

Q&A with Servando Garcia

Conversation with Julina Togonon and Servando Garcia-August 2009

JT. Please describe the process through which you make your art:

SG. I use drawings or photographs as source images for paintings. The same image will often be used to make two or more paintings. The individual paintings sort of respond to each other, or at least to the ones that came before. Whereas for example, if one painting presents a focal point that is monochromatic and linear, the same area in the next painting might be full color and blurry, or washed out. Meanwhile, the following painting might maintain the original focal point, but the space around that area will be drastically different somehow. Sometimes I think of this process as a contemporary parallel of Monet's process before haystacks; instead of responding to the changing effects of light, I'm responding to a more subjective, idiosyncratic situation.

JT. Can you say what it is that you are after with this method? Do you know?

SG. I think of my processes, or painting in general, as creating space. When marks are made on the canvas, visual space is made and depending on how the mark is made, there is a certain amount of speed given as well. So, to answer the question, while I'm making the painting, I'm looking for a kind of spatial tension that happens between parts. Sometimes the tension happens between areas of contrast, while other times it's because of subtle differences that sort of sneak into perception.

JT. How does emotion factor into your work?

SG. Emotion certainly plays an important part in my life, and my decision making while I'm in the studio, but I'm not sure how to translate that to content, or even to conversation.

JT. Well can you talk about your decision-making? Much of the work in your 2007 solo show at Togonon Gallery, as well as work between then and 2005, starting with the large graphite drawings of figures who are defaced in black paint, have an expressionist style. Even the title of your show, *Everything is Going to be OK*, kind of alludes to an emotional state.

SG. During that time, I was going through a lot of changes, personally and with my work. That time coincides with my move to Chicago, graduate school, and the birth of my daughter. I was in hurry to figure things out I guess, and my decision making was *drastic*, and relied mainly on intuition. The graphite drawings come off as violent, and I think they are, but my intention had nothing to do with violence. I was simply frustrated with the way the figures in the images looked back at the viewer, and kind of held control of the content; I didn't foresee that happening, and I didn't like it. After putting so much time into the drawings I didn't want to destroy them, but at the same time I hated them. So what I did was try a gesture that would radically change them. I did one and just looked at it for a few days, and I really liked it, so then I did the rest.

JT. What was wrong with the figures looking back?

SG. At the time I didn't know exactly, it just wasn't what I wanted. Some people sort of insinuated that I was role-playing, as if I was making some conceptual gesture, but that really wasn't it at all. Looking back it seems very transparent. I made a set of time intensive drawings of people in certain settings; I got frustrated with them and smeared black paint on their faces. I wasn't representing violence I was simply behaving violently. I didn't know what else to do. Fortunately they worked, and I didn't have to throw them away.

JT. Who said you were role-playing?

SG. Oh, people at school. Or at least I took some comments they made that way. Jerry Saltz was visiting and he saw the drawings right after I made them, and he told me that only two kinds of people do that, that kind of defacing, girls in their early teens, and crazy people. I laughed because it was funny, but at the time I didn't know what to say. He was ok with everything really, but other people kind of got irritated, either by the work or the way I couldn't account for my decisions, but at the time all I could do is wait it out. But like I said I liked the work. I couldn't identify what it was immediately, but it felt right. I intentionally repeat that gesture more often now; only it doesn't come off as defacing because the context is different. It's simply a way to create tension.

JT. Can you talk about how that works? How does the black paint on top create tension, and how do you repeat that in newer work?

SG. When you see the heavy black smears on top of detail-oriented drawing, you are seeing two distinctly different materials, applied in different densities and speeds. The tension exists because it's challenging to see two separate things at once. Also, even though the drawing is conventionally realistic, the black paint asserts itself on top in a way that is more real. It runs counter to how we identify things in representational painting. I play with this dynamic all the time now, only its more integral to the process, occurring in kind of rhythm.

JT. Earlier when you were talking about your process, you mention Monet. What other artists have been influential to you?

SG. Well I don't know how influential Monet is to me. I like the way impressionism makes sense; the way the paintings were made I mean. I really love Monet's cathedral paintings. To name a few artists who have influenced me the most, I'd have to say Matisse, and John Baldessari, Cecilia Edefalk, Robert Gober, Richter, and that one Rose painting by Jay de Feo. I also like Cézanne and some of Chardin's paintings; they are very quiet but evoke emotion in me.

JT. What other sources have influenced your work? You have made a considerable amount of work based on horror films and television.

SG. I began working from horror movies because I was interested in the way some filmmakers created certain *moods*, through perspective and light, and the arrangement of otherwise banal rooms. At some point I just wanted my work to do something like that. Television on the other hand is probably one of the biggest influences. It mainly has to do with early visual experiences. I didn't grow up with museums and galleries. Beyond observing things in nature, most of my studying, if I can use that word, came from TV. When I was small I used to sit very close to the set, amazed by the way the images formed and moved. It's probably the reason I'm near sighted. I often think that my paintings are trying to be television.

JT. I was surprised to see that you are making some paintings of a football game on television for your upcoming solo exhibition. How often do you appropriate images from Television? And what do you look for, or what qualifies make an appropriate subject?

SG. I was using television images quite often. I was interested in the distortion and patterns that appeared in an old set I used to own, so those kinds of TV abstractions were important; it was a formal thing. Then those qualities sort of became automatic and I could just make

them happen, and real life could be TV. I don't own a TV anymore so I don't usually use TV images now, but I was visiting my family when I saw that image and I liked it.

JT. What is it about the image that makes it a good subject?

SG. Well, I have sort of been into analogies lately. The television, first of all, is like painting in that it is 2-D surface designed to be looked at. The football *game* has more to do with the painting processes. Sometimes I feel like it is very difficult to move forward in painting. That is part of the reason why I'm planning on calling the show *Struggle*.

JT. You are also making, and have been making many paintings involving your daughter. Do they also involve this theme of struggle?

SG. Some do, yes, the ones showing her trying to crawl, and the ones showing her immediately after birth, on the infant scale.