

ALEJANDRO PUENTE. El desvío de la mirada (The shift of gaze)

Since his first informalist experiences with *Grupo Si*, Alejandro Puente broke away from modern art proposals. While, at the beginning, he preferred a gesture drawn with strong contrast, after a brief informalist period, he decided to paint simple shapes with color graduated by the brushstroke. Both his gestural painting and his “sensitive geometry” –as Aldo Pellegrini described it– valued the subject’s imprint against the rationalist distancing of concrete art programs.

In 1965, Puente extended shape and color to the frame in the series of works he exhibited together with César Paternosto at Galería Lirolay. Those paintings adopted the nature of objects and forced the viewer to move, as noticed by Saúl Yurkievich when he pointed out that “they allowed other gazes, apart from the frontal one.”¹ In this framework, *Pintura (Painting, 1965)* can be understood as a new breaking point in the classical “Renaissance window”, which had been questioned by concrete artists through its shaped frame proposal.

While the structuralist thinking was spreading, Puente performed modular works from the notion of system, such as *Sin título (Untitled, 1967)*, made up from four triangular frames. Soon, those modules with color accents on the edges invaded the space, breaking bidimensionality. The notion of system as a whole was essential to his primary structure program –which he exhibited with an information sheet– and his chromatic sequences, such as the one he presented at *Information*, where his works interacted with the conceptual productions of the international scene.

However, at that same time, Puente was making a new switch in his poetics, since, amidst the cultural differences he perceived in the New York scene², he started to find an air of familiarity among the chromatic systems outlined in his information sheets and pre-Hispanic friezes. Immersed in the study of the recurrence of those arrangements in cultural patterns, he took interest in reinterpreting their symbolism, and this decision became the launch pad for the searches he carried out throughout his career. The reflections he shared with Paternosto and Julio Alpuy were deepened when he returned to Argentina as he became in contact with the work and texts of Joaquín Torres García and got close to Libero

¹ Conversation between Puente and Yurkievich, from *Premio Di Tella (Di Tella Award) 1966* catalogue.

² In 1967, he was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship and lived in New York until 1971.

Badii, with whom he exchanged experiences of culture clash and shared an interest in Americanist iconography.

Then, organized compositions began to arise through an homogeneous grid that, as the layout of textiles, contained symbolic borders (*Sin título [Untitled]* drawings, 1977 and 1981). In some cases, chromatic sequences adopted an *uncu* (poncho) format, like *Uncu* (1973), which, from its very Quechua title, is inspired in the clothes worn by the Incas as a symbol of power and social status.

Experimenting with non-traditional materials, he diversified his recreations: he made collages with feathers, took advantage of chipboard and cork textures, worked with incisions on wood, tied colorful threads to create variants of *quipus* –as a reference to the system of strings coded by color and number of knots used by the Incas as recording devices– and painted the regularity of the module and iconographic motifs with a loose texture, as seen in *Ancestor* (1982) and *Paicha* (1988).

Also at that time, pre-Hispanic architecture gained importance within his research. His temple façades, arrangements or orthogonal layouts spread in large format compositions whose titles are Mapuche, Incan and Mayan words, such as *Huaraz* (1997), *Huacalera* (1998), *Uquia* (1998), *Tanka* (2000) and *Ruyala* (2001). In all these works the constructive matrix rigidity is filtered by a weave of color created by the soft brushstroke in overlapping layers.

As a proof of his searches, this set of works show his continued interest in shifting the gaze to explore space and color. Painting the edges of the frame, he had managed to shift the gaze away from the center, he got the modules and primary structures to gradually detach themselves from the bidimensional support in order to involve the viewer in a modified space and, later, the various architectures to combine and drive the gaze towards internal spaces. The early modular structures had included a chromatic highlighting of the sides, later, color was incorporated into the conceptual record of systems and, finally, became the personal imprint of their identity. This sequence of aesthetic operations cast new light into the avant-garde assumptions of the 1940s, bearing witness to Puente's contributions to the constructive neo-avant-garde and his active participation in the breaking points that gave rise to contemporary art.

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Alejandro Puente (La Plata, 1933–Buenos Aires, 2013) studied Theory of Vision with Héctor Cartier. In La Plata, he was part of *Grupo Si*, with his gestural paintings. He soon reoriented his poetics towards sensitive geometry and, in 1967, he exhibited primary structures against the backdrop of the Advanced Art Week organized by Instituto Torcuato Di Tella. He was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship, joined New York avant-garde and participated in *Information* (The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1970). After making a plastic arts proposal related to the pre-Hispanic cosmovision, he continued working in Argentina since 1971. In 1985 he participated in the *18ª Bienal de São Paulo*, Brazil. During this period he was a professor at Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes “Ernesto de la Cárcova”. He gained many recognitions, among the latest are: First Prize at Salón Telecom Argentina (1995), First Prize at Salón Banco de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (1999), Grand Prize at Salón Nacional de Pintura (2001), Konex Award (2002), Gold Harlequin Prize, Fundación Pettoruti (2002) and the Rosario Prize, Fundación Castagnino (2003). In 2007 he painted a mural, “Homenaje al artista artesano” (Tribute to the Artisan Artist), at Museo de Arte Popular “José Hernández”. He was named “Distinguished Citizen of the Province of Buenos Aires” (2008), Full Member of Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, curator of the “Ojo al País” project and member of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes Advisory Board. As a tribute to Puente’s teaching work, Museo de Calcos y Escultura Comparada “Ernesto de la Cárcova” organized the *Alejandro Puente* exhibition from March to May 2014. *Huellas sensibles (Sensitive Prints)*, curated by Cristina Rossi. Espacio de Arte de Fundación OSDE will host the *Alejandro Puente* exhibition from May to July 2015. *Abstracción y tradición americana (American Tradition and Abstraction)*, curated by Mariana Marchesi. Puente’s work is shown in numerous public and private collections, both in Argentina and abroad.