

Allegorical Post-formalism

Painting as image in the history of painting

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This essay focuses on Omar Rodriguez-Graham's painting as a post-formalist practice of disassembling and reassembling the tradition of painting. As a result, within this practice, we find two historically antagonistic poles. How then, can the corporality that distinguishes painting from other methods of image reproduction be understood as a potent vehicle for considering the structure of painting as montage? In other words, how can we relate painting to those practices usually associated with other disciplines involving fragmentation, such as photomontage? Again, we would need to create a dialectic for contradictory art concepts, to analyze in what manner painting can be understood as putting images from the past into circulation.

In this scenario, we could say that painting – before being placed in the sphere of materiality which was eventually invaded by minimalist objecthood in the 1960s – reveals that its persistence today comes back to a reflection on the image. We refer to the explanation given by Tony Godfrey on the status of painting today: “It has been established that the impulse to paint begins, first of all, in the desire to emulate a well-known painting, and, secondly, in the impulse to press a tube and spread paint over the canvas. The first leads us to a tradition; the second, to materiality”¹.

This apparently simplistic definition nevertheless provides two paths which become pertinent when considering Omar Rodriguez-Graham's recent work. If on one hand we rethink formalism as a matter of preference for materiality itself, we have to conclude that such materiality is also a condensation of images. Thus, the status of materiality, even when tending towards abstraction, is nurtured by sources which “carry us back” to tradition. First of all, one would need to realize that the dialectic exercise in which the majority of debates on modern painting were founded, figuration vs. abstraction, are hardly relevant in our search for an understanding of how painting has outlived Modernism as well as Postmodern Historicism. Hence, the notion that in its ties to Formalism, the pictorial image can show us other paths to explain the persistence of painting today.

Although the formalist narrative of painting appears to have been exhausted in terms of a teleological vision that would culminate in its own self-definition, in recent years we have seen emerging practices that revive certain aspects of abstract painting. Yet, far from perpetuating an overlapping of planes according to the constructivist stereotypes of industrial mechanization, inspired by theological beliefs, or, presupposing the expression of subjectivity without external interference, these practices are more prone to those analytical exercises which have characterized minimalist and conceptual procedures.

Possibly, the key concept for understanding this method of reinvention of pictorial materiality – in the formalist sense – would have its corresponding dialectic in allegories. To mention this dialectical framework in terms of art theory brings to mind the concept of allegory that Walter Benjamin coined for reflecting on modernity and the procedure of montage, themes fully developed in texts such as *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, and, later, in his unfinished manuscript known as *The Arcades Project*. One should recognize that linking the concepts of allegory and montage, as done by Benjamin, in terms of Rodriguez-Graham's paintings might at first sight seem a risky exercise, however, it allows us to differentiate the meaning of pictorial allegory in this field from theoretical reflection on the image.

Still, it is worth clarifying that, in methodological terms, applying the allegory, as in Benjamin's sense of the fragment, might seem a questionable effort. While, for the philosopher of modernity, allegory would refer to fragmentation – in other words, ruin. In the painting of Rodriguez-Graham the practice of assembling and disassembling obeys pictorial principles whose outcome forces us to think in strict terms of the dialectics of the image. Although there is fragmentation, the images which he pictorially develops show a distinct character to that which Benjamin observed in Parisian passages, merchandise, or in Avant-Garde art.

In this regard, it must be understood that, in this series of paintings, the notions of assembly and disassembly of allegories refer us to representations taken from the history of painting. Thus, what must be taken into account is that 'the model' from which the artist departs is a digital construction, or rather, a fragmented assemblage of such historiographic references. These "constructions" created by the artist himself and based on the manipulation of allegorical paintings with the end of painting them on a canvas, paradoxically turn back towards the lexicon of abstraction. This practice of deconstructing and reconstructing images from original works of art enables the distancing of the 'copy' from the established canonic model. The notion of montage is therefore related to a paradoxical condition, that is to say, it is aligned with a tradition of formalist materiality as the pictorial consequence of fragmentation. This practice, in turn, opens up the possibility for the construction of a unique work of art on canvas, which has historically legitimized painting as an auratic, unrepeatable object.

Concerning this definition of classical allegory – as differentiated from Benjamin's notion – it is hard not to mention artworks which similarly invert the idea of reproduction, by referencing photography – an indexical medium – in terms of unrepeatable pictorial materiality, to the degree that the image dissolves within the language of abstraction. A paradigmatic case worth mentioning is Gerhard Richter's polyptych in which he "reproduces" Titian's *Annunciation*, in his painting *Annunciation after Titian* (1973), using a photographic reproduction of the original painting as a "model". In this work, the allegorical figure is gradually erased from painting to painting until it becomes abstract and flat – an evolutionary process which illustrates the transfiguration of an allegory into pictorial materiality. We might say that this work of art – an example of the advent of conceptual painting – is a precedent for those artists who practice painting based on images from its own history.

Nevertheless, the difference between Richter's proposal and Rodriguez-Graham's allegorical paintings, is that the digital fragmentation of the latter brings them closer to the method of montage. The combination of allegorical images provides a glimpse of the contours of some foreshortened figures between forms delimited by color, sometimes a horse, or the suggestion of a lance. In these, allegories become abstract formations recalling Baroque theatrical compositions where figures were stretched to heighten their dramatic impact. Paradoxically, this exercise turns back digital reproduction towards the unique work of art. This is the moment when Benjamin's references acquire meaning, given that we are faced with a pictorial-allegorical montage which – although linked to abstraction – is surprisingly conceived from the fragmentation of the image.

On this basis, and when referring to certain practices of painting today, we could say that we undoubtedly find ourselves in the field of image production. However, in this context, said production goes back to the reproducibility of images with the end of returning them once more to the unique work of art, which in turn revives the ideology of the artist's subjectivity and originality. It is here that we must clarify that although the myth of the genius is founded on the idea of originality, as if images appeared by magic in the psyche of a creator, it has today become widely accepted that the configuration of the imaginary can be attributed to historic flows in which such images reproduce, as in the case of ancient allegories. If the classical

artist with his technical skills transformed myths or biblical texts into tangible forms of sculpture and painting, it should be understood that the configured images were derived from distant sources, always subject to a transmutation in relation to the various ideological frameworks of the times.

Thus, historiography has shown the persistence of ancient art in Renaissance Classicism, followed by successive reconfigurations of classicist imaginary in Baroque variegations and Nineteenth Century Neoclassicism. Within this same narrative scaffolding, hagiographic imagery has also been analyzed in the formation of new canons or visions within styles and epochs, along with a resignification of Greco-Roman allegories. With this standard in mind, the painting of Omar Rodriguez-Graham could well be read as a way of participating in the stream of historical images. Unlike other eras that mark the history of art, the awareness of contemporary artists of belonging to a tradition means that the game of manipulating images for their eventual transfer to the materiality of the painting becomes a pictorial analysis of images from the history of painting.

The practice of painting is a millenary chain of the interpretation of the imaginary. We see this condition in the particular case of this series of paintings, in so far as the pictorial gesture becomes an incessant exercise of reconstruction of foundational allegories. If we take hold of the concept *pathosforme*, coined by historian Aby Warburg, we will understand this linkage as pathological content that transmutes itself as the images travel in time. With this in mind, we can rethink the notion of image fragmentation in Rodriguez-Graham's analytic practice, intersecting Benjaminian concepts with Warburgian notions that, in strict terms, are opposed to the Hegelian or formalist understanding of history.

As Linda Baez explains, allegories, symbols or engrams enable the emotive charge for works of art to travel in time. Supporting the engrams is Mnemosine, in other words, memory. According to this theory, these inventories of symbols – such as allegories – form the repertoire which the artist calls on “to reject or share, according to the impulse provided by this conglomerate of images”. We can now begin to reflect on how Rodriguez-Graham's work, although analytic, paradoxically emerges as expressive. Before surmising that this is due to the artist's subjectivity embodied on the canvas – as is presupposed in expressionist language – perhaps it is convenient to understand that what is at stake is the journey of the old forms that the artist manipulates in such a way that his expressivity acquires a new *pathos*.

If we now view Warburg's conception in terms of those images which Omar Rodriguez-Graham selects from the past – such as François Boucher's Rococo painting *The Triumph of Venus* (after 1743); *The Tower of Babel* (1563), an allegory of hubris facing the divine, by Peter Brueghel the Elder; the triptych of *The Battle of San Romano* (1456-60) by Fifteenth Century artist Paolo Uccello, which combines the perspectives and foreshortening characteristic of the Renaissance; *The Turkish Bath* (1863), the romantic painting with Oriental theme by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres; the Venetian Giovanni Battista Tiepolo's Rococo paintings of the allegories of *Rinaldo and Armida* (1745) and *Apollo, the Planets and the Continents* (1752); as well as some references from modern painting such as Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase* (1912) – we must rethink how these images travel and are reconfigured through what we have identified as pictorial analysis. What is relevant in this procedure is how Rodriguez-Graham's paintings acquire expressivity without submitting to the myth of romantic impulse which presupposes the transfer of a tormented subjectivity of the artist onto the canvas.

Bringing Warburgian iconology to this analysis is appropriate, especially because of its interest in the vestiges of Classical Antiquity. Hence the notion of "survivor image"

(*Nachleben*), i.e., the imprint of allegories before the objects themselves, or rather "tradition before materiality", acquire a new relevance insofar as psychic formations. This explanation of the journey of the emotional charge over time through the surviving images that struggle in montage, is also closely related to the way in which Rodríguez-Graham confronts images of the past to the point of constructing a new expressive symbol.

It is important to recall that Warburg, while studying from an iconological perspective the resurgence of classical culture in the Italian Renaissance, unveiled the symptomatic and unconscious manifestation of the flow of images as a phenomenon of collective emotionalism. Another verification of how little expressivity has to do with individual subjectivity. At the same time, with this appearance of symbols, the notion of a linear history is dismantled. What can we now say about Rodríguez-Graham's work in relation to these assumptions of the psychic charge of the reconfiguration of those images in time? It should be noted that, contrary to the iconological exercise, the images return, but as a tangle of forms and colors in which their iconic character gives way to post-formalist composition. Nevertheless, with its basis in the theory of an artwork as a reactivation of expressive charges from other eras, it would be necessary to verify if the formal materiality becomes an analysis, that is to say, one which is consistent with the concept of painting as medium; the expressivity of the paintings results directly from symbolic procedures of the linkage of allegories. In this sense, we could understand Rodríguez-Graham's painting as an analysis of the history of painting.

Within Warburg's conception of history there exists the idea of temporary disorientation, in which there can be no evolutionary meaning, except for anachronisms. Therefore, the process of *painting* the history of painting, becomes a passing gesture, which by relativizing the entrenchment of the original, restores the symbol's accumulation of energy by making it anachronistic. But, what is particular in Rodríguez-Graham's artwork is not only that the images become anachronic, but also the formalistic narrative, which – in the historiographic concept of the development of painting – supposes an evolutionary, teleological process. Rodríguez-Graham's paintings initiate the practice of the reformulation of ancient pictorial images by revealing the formalist language of abstraction. It is surprising how they are able to put in motion the "survival of the images" of historic painting. This formalization is nothing other than the essence of the pictorial effect, the emotive charge of the formula now reduced to the material experience of the painting which, even when abstract, submits to the phantom traveler who carries the emotive nature of the allegories.

Therefore, the exercise of creating anachronisms is twofold. On the one hand, the psychic transposition of expressive symbols persists, while, on the other hand, the reduction of emotionalism of the formalist archetype relativizes historical narratives, to the point that pictorial analysis is once again a scheme capable of transmigrating the sentiment of images. Upon reaffirming the anachronism of allegories, the history of painting can appear through an abstract engram where a torrent of images and its expressivity are condensed within a schematic formula. Which we have here named: "allegoric post-formalism."

Another way to understand how expressivity becomes scheme, or formula, emerges in the process of overlapping images to the point of creating a new composition. By diluting figuration, this operation takes away the narrative of the image, but without losing the expressivity of the allegories. If we think of this exercise in terms of the iconological study of art history – ergo, not linear – we note that, during the assembling of images, they undergo a transmutation to the point of losing their iconicity. This loss is the result of clear aesthetic conviction, determined to redirect the symbolic charge of the images of a painting in a circularity that is nurtured by historical repertoires in order to take them apart and reassemble

them in an “abstract appearance”. Broadly speaking, what is also blurred is the Hegelian sense of a unique, universal narrative, from which formalism is nurtured.

Such pictorial strategy also gains merit as it provides the opportunity of turning back to classical repertoires without falling into a dead end that today tends to emulate academic virtuosity of old times. Twisting the repertoire of Great European Painting via an analytic process, makes way for painterly forms that end up being more receptive in that they avoid engaging in the effect-driven optics of *chiaroscuro*. The optic that Rodriguez-Graham proposes is not so much a tendentious academic feat but, rather, the fruit of disassembly and reassembly. This procedure – which in theoretical terms has been understood in a manner contrary to abstract painting, or, rather, as a tacit differentiation between the so-called historic Avant-Garde and formalism – is reformulated here in a synthesis which is only viable after the end of painting, in its classical as well as formalist sense.

Therefore, in the pictorialist restatement seen in this group of works, the baroque figures become abstract, even while disturbingly reminiscent of allegorical themes. In this wager on “abstract allegorism,” the image loses iconicity in favor of the simplification of the figures in reconfigurations which scrutinize the tensions, turns, and refrains of baroque figures and Renaissance foreshortening. In this sense, it would be suitable to state that this series reformulates classical schemes from the perspective of assemblage and material formalism. Hence the anachronistic characterization of the work indicates that these paintings must be placed at the margins of history.

In terms of these procedures, it is worthwhile to refer to one more of Warburg’s concepts: the “knot of anachronisms”⁶; in other words, a mixture of things past and present. In this respect, and moving past the narrative of painting as self-defined, the images break loose from the history of painting. If we take this thought to its final conclusion, a flat surface is primarily – prior to a reduction of the painting to its essence – an image of a modernist concept. Based on this analysis, the work of Rodriguez-Graham brings forth an organization of flat colored surfaces for reassembly, a post-formalism heedless of historicity defined by a teleology of painting. In this sense it would be valid to conclude that upon detaching himself from worn-out uses of modernist *telos*, the artist “anachronizes” classicism as well as the variants of abstraction.

We could also take into account that academic teaching, with so much copying of models, has unleashed the survival of images along with their anachronic nature. The “great masters” of European painting have, in this respect, been the canon of successive dismantling, which, in turn, have reaffirmed the persistence of tradition through continuous elaboration of new formulae. Didi-Huberman, referring to the Warburgian iconological thesis, explains: “To validate all of this is to give into the evidence that the ideas of tradition and transmission are of fearsome complexity [...] they are made of conscious processes and unconscious processes, the forgotten and rediscoveries, of inhibitions and destructions, of assimilations and inversions of senses, of sublimations and alterations”⁷. On this same path, the theorist asks himself “Won’t there be time for the phantoms, a return of images, a survival (*Nachleben*) which isn’t subject to the transmission model which assumes imitation (*Nachahmung*) of ancient works of art by more recent art works?”⁸. So, what does creating a model at the margin of tradition and materiality suppose? It seems that the artist today has no alternative except negotiating with the long history of the Western pictorial tradition. Or, rather, think that it is possible to paint without negotiating with the history of art, but this is nonsense. Rodriguez-Graham’s paintings are thus a reiteration which not only reaffirms the survival of ancient pictorial symbols, but which also provokes reflection on the persistence of painting beyond the exhaustion of modern narratives.

According to Didi-Huberman, survival, as understood by Warburg, does not offer us any possibility of simplifying history: "...it imposes a fearsome disorientation for all whims or attempts at dividing history or art into periods. It is a transversal notion to all chronological division"⁹. This is when it is worthwhile to ask oneself again: What does the pictorial practice which Rodriguez-Graham proposes mean? If we think of it as an analytic exercise which opens the possibility of restating painting in terms of image of the history of painting, we'd have to resume the idea that the opposition between formalism and the procedures of montage, which we recognize in the photographic processes of historic vanguards, are diluted. For a similar reflection, we would have to understand that we are facing painting after the end of painting, that is to say, a period of disorientation for which there is no single rule. We find ourselves now very far from the historical exhaustion of its modernist conception. For that reason, painting today is a practice that understands its own history, not as a condition for advancement, but as a self-conscious, analytic position, after postmodernity. In this sense, as Godfrey would say, "tradition and materiality coexist". We verify this condition in the *modus operandi* of this series of paintings, in the sense that they reveal a synthesis between opposites which, for modernity, were irreconcilable.

The set of works that make up Omar Rodriguez-Graham's *Anamnesis* are part of an era in which painting after history should be understood as painting history itself. But this approach should not be limited solely to an analytic reflection on the pictorial tradition, but in terms of an experience of aesthetic pleasure. The shifting of subjectivity through the gesture reveals how pictorial poetics can be a disorientating act, whose purpose lies in resignifying the meaning of the allegories in such a way that its emotive charge – psychic and mnemonic – finds new formulas of visual materialization. It is thus that Omar Rodriguez-Graham's analytic works reveal how allegorical expression of the pictorial persists after the end of modernist and postmodernist painting. Proof that painting as a poetic gesture or allegorical impulse has no end.