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Título: Territory of the Soul: The Search for One's Self Through the Other

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Resumen: Arnaldo Roche Rabell's February 2016 exhibition El territorio del alma [Territory of the Soul], at the Walter Otero Contemporary Art Gallery (San Juan), marked a turning point in his career as an artist, in which blue pigment often played a key role. We took the opportunity to meet Roche Rabell in his element: surrounded by his paintings. The artist welcomed us with a broad smile and his hands still smudged with paint stains. We knew that was the perfect moment to interview him.
[Versión en español]

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Territory of The Soul: The Search For One's Self Through The Other

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Arnaldo Roche Rabell's February 2016 exhibition *El territorio del alma* [Territory of the Soul], at the Walter Otero Contemporary Art Gallery (San Juan), marked a turning point in his career as an artist, in which blue pigment often played a key role. We took the opportunity to meet Roche Rabell in his element: surrounded by his paintings. The artist, shy but cheerful, welcomed us with a broad smile and the same baseball cap which he wears while painting in his studio. His hands were still smudged with paint stains. We knew that was the perfect moment to interview him.

Laura Tíscar: The soul, an unfathomable entity and the eternal subject of analysis in art, not only guides this exhibition, but also your artistic career. Always departing from universal knowledge vis-à-vis your inner voyage, you argue that this series of still lifes

represents the “end-result of rebuilding what is beloved, including my own soul, with the belief that, even amid the detritus, miracles can still be found.” Is it the hope, the promise of transcendence offered by art that motivates creation?

Arnaldo Roche: This “territory of the soul” is a space that I return to every so often in order to understand exactly where I am, how I view myself, and how I am interacting with others. I use a broader palette now, beyond what I was doing in my blue period—a color I still continue to work with—and I am mainly looking to speak about others. One painting from my blue period is titled ¿Sabes tú dónde habita el Todopoderso? [Do You Know Where the Almighty Dwells?], and that is a question I ask not only of myself, but in reference to myself in my relationship with others. However, I understand that in some way we are all survivors—all of us, after the storms, the floods, or the cyclones, we wind up returning to the scene of the catastrophe and we attempt to pick up the pieces. In my blue period, this was more evident because in the representations of these shallow waters, you can sense small things beginning to float about: You may find a photograph of your child three houses down and not only in your car, if you know what I mean. These pieces speak of the way we construct our happiness, an element that is present in my blue works and even in my most recent self-portraits. These pieces don’t mean that I am devastated, rather that I have learned to be comfortable with artificiality. Painting is somewhat artificial, but it has a symbolic charge in which we find beauty even in the midst of destruction. Where there is something incomplete, we find the opportunity to heal and mend with love. What is truly important is how each of us achieves happiness. As I’ve said before in some interviews, any element that brings me joy almost always winds up on the canvas.



Arnaldo Roche Rabell, Sin apostar ya gané, 2016.

LT: Speaking of the self-portrait—a recurring format in your work—you once stated that it offered a good way to ascertain exactly where you were at, what your situation was at the time you were working on these images. Aside from theories regarding its purpose, do you feel that the self-portrait works as a humanist proposal, as a method of sensory discovery of the world through the place we occupy in it? Perhaps there is a self-portrait concealed behind any artwork: a singular conceptualization of the world that describes the artist’s hopes, desires, and conflicts?

AR: When we speak of my self-portraits—to which I return from time to time out of need—there is no doubt that they are structures that I fill with my anxieties, my needs, and my inquiries into my own current position in relation to myself and to others ... I would say that my mood is the main revealing element in my self-portraits. During that process I don’t treat myself well. The idea behind doing this is not to use distortion with the ultimate aim of triggering some impact or bringing someone closer or pushing them further away from my work; it is all driven by a passion for discovery. I hope that, in time, people will ask themselves, “How did this man live?” Frankly, all that I do and all that I retain is aimed at conveying the emotional charge of my obsession with what I believe is

real, what I can touch, and, finally, what I can say is mine—even if only for a moment.

LT: Painting is sometimes accused of being hedonistic, non-collaborative, and also disconnected from the globalized art scene of our times. Nonetheless, there is profound empathy toward your fellow human beings in your work. Is this painterly exercise of introspection a discovery of the other through the self? In other words, is painting an exercise in which artists interweave themselves with their surrounding environment and partake in a collective identity?

AR: During my creative endeavors, I must ask who I am in order to be able to understand the best way to express empathy, which is the need to reach others and identify myself with them. Throughout this intense, emotional, and mentally demanding process, I come to see and discover myself. Best of all, I am able to extend myself and reach others. And, thankfully, my paintings speak of an essence that we all possess. They function as mirrors, not because these works represent my face, but because they portray the passion with which I have painted and which I continue painting them. When I speak of the art object, I speak of what we wish to love, what we wish to represent, and, in my own case, what we ask permission to touch and whose “door we get to knock on.” I say “knock on the door” because that was a part of my artistic process when I was in

Chicago. I would take large rolls of paper, already bearing layers of crayon, and I would go out to people, telling them that I was there. I would ask them whether they would let me touch them and their belongings. I was interested in seeing how close I could get to people, their possessions, and their fears, but this also required their consent. That is why empathy became a tool for closeness. Not necessarily on a level that only shows the occurrence of empathy, but empathy defined as a direct connection with another person. In other words, it becomes a performance in which I persuade you to have faith in me and where I’m going to treat you in the most respectful way, and that I will never mock you or what is important to you. Those are the defining boundaries of Arnaldo Roche’s painterly experience. In fact, I remember that a professor from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) once asked me: “Do you want to be painter or a psychologist?” I was stunned, but I understood that the most important thing for me was not to find myself—something I did through self-portraiture—but to go outside of myself in search of that world.



Arnaldo Roche Rabell, *Andar camuflajeadado*, 2016.

LT: It seems impossible for me to associate your characteristic use of frottage with a mere expressive or technical need, given the intimacy you share with your work. Is this direct communion with the portrait subject an extension of your own connection to them?

AR: When I was in Chicago, I felt the need to answer to who I truly was, to understand the essential elements in order to arrive at myself and my true purpose: everyone else. After getting to know myself by constructing my own self-portraits, I threw my self physically outdoors and began to print leaves and fabrics, up to the point where I was throwing horses, cars and even my own mother onto the canvas. During this process as a student, I arrived back from Chicago to make a “second skin” for my mother. I had the courage to touch the people who gave me their consent, who believed in me. Here, faith played a vital role: Do you believe in me? Then let me respectfully place my hands on your body, let me fill that gray emptiness—that negative space mentioned by Picasso—so I can express how we share the same air, the same space, and, maybe, the same concerns. I am that St. Thomas who has the need to touch.



LT: Your work represents a perfect balance between what is spiritual and esoteric, as if two opposing forces were simultaneously repelling and attracting each other. In what way do the spiritual and the esoteric have an influence over the more mundane aspects of existence such as daily challenges, the overcoming of obstacles, or perseverance?

AR: I think that to look at my art as esoteric is a result of interpretation, since it can be observed from various degrees of proximity and distance. Sometimes my work draws the viewer in, just to see how it was made. In both cases, it is always possible to find something to respond to at an emotional level. Lately, and almost out of necessity, I've had to write my own history. This is a consequence of delving with so much depth into

certain subjects that I would not want to leave behind a legacy of being more eccentric than I really am. I am a little child who dances whenever a large or important work is finished. The workmates who assist me often say, "Well, there goes Roche!" I live with such intensity that everything must be done with absolute devotion. As I mature, I'd like to start each day by doubting what I did the day before. In that way, I can work with the struggle and conflict to then take advantage of each change on the work's surface. Almost all of my works are made without sketching and are based on a powerful idea that often comes from a spiritual place. That is how I visualize my art: as something sublime. When it is later analyzed by history, it will not stand out because of what I have said about it, but because people have perceived this struggle to prove that I am alive, of how I gave myself the opportunity to reinvent myself and see myself in others. It is absolutely essential for me to see myself in others. That is love, right? That is love.

LT: We know that your work is closer to those existential questions, and that it has a meditative and intimate nature, but Arnaldo Roche is also renowned and, hence, a public figure. I wonder how social pressure has affected your art. Do you feel that there is a social sector that has burdened you, as a Puerto Rican public figure, with some messianic mission to solve Puerto Rico's situation?

AR: El territorio del alma is a territory bound by four walls, a studio. It is not a work for the public, nor is its purpose to be shared, handled or moved to a space beyond those four walls. From here, inside, this is the only place where I have any measure of control. Outside, the territory is, in this case, Puerto Rico's situation; where no one has to convince us to rush into such an important process. We have to reformulate Puerto Rico's territorial situation, but we are not lacking in justice or good politics. We simply need time. Arnaldo Roche will not solve that problem; that's an issue for all of us. I can only attempt to persuade, through visual beauty, those who are somehow unconvinced to love greatly; that we are able to communicate in a more sophisticated way and that we can feel comfortable with ourselves. What you see here, in this exhibition, is only a piece of someone who is certainly aware that outside there is a crisis. Inside, however, there is plenty to give.



<https://youtu.be/Utoq4z4b0sk>

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