



FACING MULTIPLICITY: A CONVERSATION WITH DARIO URZAY

Interview by the writer Eduardo Lago for the exhibition catalogue, in the Rekalde sala . Bilbao, 14 August 2000

Eduardo Lago: Which, would you say, is the significance of this exhibition in terms of your career as a whole? Which would be the most significant changes and additions, both technically and conceptually?

Dario Urzay: I intended to classify certain pieces that I have made in the past three years. The exhibit opens up with a large format piece, titled "En una microverso fracción II." This piece marks the beginning of a series of changes. Another important innovation is the appearance of what I call negative paintings. One more change of gear, after the images generated by camera strokes, is the surging of a different type of digitally generated images.

EL: Here we could talk of evolution within continuity, as it happened with the camera strokes that you mentioned, the brush strokes made by a camera. You use the computer in a craft-like manner; you turn it into an instrument such as the one that the camera was before.

DU: Well, for me, the utilization of new methods emerges always from necessity. In 1990 I needed to resolve the problem of how to make a gesture without directly using the brush. This is how I made one series of double paintings. To this end I invented a device that allowed me to arrange the brushes according to a special disposition. Similarly, the computer is an instrument that allows me to begin pieces which surge from images that do not have a "real" existence. When I make an abrupt movement with a photo camera in front of a television, later registering the image of moving eyes which do not exist in reality, I utilize the computer to obtain a certain kind of three-dimensional images, whose existence is purely virtual. I do not move as if I was working with a two-dimensional canvas: I work with a space like that of sculpture. First I create an object inside the computer itself. Then I photograph it and I take it to a lab for developing. Only then becomes the matter of scale, of size, a question. The type of images that I use, I create through a program that was designed to generate landscapes. These are something external, but when I use them they create the feeling of something internal. They have a visual organic quality, resembling something inside a

body. In the computer there is no such thing as the spatial relationship that I have with objects in my studio, where everything I do is life-size. In the computer I work without a scale system. This could be done in a different manner: I could build a model in the studio, give it volume, and photograph it from different angles. But that studio-made model would be life-size, and I want to work with something that is ideal beforehand. That is why I build it three-dimensionally inside a computer, not based on a material model.

EL: If there was a possibility to reduce to or isolate the essential elements of your whole history as a creator, which would you point to as the main ongoing fundamentals?

DU: Perhaps it would be an investigation concerning the representation of what is real and its image, to which a temporal dimension is added.

EL: Could you be a bit more explicit about this? How is this idea represented in this exhibition?

DU: For instance, the negative paintings are pieces that want to become positive, that are waiting for someone to change them. Within this attitude there is somewhat of a hopeful state of mind, which always implies a future.

EL: At times you have spoken of the close relationship that there is between your work and some of science's ways of investigation and discovery, especially those of physics and biology. In fact, your work implies an organic world whose images remit us to science, to the interior worlds of biology, of tissues.

DU: Well, yes, I am very interested in scientific imagery. But I seize those images from the outside: mine could never be a scientist's point of view, but that of a creator in the visual realm. I do not attempt to reproduce any scientific images in my work. While I create, pictures emerge that could be reminiscent of something within the world of science, of biology. These images look as if they were taken from a histology atlas, but that which surfaces, is really a reflection from the subconscious. In our memory, we have an archive of technological or scientific images, which we have collected from documentaries, magazine illustrations, etc... A piece that I begin may, at a certain point, come to resemble the interior of a body; for instance, the texture of the brain, which is one of the most frequent associations. But that is not necessarily the intended outcome of my initial approach to the piece. What happens is that the signs with which I confront the viewer provoke in him a decoding reaction. All my pieces have a very photographic quality, and seeing a photograph is recognizing something. Even in the most abstract of pictures we are accustomed to recognize something; thus, in seeing my images, the viewer thinks that he is recognizing something.

EL: It seems to me that one of the connections of both your artistic creation and your reflection on theory is based around the relationship between the macrocosmos and the microcosmos. I am interested in your view of how to pass

from one dimension to another. Could you speak of this investigation, of how you travel from one side to the other, from the titles up to the procedure of creation?

DU: Well, that has to do with the idea of a fraction: identical structures that repeat themselves at different scales. In my paintings everything is life size. The spontaneously triggered reactions respond to a design that is "real," in the physical realm. However, the pictorial representation that I produce, creates a sensation of an enlarged photograph. For example, the blue pieces, if seen from afar, usually evoke a cosmic sensation, a planetary one; but if seen from up close, they resemble blood vessels. The structure is always the same, yet our subconscious takes on a codifying mode, and that modifies our perception of the piece.

EL: One of the most interesting aspects of your work is your not wanting to interfere with the spontaneous flow of the creative process, but you rather take a step back and observe how chance or the medium's own dynamics conclude the images.

DU: Yes, I see there a fight between static and dynamic; on the one hand there is everything that is related to chance and chaos, what is informal; and on the other, everything that seems to be somehow constructed. The chaotic, the informal, the dynamic, has a dimension of temporality. The static is timeless. I believe that there is a tension between these two poles. There are times at which I emphasize this contrast even more: for example, in pieces that show randomly generated blots, also features the title "construction."

EL: But the starting point is a blank page, at the beginning you do not know where you are going.

DU: The start is always chaotic, I allow things to fuse, and their development gives me ideas, until the point where I intervene, only to let the process follow its own path again. I repeat this over a series of phases, until the process reaches a point where I say "that's it," and the piece remains somehow congealed that way.

EL: When do you know that the piece is finished?

DU: When I realize that nothing that I would add to it would provide anything new. Sometimes I try to introduce a risky element temporarily just to see how it works. Because I cannot know it in my head, I have to see it. And once I decide that it is finished, I cover it with a layer of resin and I cannot work on it anymore, there is no turning back.

EL: It seemed amazing to me how you juxtaposed in one same panel a computer-generated image over a painting in the most classical sense of the word. What is shocking from a perceptive point of view is that the viewer does not know which is the painting and which the computer image. Why create

that game?

DU: You asked me before whether the area on the left, where the luminous dots were, was a photograph. Whether it was or not, it transmitted a very photographic feeling. It is of no interest for me whether things are made in paint or photography, what is truly important is the way that the image is codified. Lately, photography has been widely used as a single medium, as if it were a panacea, ever since it was artistically validated. I seek deliberate confusion: to execute a painting that appears to be very photographic, or to treat what is photographic in a way that makes it seem pictorial. Because in the end the only thing that matters is how it has been encoded. I codify reality through image. There are images made out of paint, images made out of photography, and images of mathematical algorithms; but what is important is the final result. The way in which it was achieved does not matter.

EL: But, isn't there an additional intention in juxtaposing disconnected elements? I am very intrigued by your interest in the idea of double, of symmetry, of diaphanous reflection of the image, of repetition. It is something that manifests itself in many different ways: from the negative of a piece that is already made, to the positioning of two images one in front of the other, or on top of the other, or the device that generated images like a double brush... Clarify a bit what all this is responding to.

DU: There has always been a certain schizoid tinge to my pieces. Sometimes it is presented as a kind of conflict, and sometimes it is a dialog. There is a continuous tension between painting and photography. More than doubling or repeating something, it is a matter of avoiding a single vision of things. When I made the double traces, leaving the trail of a gesture when holding the brush handle, I created a difference between the images, even if they looked identical. A negative and a positive are two images that refer to the same "reality." A photograph captures the reality that was supposedly in front of its lens, but then the photograph has its own reality as well. In a photograph where a negative and a positive have intervened, the image of reality given to us stands in a middle ground between the two. A photograph can also have very different positive prints, which are interpretations of reality parting from a negative that is in a latent state. There is no one single way of seeing, one single way of apprehending. The way of apprehending is multiple, and sometimes it is at the interstice between two opposites. It is in the differences between them that reality is located.

EL: And this is how the negative paintings emerge.

DU: I have had them in my head for a long time, even before I made "En una micro-verso fracción II." By the time I started using the eye sequences, in New York in 1991, I had already tried it out. But I was not finding what I was looking for, or I did not know how to make it. I don't mean this in terms of technique: I did not know how to conceptually make it. It is something that can also be related to negative sensations, or to confronting a reality

that one wants to turn around. I started making my first negative paintings in New York in 1997. My idea was for the paintings to be finished, but not the images. I wanted finished pieces that featured unfinished images, images in a latent state: the viewer would be the one in charge of finishing them, of transforming them. It is as if I gave someone the negative of a photograph and he had to go to the photo lab to make positive prints of it in order to see it, because he is not used to seeing images in the negative. He needs to know what is the reality that the picture refers to, what is the referent of that image. I wanted to produce pieces that, as paintings, would be finished, in relation to me, to the painter. But that in terms of image would be unfinished, in relation to the viewer, who would be hypothetically able to finish them himself, to transform them. The artist creates a construct out of reality and tries, at the very best, to offer it to the viewer so that he has the possibility of transforming it, even from a social perspective.

EL: Can you speak a little of the umbilical cords, which seem to be one of the most characteristic images of this current period?

DU: The umbilical cords are directly related to the negative paintings. The first time that the idea of tubes occurred to me was in London, in a painting that now belongs to the Alava Museum. In it appear two retinas on top of two lights, and on the sides there are some kind of tubes or conduits. The painting is a lot cruder, from a technical point, than the ones I do now. But that is the root of that feeling of tubes, of a chiaroscuro that resides in the stroke of the brush. Those same tubes appear again in a series of pieces on paper that was exhibited in the America space in Vitoria, made in ninety six; and already in this last stay in New York they become one single tube. And that single tube, I don't quite know why, I call umbilical cord. While I was making the stroke that generated that shape, I felt as if there was a back and forth movement. I had the feeling that, in finishing that stroke that segregated the cord, in lifting the brush from the canvas, at that particular moment my contact with the piece was cut off, as if it were being born. When treating the stroke in the negative, everything is turned around. For instance, in a later painting in which there are luminous dots, they would appear to be dark. And the conceptual connotation of the umbilical cord would also become its own negative side: instead of meaning birth, it would remit death. I saw here the possibility of a play between life and death, somewhat in the same way that Barthes commented on the relationship between photography and death.

EL: And what other icons or images, aside from the umbilical cords, are now, as eyes used to be, the most recurring?

DU: Perhaps those that are worked over digitally generated images. The capillary and venous ones have now become gigantic. Suppose I were to walk up close to a painting from a previous period, in which those vessels were the product of a reaction between the media used. As my distance from the painting gets progressively shorter my vision would become blurry, and I would reach a

point in which I would not be able to see the interlace of vessels. In the computer I can get extremely close... in previous paintings the vessels were at a smaller scale than in the new paintings, where they resemble gigantic veins. The old paintings one could only really approach through the mediation of an optical instrument. It is as if the computer were replacing a microscope.

EL: This is just an impression of mine, but I would like you to talk about the dominance of pure colors over the diverse universes of images that you create. Sometimes the totality of the painting is dominated by green, or sometimes red, or as in this exhibit a prevailing blue.

DU: Red plays a very characteristic role in all the work that I have done in the past few years. My paintings speak of a coagulation process and, as a metaphor, I am interested in blood as a vital fluid. I work with fluids that, as you saw in the studio, do actually coagulate. Green is mainly the opposite of red, its negative side. If you saw the negative contacts of one of my red paintings, it would be green. Blue holds for me a relation with what is cosmic, with thought. I don't know if you recall that Miró piece that has the word "foto" next to a little blue blot, and a text that says "Este es el color de mis sueños" (this is the color of my dreams). For me, blue has a connotation that evokes the realm of thought.

EL: Just to finish up, let's go back to your intuitive idea of time. Why do you insist that the pieces that you present to the viewer provoke his sensing certain aspects of the future?

DU: I have a piece from 1983 entitled "Proyecto para comenzar un final," in which the painting is represented inside itself by incorporating a series of photographs that document the whole gestation process of the painting. It is somewhat of an attempt to represent time. It would be absurd to say that my work is about time itself. My work is about my relationship with reality, and within that relationship with reality time is a fundamental aspect. Time is a convention, and it is perceived in art in very different ways. I am interested in the idea of a continuous present. For example, in the negative pieces the future is contained in a latent state. From my point of view, this is interconnected with memory. This expression presents a contradiction in terms but contains a kind of memory of the future. In this sense the negative paintings are like memories of the future.

Translation: Sara Murado Arias