

**HECTOR VILLARROEL
AT THE EMBASSY OF CHILE, WASHINGTON DC**

The Embassy of Chile continues its series of exhibitions exploring the status of contemporary painting by Chilean artists with Héctor Villarroel (born Santiago, 1967). Villarroel completed his formal training in 1990 at the Universidad de Chile, where he was trained as a painter. Since then, despite the myriad materials available to art making, painting has been his medium of choice. This exhibition concentrates on Villarroel's production since 2003.

Travel and migration were recurrent leitmotifs in twentieth century art. They were expressed in a variety of ways, sometimes overtly through the representation of the peripatetic artist such as in Picasso's *saltimbanques*, at other times impacting the way in which artists formulated their artistic identity and the way they were received by critics, as was the case with the so-called *Transavantgarde* of the 1980s. Issues of belonging and dislocation never cease to be relevant for art making. They have increasingly become part and parcel of artists' life experience, the result of expanded possibilities of travel and of the demands of an ever more integrated art world. Villarroel's two latest sets of paintings, *Wings* (2003) and *Transfers* (2005), engage themes of intercontinental travel and displacement. In seeking new audiences, the artist shows his works in a constant tour around the world, all the while incorporating elements of his journey into his production, until the work itself almost becomes a travel journal [bitacora de viaje]. Villarroel's own life and production in cities as varied as Brussels, Barcelona, Madrid, Santiago, and New York served as the impetus for *Wings* and *Transfers*. They make reference not only to the tangible experience of travel but to the artist's internal journey: the implications to his work and self that result from the need to translate his existence to another place and culture.

Painting's textures, consistencies, and smells keep Villarroel grounded, providing for him a sense of belonging despite his perpetual movement. Surrounded by the plethora of digital media available to art making today we are quick to forget painting's material and sensual appeal. Villarroel's working method is painstakingly detailed: he embraces an almost academic attention to the process itself. Researching, sketching, preparing studies, designing the composition, stretching the canvas, layering, glazing, the use of transparencies and opacities, and the articulation of rhythm, tension, balance, and color are all for him necessary steps to complete a single work. Throughout this process he takes ownership of painting through the senses. In a way, the familiarity of painting, familiarity that goes back to his formative years is the subject matter of *Wings* and *Transfers*. On a first instance then, Villarroel connects to his audience through appeal to the shared memory of the senses. Yet it is abstraction which he delivers, a style that we do not easily associate with the full deployment of oil painting's traditional steps. This apparent contradiction between process and style makes Villarroel's works unmistakably contemporary, and generates a second link to his audience, as it is forced to confront its expectations on the

diverse guises and possibilities of painting. As he quests for painting's new paths, we become Villarroel's fellow travelers.

The teachings of Zen Buddhism constitute a major source of intellectual and spiritual stimulation for Villarroel. They also provide theoretical unity to his work. For Zen Buddhists, *dharmas* are the basic and irreducible building blocks of the world. They are in constant flux and when grouped take multifarious forms such as trees, water, light, and people. Painting for Villarroel represents an attempt to reach integration with nature. In making his preparatory sketches, Villarroel devises his own set of "basic organic units" that he later regroups on the canvas. He consciously attempts to replicate nature's operations and rhythms, and in this sense painting becomes both the means and the end, the pursuit to reach a fusion with nature and nature itself. The production of other twentieth century artists such as Yves Klein and Robert Rauschenberg was also impacted by their understanding of Zen Buddhism. Zen's emphasis on the immediacy of experience inspired these artists' endeavors for an ever-increasing synthesis of art and life. Villarroel, through his meticulous process, also attempts and evokes that integration. "I try" he says, "to position man in coexistence with nature, and to mitigate our tendency to impose ourselves on it."

In the movement from *Wings* to *Transfers*, we see an enactment of that effort, a performance of that aim that starts in one series and is fulfilled in the other. Villarroel combines in his paintings expressionistic and geometric abstraction, the two major styles of abstraction in the twentieth century. He extracts the meaning built up in these styles and condenses them on the canvas, representing the tension between the organic and the man-made in an almost diagrammatic configuration. In *Wings* masses of formless paint coexist, yet do not merge, with the hard-edged formations that echo the shape of the canvas; one kind of painting is enacted within the frame established by the other. In *Transfers* however, Villarroel goes one step further, interweaving both: expressionism and the geometric infiltrate each other; superimposition gives way to intertwining and interdependency.

It seems today that work done in a traditional medium must reflect upon the status of the medium itself to be called art. But if we consider the work of artists such as Gerhard Richter and Daniel Buren we cannot help but wonder about the next step of painting in the face of the near exhaustion of its capacity for self-reflection. Villarroel is adamant in denying painting's self-scrutiny as his work's hidden agenda. He does not want to vindicate painting either, he contends. But this is nevertheless the ultimate effect of his production. In regrouping the building blocks of nature on the canvas, he not only asserts his agency as a creator, but also upholds painting not as a medium for art but as a medium for life. Painting becomes a bridge to life, a "medium" in the non-aesthetic use of the word to help him connect and stay connected to the world.

Carolina Carrasco Nevdatchine

Independent Curator, New York, December 2005