinquishing his New York studio three years later added a further melancholic weight. The installation, *My Father's Jacket* (2012) epitomized this burgeoning toll of distress and recollection. Successive shots of the Rorschach Heads are projected on an outsize black suit jacket. The resultant uncanny mise-en-scène is reminiscent of the refrain that closes W.B. Yeats's poem, "The Apparitions" (1939):

Because of the increasing Night

That opens her mystery and fright.

Fifteen apparitions have I seen;

The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.

The manner in which the Rorschach Heads metamorphose in this installation and throughout the series overall—from mostly transfixed fright to the occasional grim grin—conveys a powerful effect of psychic flux, as though watching were yoked to looking within the self. Here, historical forces also enter the equation.

2009 was no ordinary year. It witnessed the global impact of the economic recession accompanied on an international scale with widespread social unrest. In returning to Madrid in 2012, Ciria was re-settling in a changed country from the one which he had left in 2005. No longer in a boom, Spain

was (and still is) witnessing massive unemployment and frequent street demonstrations, an increasingly conservative climate in which social conflict between the forces of authority and those of protest were, as in Greece, exacerbated (indeed, even I myself recently had an ugly encounter in Madrid with the policia nacional). Such is the background to Ciria's recent works. When the motifs from the Rorschach Heads, which already resembled cut-outs, were literally excised to create props for the street actions in New York that Ciria photographed and titled *Lost Identities* (2012)—in which people hold these artificial faces in front of them like masks—Ciria perhaps came close to a kind of agitprop.

Yet we should not for a moment imagine that Ciria is a latter-day Edvard Munch or William de Kooning, let alone a Madrileño version of Georg Grosz. Perish the thought. On the contrary, he is a deeply conceptual creator, alert to the semiotic components—among them lines, grids, planes, gestural techniques and the chromatic spectrum—that constitute the building blocks of art. This is why the torpedo or jagged-angled presence that recurs throughout Ciria's paintings and especially the *Masks of the Glance* series does not perform as an unbridled gestural mark à la de Kooning but, rather, connotes a disciplined painterly reconstruction of such expressionist swathes. Ciria likens them to a phosphene, "the light sensations that remain on the retina after one has looked into the light (2)". In other words, they are traces, residues. Why else is a 2011 series titled *Abstract Memory*? The reason is because it enacts, at one level, a retroactive meditation, a critique of abstraction. Traces and retroaction lead to the next novelty in Ciria's progression: photography.

As Susan Sontag and other cultural critics have frequently observed, photography is a melancholy medium. It freezes the past, turning what is absent into a presence that is, nevertheless, imbued with an aura of loss, life gone lifeless. Sontag explains the phenomenon thus: "Such images are indeed able to usurp reality because first of all a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real; it is also a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask (3)". Enter Ciria's next series, the *Psychopomps*—begun in 2001 yet now expanded in their imagistic scope and no longer based on advertisements—in which photography plays a key role.

In the *Psychopomps* oil painting overlays digital prints on canvas. Hence they are a species of collage, a method uniting different media in which the process of layering is fundamental. Some of the titles of the *Masks of the Glance* already presaged the atmosphere of the *Psychopomps*. Think of *The Hole*, *Nine Windows*, *Narrow Days* and *I Hear Voices In My Head*—in short, abasement, vacancy, constriction and psychic fantasy. Likewise, the reign of King Ubu in at least three of the small *La Guardia Place* collages on cardboard of 2008—an allusion to the titular anti-hero in Alfred Jarry's 1908 play of the same name—signaled the rise of the absurd (the only kingdom over which

Ubu presides is anarchy), the polymorphous (he is shaped like some cross between a man and a vegetable) and infantile impulses (bodily excretions abound in the play) in Ciria's stagecraft. The former speckles and wedges of luminescent orange-red in the two earlier series develop, in the Psychopomps, into violent painterly explosions that assail and obliterate the photographs under them.

The word "psychopomp" gives the stately game away: it is the ancient Greek term for a spirit guide (daimon) of souls to/through the underworld. We are in a modern inferno, its populace a parade of fashion models, hip hop musicians, belligerent Humvees and worse; one effaced soul, overwritten with the word "MASK" in blood red, has a suspiciously Adolf Hitler-ish haircut. True, as Kuspit has observed, the erotic remains a compelling dynamic even here—in the seductive females, the breasts encircled with paint, the tongue that one lady thrusts out—but it feels closer to a liebestod, for thanatos is surging from the depths to overwhelm eros. Yet if this is a troupe of the damned and damning faces of our time, it is also oddly formalized, a quality that lends it an uncanny cast, as if even the barbaric paintwork were an act of coolly premeditated iconoclasm. No wonder Kazimir Malevich holds a wobbly red square etched with black in front of his face, while an unruly motorbike's front wheel is fixed beneath a precise grid of phosphene-cum-gestural blotches, stasis imposed upon propulsion. Ciria has created a waxworks not just of people but also out of the mechanics of abstraction, which pivots upon erasure and displacement. To rephrase Harold Rosenberg's famous mythology of "action" painting: the figure goes, the brushstroke-as-constructed-event rules. Overall, we confront a red-hot but chilling masquerade—James Ensor's serried masks updated through the theoretical knowledge gleaned from a century of abstraction. Carnival's riotousness, as it were, meets Lent's somber repentance.

Lastly, the Psychopomps' layered physical makeup sets the scene for Ciria's next working group: the wildly inventive, manic Puzzles, which are ongoing (all the collages belong to a wider taxonomy, Constructed Dreams). What had been a relatively straightforward technique in the Psychopomps waxes complex. The backgrounds of the Puzzles are comprised of Ciria's customary abstract paintings, now rendered on tarpaulin. Over this base stand collages made with a thick plastic medium, similar to that used for covering worn surfaces in bathrooms and kitchens. Then additional pieces of the plastic, treated as collage, together with some more painted spackling, complete the whole. The outcome is, well, deliberately... a puzzle. Puzzling because everything is so transitional and composite. In several Puzzles gridded strips form rudimentary color charts, as though some rickety demonstration in optics by Josef Albers were emerging from the formless. Elsewhere, discs, stripes and splashes—shades of such non-objective precursors as the Delaunays, Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis and Jackson Pollock—reconstitute themselves as single staring eyes, faceless heads,

unquiet still lifes and cell-like organisms. We are witnesses to the birth of a very strange world, by turns antic, considered and savage (as, say, Joan Miró's universe could be all at once). Faces are forming themselves, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot (see the epigraph to this essay), in order to more than return our gaze as we meet theirs. Morpheus has comingled with Cyclops. Most critically, the Puzzles take to an extreme an undercurrent that has longed haunted Ciria's universe and which has lately come to the fore. The impression is of a ubiquitous agon between what lies below and what surfaces above. Something "raw"—in the sociological (the violence that lurks beneath civilized norms), psychological (the subconscious that lurks in everyone) and material (the ground that lurks under all paintings) senses—has been wrenched from underneath to preside/(c)over the manifest surface. In the process, this rawness has become "cooked," conditioned, refined and made hyper-sophisticated by the self-reflexive stratagems and artifices of Ciria's ceaselessly inventive art (4).

1. Donald Kuspit, "Testing and Projecting the Self," in Ciria: WDW (Bucharest: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012), n.p.
2. Ciria, in Marcos Ricardo-Barnatán, "Alphabet: Ciria-Gilgamesh," in Miguel López-Remiro, ed., Ciria: La Epopaya de Gilgamesh (Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2007), 102.
3. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London and New York, Penguin Books, 1997), 155.
4. The reference is of course to Claude Lévi-Strauss's distinction between nature and culture in *The Raw and the Cooked*, *Mythologiques* Vol. I, transl. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press [1964], 1990), especially 28: "This is tantamount to saying that, within culture, singing or chanting [i.e. art] differs from the spoken language as culture differs from nature.... Again, singing and musical instruments are often compared to masks; they are the acoustic equivalents of what actual masks represent on the plastic level."