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From Painting the Social to Drawing the Personal

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree
Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Alida Cervantes

Committee in charge:

Professor Ernest Silva, Chair
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2013

The Thesis of Alida Cervantes is approved and is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California, San Diego

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

From Painting the Social to Drawing the Personal

by

Alida Cervantes

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California, San Diego, 2013

Professor Ernest Silva, Chair

This text will investigate my art practice during the time I have been studying in the Visual Arts Department. While navigating social themes like race and class in the context of colonial and modern México, this paper focuses on my shift from painting primarily about social issues to drawing subject matter related more to the personal. It accompanies an exhibition of large-scale drawings on paper.

FROM PAINTING THE SOCIAL TO DRAWING THE PERSONAL

My work is about relationships between individuals of different class, race, species, and sex. My work addresses the power dynamics that occur within these relationships and how sex, love and aggression flow (or not) within these. I am interested in different levels of domination and submission that occur in these relationships. Aspects of religion like sin and guilt play an important part in my work as well. A lot of what informs my work has to do with my personal life. The relationships with and between people that were close to me growing up and have been in my life are my primary inspiration. The work I am presenting addresses these issues and the changes in my creative process that I have been undergoing during my time at UCSD.

For my thesis show I am presenting several large-scale sketches. These sketches are a phase of experimentation with drawing/painting that I find myself at this moment. For the last year I had been concentrating mostly on drawing until about 6 months ago I made a conscious decision to stop painting altogether, at least in the way I was used to doing, and focus primarily on drawing. My focus on drawing made me interested in experimenting with different aspects of it and the works I am presenting are the product of that experimentation.

The work I am presenting is a reaction to my last body of work, my “casta paintings” which was a series of oil paintings that I presented in my 1st year review, and that I will also talk about in this paper as a way to understand more my present work. These paintings were my response to the Mexican casta paintings from the colonial period in México, which I will describe more later. I

continue to be very interested in historical painting. I'm particularly drawn to the religious "drama" is played in a lot of Spanish art of the 16th and 17th centuries, like Zurbaran for example. The art of Goya, particularly his depictions of certain "dark" aspects of human nature are also of interest to me. Mexican art is also influential in my work. I'm interested in Mexican colonial paintings, especially the casta paintings, Mexican folk art and the Mexican codices from the colonial period. I am also interested in Mannerism and allegorical paintings primarily from Italy. The way the human figure is distorted and presented in exaggerated poses in Italian Mannerism appeals very much to me. Lastly I would say the allegorical paintings of Cosimo Tura and Francesco del Cossa have been important to my latest work.

The casta paintings that I did for my last body of work were my response to the Mexican casta paintings of the colonial period in Mexico. Those paintings were done in Mexico during the 17th and 18th centuries. They documented the racial combinations that existed in the New World through the mixing of Indians, Blacks, and Spaniards. The casta paintings represented the social order where each person ranked. They reflected the sense of superiority of Spaniards by illustrating an orderly hierarchical society where socio-economic status depended on skin color. The casta paintings were done in sets that usually consisted of 16 small-scale paintings, which illustrated 16 different racial mixes of couples and their offspring. Each painting had a text like the following: From X and Y Produces Z, where X, Y, and Z is the name given to the race or mix of each individual and the child. At the top of the sets were usually the mixes of pure races and at the bottom were very

mixed couples. Casta paintings were also done individually in larger scale. These paintings followed the same format as the sets do of including a couple, the offspring, and a text to describe each figure. Things like dress, landscape, typical foods, animals and customs etc were portrayed in the paintings. The paintings sometimes showed the couple and child in a domestic setting, like in the kitchen having dinner, or sometimes in an outdoor setting, like taking a walk in a garden. Most of the time the images are ones of domesticity. Sometimes though, certain artists made a point of showing the result of certain castes mixing. Sometimes the result was a slow lazy individual. Other times the end result was violence. So in some paintings one of the spouses is portrayed taking out some sort of aggressive conduct on the other, like beating them with a stick or trying to stab them with a knife.

I had several reasons for being interested in the theme of the casta painting. The conquest and colonization of México is interesting to me for all it represents with respect to relationships of domination, subjugation, and submission between individuals of different races and classes. The theme of sex (sexual attraction, impulse, sex norms, sex and religion) is also interesting to me in the context of Mexican culture. Another reason I was drawn to the casta paintings was my story as a white upper class Mexican. Aspects with respect to how I was raised that deal with class, race, and sex are very linked to many ideas that were predominant during the time the casta paintings were done. The fact that I grew up with servants (male and female) working and living in our house also strongly fueled my interest in relationships between people of different race/class, particularly in relation to domination and submission.

The casta paintings that I did, like the original casta paintings, represented a male (even if it was just a part of a male) and a female of different race. Sometimes a child appeared, but at other times an animal appeared instead. When I did those paintings, my intention was to show these couples in some sort of sexual or aggressive tension, at whatever level. Sometimes it was just an odd look one of them was giving the other, at other times it was more violent. I wanted to focus more on the theme of the casta paintings to be sex, not race and class, like it was in the original casta paintings. The paintings were done on large, rectangular, wooden panels using oil paints and sometimes enamel paints as well. The process of creating the images to be painted was done using Photoshop. These images were collages that I created using other images that I would find online. I used fragments of the original casta paintings, dolls, figurines or sculptures from Mexican folk art to Italian Renaissance art. Using Photoshop I would cut them up, layer them, combine them, etc etc and then rearrange them until I got something I liked. Usually the result was something that was visually appealing to me, had a certain tension between the characters, but that I also found somewhat amusing. When finally I had what I wanted, I would then transfer the image almost literally to the painting surface. What ended up happening is that the copying of the image as is would bring me to a breaking point where I couldn't stand it anymore because it was so annoying and rigid and so then I would do something to sabotage the painting or at least break with the rigidity of copying the image as is. Then I would go back to fixing it and trying to make it nice again until one more time I couldn't stand it anymore and would do something a little more expressive. I would go back

and forth navigating this tension of trying to have things look a particular way but at the same time being annoyed with myself for doing that. I painted until the painting had a specific intensity and then I would leave it.

To a certain degree, this is how I have been painting for the last 20 years. Although my current work incorporates painting, it is on many levels different from the type of painting I had been doing before. For example in terms of the actual painting process, when I was oil painting, I cared about getting things to look to a high degree to what my visual source was. Now I am more interested in using sources only as a starting point. What my source is has changed a lot, as well. When I began painting I used live models. Then I moved to photographs, then I moved to altering the photographs, then I made collages. Whatever it was, in the end I didn't allow myself too much input on how the painted image should be with respect to the original image. So if something was yellowish green, I made it yellowish green. This part of my painting got more flexible throughout my time painting, but in general I was sort of a slave to my original image that I would copy. I was interested in being able to improvise, but there were many concerns that limited my expressivity to a high degree. I was concerned in finding myself in the moments where I am not making decisions so consciously when I am painting but rather, they happen by themselves, but it was hard for this to happen because of the limits I put on myself in terms of interpreting or creating an image. This has become a priority for me, and I am trying to find the setting for this to be able to happen more often. I would say throughout my painting years I have been gradually moving from painting things as they are to painting things more how I

want. In short, my focus is more on improvisation rather than on realistic technique.

Something else that makes my current work different from my last work is the incorporation of drawing. In the past drawing has been something I've kept sort of informal and secret. I've never really considered my drawings finished work, or even work at all. My drawing has always come mostly from my imagination, perhaps because it is faster and more accessible. And because it came from my imagination I've judged it to be bad and self-indulgent, although secretly I kind of liked them. I feel like in a way painting has been like the adult in the relationship and drawing has been the child. Now I am at a point where I need to come out of the closet with my drawing and let it be what it's going to be. I've never shown my drawing as actual work and its becoming interesting to me to consider what I view as a finished work and what I view as a sketch. And also what I see as good and bad work.

In terms of the supports I use, I have moved away from working on canvas or wood. I am working on large big pieces of paper that I create by gluing smaller pieces of paper together to form larger pieces. This means that the creation of the surface is more integrated more into to the actual making of the work. So I am making decisions about the shape and size as part of the work while producing it.

For this new type of work I did not use oil paints, as the fact they're so expensive and give so little are a limitation for me. I prefer to use house paint, which is very cheap and allows me to use really big brushes and be more active with the paint. The paint dries fast and this allows me to rework an image over another image faster, unlike oil paints. Apart from that I am using ink, charcoal,

pencil, pen, gesso, and marker. I like the contrast created by different types of marks near each other and using these different media make that happen.

My primary concern now is discovering which is the way that I most enjoy representing the things I see without being so tied to an image, including the one I am creating. My use of sources is more varied and the degree to which I am faithful to them varies highly so this permits me a high level of flexibility.

Sometimes I am using an image I have found, other times I am using something that I making up from my head, other times I am using something I saw from memory. Still at other times I am using my own sketches, or someone else's. Most of the time I am using all of these mixed together. I'm not using Photoshop as an intermediate step like I did for the casta paintings. I use the images I have or my imagination and work directly on the piece. I don't work and rework an image before deciding to make a piece from it. I prefer to work and rework it during the actual process of creating the piece rather than have it be something I do beforehand and that therefore is separated from the making of the piece. Using black and white paint allows me to do this because I can work fast and not become distracted by decisions with regard to color.

My process is sort of like the following. When I create the surface I am going to be working on with pieces of paper, I think of the pieces I am gluing together as giant brushstrokes that create a giant surface for me to draw on. I use cheap industrial paper and glue it with finer paper like tracing paper to make the bigger pieces. The process of making the big piece is intuitive; I just kind of follow my instinct and glue or cut off accordingly. I also try to let the paper do whatever it does like get wrinkled or get dirty. After I have a shape I am happy with, I start to

put gesso on some areas. This part to me is like another layer because I deliberately choose to put gesso in some areas and leave others with the paper showing. This is very different to what I used to do in painting, which was cover the entire area with gesso. I'm using gesso as if it was paint. When I make the drawings, sometimes I have a very clear idea of how I want to go about it but other times I don't really and just allow myself to discover it while doing it. Sometimes I have a clear idea of what I want and at any moment it turns into something else I wasn't necessarily planning on making. Either way I am interested in the transparency of the process to a certain degree so that "mistakes", accidents, drawing, and redrawing are made evident in the final result. Sometimes I don't know if I am making drawings or making paintings. Sometimes the result is more like drawing and sometimes more like painting.

My current work draws from several sources. It has to do with the casta paintings, animals, my relationship with my ex-partner of 9 years, the history of Mexico/Spain, religion, and certain aspects of human nature that I talked about like domination and submission in the context of difference. Different aspects of Catholicism like guilt, sacrifice, and sin are important elements of my work. Where as my casta paintings had a very precise theme, I feel now I am letting all my interests play themselves out in any manner which they please. This may be a way of handling things for the moment just to give myself more freedom, in the future I may adapt a more structured way of representing my ideas. I'm not sure.

The work I am making now is a step towards teaching myself to create drawings and paintings and get myself out of the mode of exactly recreating

images. I am attempting to move away from the security of recreating an image the way I've always done in painting that limits me not only from delving deeper into a work, but also in allowing me to enjoy and express myself more. I certainly don't feel these sketches are the final step but they are teaching me to let go of certain elements of creating a work that are not useful for me even though I have taken advantage of them for so long. Having a pre-conceived idea of what an image is going to be has become a process that is much more flexible now. The pre-conceived idea has become only a source for me to work from, and I am moving away from having it be a limitation for me. I am not sure if or when I will go back to painting with oils. For now, I am interested in continuing to experiment with this media and pushing the properties of collage or the process of layering images and the paper they are created on. I also want to start cutting the paper in different places and have the pieces be more fragmented in the way they are made but at the same time still hold together a unified image. I see my process right now as one whereby I try to rebuild something out of shreds. Or another way to look at it would be to say I try to make something nice out of a mess. Or I try to make something clear out of something that is not clear at all. In terms of content, I am very involved still with the themes of my work and don't see them changing very much. I want to explore more the theme of the domestic maid in the context of Mexico in relation to how I view it now and perceived it growing up. I feel is something that, like the casta paintings, encompasses many of my interests. Animals might become more prevalent in my work, as well, as a way of investigating more my ideas relating to religion, human nature, and nature in general. In the end, what I want to do is to manifest how I view different things that

I experience in my life but to use that in a way to talk about something that is not just directly my life.