

The Palette and the Planet

On Osvaldo Romberg's Dirty Geometry

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Osvaldo Romberg's work has been dealing for over forty years with the weighty considerations of the inquires and iniquities taking hold of the outreaches of the Modernist geometric rhetoric. His works from the 1970s were characterized by areas of color patches marking the traces of mechanical brushstrokes, and different color hues set on a plane according to the horizontal and vertical coordinates of the square support of paper or canvas, in accordance to the painting's autonomous and geometric format. These painterly elements seem to be modeled according to the historical reference of Paul Cézanne. But the given moment they imprint and leave in their track is one already familiar with extreme expressions of purity in painting and in its geometric rhythm – like the works of various Minimalists – sweeping away the remains of Cézanne's pictorial language to implement their fanatical approach. The color patches Romberg leaves on his square supports in the 1970s can then be read as a "contamination" of the geometric order that could have been absolutely refined, had it not been touched.

The act of staining-contaminating the square format repeats through the color hues from one work to the next acceding to the same order until eventually a system appears. According to it, every line of stains opens with a certain color that develops by a minute and rationed addition of another tone. The industrial name of each pigment is written beside each hue, usually in handwriting, and frequently the arrangement is accompanied with a reproduction of an artwork that can be categorized as Old Master. The confrontation between recollections of past artworks and the abstract pictorial arrangement evoking the linguistic of Modernist painting, suggests that every artwork is an incidental junction between foreign semantic mechanisms. Yet the semiotic safety net of the linguistic system grounded in Romberg's works, leaves a gaping hole – in the abstract form of painters' palettes evoked through the mode of ordering of the color marks, hue after hue on the surface, like paint placed, on such a palette, ready to perform. This associative reference may also suggest an affinity between the color arrangement created on the palette and the model of the semiotic system appearing in Romberg's works. His conceptual palette is the occupation of painting that will forever exist "before" and "after" every act of painting, and any of its circumstantial, historical and political contexts.

In this respect, Romberg's palette is the Readymade of the profession of painting; that which is rooted in the temporal conditions of each and every painting – as is demonstrated in an almost didactic way by the Old Master reproductions attached to the works; but also leaking out to the non-temporal, conceptual, utopian, abstract – as is evident from the patches of color made by mechanical brushstrokes, acting out the painter's task. They are placed hue following hue, as if presenting the capabilities of a trained hand (almost like the hand of an Old Master), changing the tone bit by bit, patiently and gradually; as a set of visual appetizers that are supposed to develop gradual minute scrutiny of the nuanced tones of the seen. Romberg's Readymade, or his semiotic system, are not only a means evoking thought or imagination, but also a medium of sensory experience sobering up in face of each epoch, style or motivation. But one that is also desirous, always after more nuanced shades of appearances.

The same color patches, so characteristic of Romberg's language and system, became more rigid and square, geometric and hermetic in his recent paintings from 2013. What was formerly a schematic organization of brushstroke marks has now become a pattern of emblematic shapes, invested with a symbolist slant, especially when flashes of color appear on the dark ground lending the works a galactic feel. In some of the paintings a few of the square patches are erased, replaced with black square marks like islands of non-sight directing a superior eye from the light to the darkness. These paintings seem to chronicle means for the blinking motion of the eyelid. Other paintings are like tales of apparatuses for iris expansion – they have bands of color that seem like a stretching of the earlier color stains, evoking a similar coloring and logic of the division and grading of their characteristic tones. These hard-edged color stripes are placed diagonally like the dynamic vectors in Wassily Kandinsky's paintings. In Romberg's paintings' compositions they appear on a dark ground, like an abundant array of juggling sticks placed one upon the other, so that even in their gaps geometric shapes are born: squares, diamonds, triangles placed on their tips like hourglasses, like fragments of Constantine Brancusi's *Endless Column*. The reference to the chapter of symbolic abstract in the history of Modernism is clear. Moreover, the light glowing from the color stripes on the dark ground is reminiscent of later moments in Modernism, like the works of Dan Flavin or Bruce Neuman, who replaced elementary painterly components like line and color with neon tubes.

In these works, Romberg not only challenges traces and references of different histories and languages, but also obstructs each one through the other, diminishing their ability to communicate meaning and coherence. From their numerous contact points, the same lines chart a web of constraints blocking their movement and sealing off any entry to space. They have the perverse role of "dirty geometry," if only because they subvert the discipline of each function given to geometric shapes for utopian causes and fantastic dreams. But when they stop functioning for one cause, these same geometric shapes also encourage their usage in another capacity – on the lattice surface, in the illogical and seductive dynamic occurring between the parts of this net, and in the capacity of painting that liberates the stoppages, the delays and the taboos of the Readymade.