

**Sink or Swim: Servando Garcia's paintings and the survival of the fittest**, Essay by Terry R. Myers, Independent curator and critic

*'Looking' is and is not 'eating' and 'being eaten.'* — Jasper Johns

Even if — or precisely because — the current proliferation of painting is largely mannerist in both nature and effect (not to mention affect), as facile and anemic canvases are cast ever farther and wider, it doesn't mean that all is lost. At the very least, Servando Garcia's paintings will likely be amongst the survivors. Sometimes, it seems, literally clawing their way back to the surface, they use their state of pictorial "deathlessness" as a kind of machine to produce not only the different material conditions or conceptual concerns of what remain rather incomparable types of paintings, but also an ultimately unifying and slightly terrifying, even palpable sense of unease.

Most of the paintings that have stuck with us throughout history act like zombies. They share a vested interest in turning us into one of them: frozen in their seductive presence, we stare, left vulnerable to anything approaching from behind. If that melodramatic scenario is too modernist for some, let's keep in mind that even a playfully "postmodern" argument about context or grand narratives (that could also take place even in front of a painting) can be equally distracting, still leaving us open to an attack from a ravenous zombie-painting hell-bent on performing its reason for being: to "devour" us.

Take, for example, one of Garcia's more deceptively conventional pictures, called *comfort*. Introducing itself as a straightforward domestic scene, in the end it refuses to stay put. The merging of the colors and shapes of the clothes in the closet and the patchwork quilt on the bed seems safe enough, until all of the viscous implications of body and grid take over your brain. Are the clothes actually other paintings hidden away and not yet (re)animated? Is the bed a site of life or death for the grid, or both? And what was that noise you heard?

Even "empty" paintings like *open or red room* immediately fill up with what could almost be marrow or blood, albeit of the strangely dry (if not deliberately unreal) variety more commonly thrown around in the most dramatic of fashions in horror movies — reminiscent of Peter Doig's eerily calm yet materially explosive paintings in which we're always left with one pressing question: "what is going to happen?" This "empty/full" dialectic is pure zombie as well, perfectly encapsulating the peculiarly ecstatic condition of the undead nonhuman as well as the deathless painting. Garcia's two "sink" paintings, *sink-left* and *sink-right*, radically isolate the tension between emptiness and fullness, or blankness and saturation, bringing a bracing clarity to the relationship between their opposing surfaces that seems to produce its own gravitational pull. Clearly unapologetic about their debt to Gerhard Richter's and Vija Celmins's like-minded fixations on surface (made ambivalent in the former, and resubstantiated in the latter), Garcia's sink paintings juxtapose the density of a strangely traumatic "black hole" (bringing to my mind one of Jasper Johns's most unusually expressive encaustic works, *Painting Bitten by a Man*, 1961) with a poignantly flattened, grayed, and fleeting "screen memory," giving both surfaces everything they need to not only survive, but thrive.