Two Dialogues with Painting

John Yau

The pairing of Leda Catunda and Alejandra Seeber, who were born nearly ten years apart in the neighboring countries of Brazil and Argentina (in São Paulo, 1961, and Buenos Aires, 1969, respectively), brings together two artists who have established a lively, complex relationship with painting's legacy.

For Catunda, this engagement with painting started in the early 1980s, and later in the decade for Seeber, who named Catunda, during a visit I made to her Brooklyn, New York, studio, as one of the artists who inspired her. The juxtaposition of the open-ended, at times playful and challenging work by these two adventuresome artists of different ages and countries, deepens our understanding of painting's possibilities.

For painting, which had become moribund in the 1970s, when the international art world was primarily focused on conceptual art, performance, and installation, the decade of the '80s was a contentious period framed by two antagonistic viewpoints. Crucial to both positions was the question of whether painting could move forward or not. There were those who believed that it had reached a dead end, and the only possibilities that remained for it were appropriation, citation, and parody. Unable to move forward, it would resort to cannibalizing the past. On the other side, there were those who believed that painting had returned with a renewed vigor, particularly in relation to the figure. For many younger artists, these antipodal viewpoints did not welcome differing perspectives. You were either opposed to painting or you believed in it without a trace of skepticism.

Originating in the 1960s, when Andy Warhol began to use mechanical means (silkscreen) to make paintings, the first viewpoint not only declared that painting was dead, used up, or exhausted, but that craft was bourgeois, anti-democratic, and hierarchical; correspondingly, the author and authorship were just as dead, and originality was, at best, an illusion. This outlook, which promoted the model of the artist as a machine-like producer, was further influenced by the writings and work of Sol LeWitt and other conceptual artists. With Marcel Duchamp regarded as one of the guiding lights of a non-optical, non-painting artistic practice, artists who aligned themselves with this position developed a vocabulary of readymades and comprehensible signs, often derived from mass media. They adopted the use of non-art materials, which could be fabricated or bought in a hardware store or flea market, and called originality and authenticity into question through copying, quotation, and caricature.

The second viewpoint began to gather steam between the late 1970s and early '80s, culminating in the large group exhibition, Zeitgeist, at the Martin-Gropius-Bau in Berlin, Germany (October 16, 1982–January 16, 1983), curated by Christos M. Joachimides, a Greek art historian, and Norman Rosenthal, who was the Exhibitions Secretary (1977-2008) at the Royal Academy, London, England. Touting the "return of painting," this widely acclaimed gathering centered on artists working in New York, Germany, Italy, and to a lesser extent, England. At the same time, dealers, curators, and critics were promoting the national characteristics of movements labeled Neo-Expressionism in the United States and Germany, and Transavanguardia in Italy. Largely focused on the figure, the artists were voracious in their ingestion of expressive styles, mythology, art history, religion, and even politics. In their work, appropriation and citation were not necessarily meant ironically.

Standing behind these divergent viewpoints is a statement that Donald Judd made in his highly influential essay-cum-manifesto, "Specific Objects" (1965):

The main thing wrong with painting is that it is a rectangular plane placed flat against the wall. A rectangle is a shape itself; it is obviously the whole shape; it determines and limits the arrangement of whatever is on or inside of it. In work before 1946 the edges of the rectangle are a boundary, the end of the picture. The composition must react to the edges and the rectangle must be unified, but the shape of the rectangle is not stressed; the parts are more important, and the relationships of color and form occur among them

By advancing his belief that painting had reached a dead end, particularly as a rectangle resting flat against the wall, Judd opened up myriad possibilities, included shaped canvases and hybrid objects that were neither painting nor sculpture but a combination of both.

While the artists who gained attention in the first years of the "return to painting" seemed to have ignored Judd's challenge, I think it is pertinent to bring his essay up in discussing the work of Catunda and Seeber, not because it was a direct influence, but because it was something very much in the air they breathed.

Here I want to make a few other points about the international art world of the 1980s, starting with the exhibition, Zeitgeist. The curators Joachimides and Rosenthal brought together nearly 240 works, most of which were paintings, by forty-five artists. The roster included members of an older generation, such as Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), Andy Warhol (1928-1987), and Mario Merz (1921-2003), as well as younger artists, such as Julian Schnabel (1951) and Sandro Chia (1946). In addition to the Germans, Americans, and Italians, the exhibition also included a few artists from the United Kingdom, Denmark, and Austria.

As much as this massive exhibition achieved in bringing attention to the return of painting, there were serious flaws to its conception, which, to my mind, cannot be overlooked or underestimated. The first is that an exhibition that claimed to be international was not that at all, as it ignored much of Europe and all of South America, Africa, and Asia. This suggests that Catunda, who, as a young artist, was directly exposed to the global art world through the prestigious Bienal de São Paulo —

the second oldest art biennial after the Venice Biennale — also experienced the isolation of seeing older Brazilian artists, such as Lygia Clark (1920-1988) and Lygia Pape (1927-2004), being ignored.

While one could make claims to mitigate why this happened—starting with the cost of shipping, for example— Zeitgeist's second flaw is egregious and inexcusable: that the only woman included in the exhibition was the American painter, Susan Rothenberg. This means that the curators of Zeitgeist were either ignorant of, or chose to ignore woman painters, as well as the rise of feminist art — a decade after Miriam Shapiro and Judy Chicago and their students from the California Institute of the Arts Feminist Art Program organized and participated in the installation, Womanhouse (January 30–February 28, 1972). This exhibition, which took place in a dilapidated mansion in a rundown neighborhood of Hollywood, changed the course of art history.

In A Praca (1985, acrylic on blanket, 200 x 190 cm), which Catunda made before she was twenty-five, we see the work of someone who has already fully grasped the advanced thinking and theorizing about painting that was swirling through the international art world at that time. It is also important to note the painting's date, 1985, because on March 15 of that year, the authoritarian military dictatorship in Brazil ended and José Sarney took office as the elected

By painting on a blanket, a readymade, Catunda found a way to simultaneously acknowledge and critique those who embraced Marcel Duchamp and the death of painting, as well as those who championed painting's return. Instead of working within the restricted boundaries associated with these divergent positions, Catunda staked out her own territory by painting on an ordinary object associated with comfort, domestic life, and family leisure. Her choice of a blanket signals that her motivation was not purely aesthetic. Whatever Catunda thought about the political and social situation of Brazil, and the changes that were happening all around her, she makes no direct reference to them in A Praca. Instead, she turns her painted blanket, which has a decorative border on all four sides, into an open-ended commentary:

about its function as something to sit on in a square or marketplace, and about painting and the role it plays in society.
By transferring a functional object into the realm of art, Catunda redefines a territory initially marked out by Duchamp when he signed his name on a bottle rack and a urinal, transforming them into pieces of sculpture. The difference is that Catunda has radically altered the surface of the blanket without denying its function, which is implied by the fact that it is not framed, but hangs loosely against the wall. Could it be taken off the wall and used as a blanket? That question foregrounds the artist's rejection of the privileged position occupied by a painting on canvas.

Looking at A Praca, we seem to be gazing down at the paving stones of a public plaza. The blanket has become a picture of what is beneath it. We see flowers growing inside carefully defined grassy sections, which are outlined by orange borders separating them from the stones. The plaza is both tended (manicured gardens and flowers) and untended (wild blades of grass emerging between the stones, slowly pushing them apart), resulting in a tension between nature and civilization. We are invited to ponder this stress. Are we not also invited to consider the painting's title, which can mean either "square" or "soldier," in relation to Brazil's political history?

During this first period of Catunda's career, which lasted from 1982 to around 1990, she combined painting and sewing, as well as a wide range of found objects, which she used as either supports or content: patio umbrellas, printed fabrics, beach towels, dresses, T-shirts, socks, leather, jigsaw puzzles, pillows, and shower curtains. The paintings were figurative, which was largely a function of the printed surfaces whose images she incorporated into the work.

By bringing in ordinary, mass-produced domestic items, Catunda underscored the ubiquity of images in our daily life. Was a painted image more precious and important than a commercially printed one? Did consumers stop to consider what message might be embodied in the images printed on a blanket or towel? This is one of the

distinguishing features of Catunda's work: she can be at once incisive and playful, witty and serious.

In 1989 and '90, Catunda began focusing on the material side of her work rather than the printed image. We see this transition in Babados com janelinha (1989), Retalhos Rosa (1989), and Quadrados de lå (1990). Made of scraps of cloth, most of which have been painted pink, Retalhos Rosa is both a collage and a painting, and neither of these things. With its references to femininity (pink) and household items (doilies), it evokes sewing and "women's work," claiming that they are equal to painting.

At the same time, Catunda's use of rectangular pieces of cloth carefully arranged within a larger rectangle infuses these works with the legacy of geometric abstraction, especially as it was manifested in the art of Pape, Clark, and the Spanish-Uruguayan artist, Joaquín Torres García (1874 – 1949). In these and later works, such as Almofados Azuis (1992, acrylic on fabric, 270 x 200 cm) and Rethalos Azuis II (1992, acrylic on canvas, 75 cm in diameter), Catunda extends the Neo-Constructivist tradition that is a deep part of Brazilian art history into new territory, and in so doing, opens up what to some might have been a closed line of thinking, reminding us that nothing is ever used up in art. By using paint to bond fabric and geometry, as well as call attention to the support, Catunda dissolves the distinction between "women's work" (sewing and embroidery) and painting, domestic craft and high art, often with a note of humor running through the work.

In Sete Gotas III (2001, acrylic on canvas, plastic, and fabric, 208 x 156 cm), the title directs the viewer to the seven gotas (drops) hanging down from a mouth-like shape, but it is also possible to see them as tongues. Catunda's ability to be funny and ribald, innocent and risqué, all while using cheap, artificially colored, throwaway materials, infuses her work with an urban grittiness. By rejecting expensive supports, such as those favored by Frank Stella, for example, or the highly engineered stretchers used by Elizabeth Murray, Catunda implicitly questions such artists' apparent allegiance to the masterpiece tradition of painting.

In a recent hybrid work, Beira-Mar (2018, acrylic on voile and fabric, 130 x 137 cm), it's obvious how beautifully precise, smart, and funny Catunda can be. While the composition and the use of found surfaces harken back to an early work like A Praca from 1985, Beira-Mar also does many new and fresh things.

Beira-Mar has a wood frame that is made of four slats, each of which is painted. The top slat depicts a blue sky with parts of puffy white clouds visible, and a yellow sun with rays. The right and left sides of the frame are both painted in vertical strokes of green, suggesting dense vegetation, while the bottom slat is more abstract: it is black with gray vertical strokes evenly spaced across the entire length. While the top slat is clearly representational, the two side slats are painted abstractly. Still, because of their color and placement, they are easy to interpret as vegetation. The overtly abstract bottom slat is more elusive as to how it might be read.

Within the frame, Catunda has arranged differently sized rectangles, which are essentially pre-made stretchers covered by two layers of fabric. The bottom layer is chartreuse voile, a sheer, silken material, which allows the stretchers to be visible. Catunda has painted images on the second layer of fabric (sailboat, island, parrot, trees, and flowers), as well as cut large circles and semi-circles out of it, exposing the voile beneath.

Paradise — even in the form of leisure — is an artificial construction, as is a painting. I like that Beira-Mar would fit comfortably in a house, a museum, or a seaside resort, and yet remain something to hold in the mind long after encountering it. This is Catunda's great strength: her work opens up a space for the viewer to reflect upon the privileged status given to art; the relation of art to meaning and culture; the consideration of what is real and what is artificial; and whether the difference between the two is smaller than we might think.

Alejandra Seeber shares Catunda's interest in domestic spaces, the privileged status of painting, the circulation of images in contemporary culture, and the porous border between abstraction and figuration. By exploring that boundary, Seeber challenges the commonplace measures that sophisticated viewers use to judge a work of art. In Black grass ultra (2008, acrylic and oil on linen, 30.5 x 40.5 cm), the artist makes a painting that can be read two ways, with each cancelling out the other. In one view, we are looking at thick black grass growing from red earth. We also see some yellow flowers emerging from the dense black field.

But Seeber's painting sits perfectly on the cusp between abstraction and figuration, calling into question how we comprehend it. Is it a figurative painting tilting toward abstraction, or an abstract painting tilting towards figuration? Does it matter? And if it does, what is the reason why?

Black grass does exist, but it seems like an unlikely subject for a painting. In fact, green grass is also an unlikely subject, unless you mean to employ it as an ironic comment on abstract gestural painting, as James Rosenquist did in his painting Spaghetti and Grass (1964-65).

In Black grass ultra, Seeber pushes her work to the point where the comprehensible (or figurative image) merges with the incomprehensible and jarring (an abstract mark). By including these divergent possibilities, the artist challenges the viewer: if you readily comprehend the figurative (or recognizable), what then is your response to the unrecognizable (or abstract)? Is your experience of art based only on resemblance? While some might think this question is settled, with the assigning of abstract paintings and figurative works into distinct and separate categories, Seeber deliberately unsettles the question.

What are we to make of her paintings of interiors, such as Puerta interior con lámpara de ciervos y empapelado de rocas y elefantes blancos (2002, oil on canvas, 145 x 140

cm), Interior, 2008, oil on canvas, 93 x 123 cm), and Interior con arte negro (2008, oil on canvas, 120 cm x 91 cm)?

In Puerta interior con lámpara de ciervos y empapelado de rocas y elefantes blancos, Seeber has juxtaposed two different interiors. The one on the left, with its open door, bare wall, and diagonally receding hallway, is largely decorated. The hallway pulls the viewer into a space that ends in what could be part of a wall, or perhaps a section of an abstract painting. On the right side, Seeber depicts a portion of a room with patterned wallpaper depicting white elephants in silhouette on a crimson ground. In the foreground, there is a table on which a thin, stiff, blue board is resting. On the board we see what appear to be a wine glass, partly covered by dripping paint, and an opaque sculpture that seems to allude to a finger or penis.

Between the table in the foreground and the wallpaper behind it, there are two couches kitty-corner to each other, a coffee table, a rug, and two big smears of dripping paint spreading out from under the coffee table. There is a tree growing from a pot in the corner of the room, where two different patterns of wallpaper intersect.

What I find engaging about Puerta interior con lámpara de ciervos y empapelado de rocas y elefantes blancos is Seeber's ability to choreograph different levels of readability, with each level challenging our ability to fully see and name all the parts of the painting. Do the parts add up to a narrative? If so, what story does it tell?

What are we to make of the brown smear spreading down the rug onto the sculpture on the table, and the black smear overlaying it? Besides flattening out the space and obliterating part of the image, what else are they doing? Do they add an abstract element into a largely figurative painting?

What about the white elephant wallpaper? A white elephant is a possession that its owner cannot get rid of, but whose cost, particularly when it comes to maintenance, is out of proportion to its usefulness. By evoking wallpaper covered with white elephants,

is Seeber commenting on the status of painting as something we cannot dispose of, but is too expensive to maintain? She further complicates any single reading of Puerta interior con lámpara de ciervos y empapelado de rocas y elefantes blancos *by giving the wallpaper on the adjacent wall a stone pattern, and by spilling yellow paint across both spaces, joining them together. Does the yellow paint deface the composition or unify it?*

There is ambiguity in Seeber's interiors, which invites further reflection and speculation. If, as Duchamp says, the viewer completes the work of art, how do we do so with these paintings?

Is the rectangle in the upper left-hand corner of Interior con arte negro meant to be an abstract painting? Why is there a fence-like row of tall, sharp leaves in the foreground? Are we outside of this house, looking in through a window, or inside? Are the leaves some kind of room divider? What about the object depicted on the painting's right side? Is it meant to be a sculpture? Is Seeber's Interior intended to be an example of sophisticated taste?

I think the deeper question, as with Black grass ultra, has to do with legibility: must something be immediately legible to be accepted? Must everything in a painting occupy a stable and readable position? What happens when certain parts of the painting challenge that stability and desire for order, and other parts don't?

In both Last disco years (2012, oil on canvas, 75 cm x 88 cm) and Big disco years (2012, oil on canvas, 125 cm x 170 cm), Seeber divides the picture plane into triangular, pie-like sections. Within each section, she paints various abstracted views, which seem familiar but remain elusive. The triangular sections serve to flatten out hierarchical thinking: every section is equal to every other section.

Together, the sections suggest a faceted, mirrored disco ball turning above a dance floor, a kaleidoscopic reflection of what is going on in the room below. And yet, instead

of presenting us with figures, fashion, or nostalgia, Seeber stays in the realm of the abstract, suggesting that any comprehensible view of discos, and the heightened moments of that era, is likely to be false.

In their expansion of painting's possibilities — an endeavor that simultaneously calls its privileged status into question — Catunda and Seeber push the medium into new territory, one that is serious without taking itself too seriously. Both artists are able to infuse their work with humor and social awareness. They question the viewer's standards of what constitutes beauty and a refined aesthetic experience, and invite the viewer to do the same. Their notes of vulgarity, as in Catunda's tongue-like shapes in Sete Gotas III and Seeber's white elephants in Puerta interior con lámpara de ciervos y empapelado de rocas y elefantes blancos, remind us of what was neglected in the austere rise of Minimalism and Conceptual Art. That vulgarity further enlivens their work. In a world that seems to be veering toward greater intolerance, humor and vulgarity are ways to push back against society's increasing rigidity. This alone makes the work of Catunda and Seeber so necessary and urgent.