

Jose Bechara's Tense Gaze

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2005

I would like to begin this brief analysis of José Bechara's work by stating my conviction that his gaze is above all a pictorial one. It is a humanised gaze, poetic and tense, but above all, born out of painting as a vital experience. Indeed, it is steeped in a halo of mystery, possibly because, in the manner of artists like Giacometti, Bechara 'builds through elimination', essaying mental images on the brink of oblivion.

Through this process, his 'addition by remainders', clean lines, and naked tension, José Bechara renders a drawing – on rice paper – the architecture of a house inked in red, bloody sap, revealing the bones of its structure. Its synthetic character reminded me of the only image illustrating Laugier's 18th century treatise "Essai sur l'architecture", in which he stipulated that the rules of classical architecture derived from the earliest constructions in wood. Laugier deduced the essential principles of architecture breaking with the dictatorship of tradition, and by doing so began rationalist thought in modern architecture. He subsequently explored the origins of primitive dwellings, shacks, a bared down architecture of beams, poles and roofs, without walls: an architecture that is sincere, capable of valuing space.

This serves as an introduction to Bechara's work which he develops around themes such as death, time, abandonment and memory; above all a certain silence and, (as I mentioned previously), obliteration. In order to understand his most muted experiments, and after this brief introduction (touching on the barest of arguments) it might be a good idea to consider first his most colourful work, set in Paraná, from which we will move to darker reality, greater austerity of form, and tension of skin. It is a trajectory in fact that leaps into three-dimensions, into the current phase that is at once sculpture, drawing and painting; that is above all aesthetic experience.

The Paraná house is a real experiment. A house that looks like a provisional bungalow spewing things out through its windows, finally ridding it of all the air inside. Much like opening the window of an airplane and being sucked out to our deaths. Perhaps it is Bechara's allusion to the Arab proverb "when a house is finished death enters it", perhaps thus expressing a desire to return to the beginning, faithful as he is to a spirit of non-conformism, continuously leaping ahead, typical of his trajectory. Which brings me the architect's speech in Adolf Loos' "Story of a Poor Rich Man": "How could you allow people to give you gifts? Haven't I already planned everything that is necessary for you? You don't need anything else! You are complete! [...]" To the owner (of

the house) there would be no more painters, or artists, or even craftsmen. He felt bereft of his own future and aspirations, of being and of desire. He was left the thought: "I now need to learn to walk with my own corpse."

But Paulo Sérgio Duarte adopted a more serious tone on describing José Bechara's subsequent decision translate that colourful experience in Paraná into a kaleidoscopic wooden sculpture. Duarte describes how Bechara takes his pictorial experience and exports it into painting: "It is a form of monochrome in space". (1) It is possible that Paulo Sergio Duarte, who studies Hélio Oiticica's work, may be playing with the meaning of his spatial reliefs, his 'monochromes in space'.

(Although the inside of Bechara's piece is merely intellectual and not open to participation.) Bechara boldly defines his piece as a monochromatic object that projects itself and expands into space, at no cost to the interpretation of his more recent work.

Both of them are certainly right, monochrome does not mean simply that which is made up of a single colour, but also that which is chromatically uniform, such as Bechara's House. I suggest that for the moment we should imagine the house as a painting doubled over by heat, taking on an abstract three-dimensional form. If we flatten it out onto a single surface, it would be difficult to distinguish much apart from surfaces reflecting slight differences in shine. Perhaps, like Mark Tansey, Bechara would tell journalists that he was saving colour for his old age. Many may think that I am in jest, but I am just as serious as Kierkegaard when he described his own (thoroughly red) painting, as the surface of the Red Sea after being crossed by the Israelites and the Egyptian troops drowned. (2) Danto, on the other hand states that "with supremacism, it is difficult to think of paintings that do not imply images, but an objective monochromatic reality, a reality therefore, that is not objective (which is what he liked to say about Malevich). I think, in fact, that the term 'not objective' means ultimately, a certain spiritual or mathematical reality." (3)

Yves Klein also asked himself whether future artists would chose to express themselves silently and for all eternity, through an immense, painting bereft of any dimensions. Klein took a gallery and stripped it bare, placing on exhibition an empty, virginal space, offering nothing for contemplation and experimentation, but absence and nihilism, to be converted into a space of sensitivity. Yves Klein sought out this "space" as raw material in a 1958 exhibition at the Iris Clert Gallery, in an attempt to demonstrate the energy, the forces infused in spaces from the accumulated energies of previous experiences. (4)

Like Klein's project – and as we shall later see on discussing Medardo Rosso – José Bechara suggests through flaws, understated hues, revealing through omission, through absence, even through emptiness itself – although his works are brimming to our eyes. His works whisper

realities, shunning without denying images, refusing to lay them out in drawings, but laying out fields open to possible, imagined and intuitive conclusions. His works touch reality gingerly, caressing, discovering sounds that can only arise from silence, a way of subjective release akin to the music of John Cage. With Cage there is no sound, but a form of listening; with Bechara's paintings often there is no painting, but a way of thinking.

A few years ago on discussing the work of Ignasi Aballí, I mentioned how the simple act of blowing particles of dust off a sheet of paper can result in art. Aballí's *Soplidos* are drawings that clean the paper support, that speak of painting beyond the boundaries of visibility.

Perception or vision is exhausted freeing us to explore emotion, beyond sight or imagination, whether it is the suggested outline of a body or the play of light in the architectural space at given times, or to put it more concretely, light streaming in through a series of large windows, projected on to the floor and the work itself. (5) A complicity that is taken even further in his series of photographs entitled *Reflexión*. Photographs of reflections on the ground, generating interesting compositions; different sensations that fuse together sight and thought, intention and feeling. Ignasi Aballí concludes: "The fact that no particular image is represented makes all images possible".

Artists like Bechara know that in every surface there resides an image, and also that we should give them form, shape them with our imagination. His works invite us to speculation, but speculation that is contained and economical. His works require a gaze that is slow, careful, or better, clear-eyed. Bechara's works seem to ask of us the Zen concept that we should release ourselves from desire in order to achieve our aims.

Which leads me to Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows": (his closing words) "To tell the truth, I wrote this because I wanted to pose the question of whether there is any approach, in literature or in the arts for example, through which one could compensate for imperfections. I am interested in recovering, at least in the field of literature, the universe of shadows that we are dissipating... I would like to increase the water dripping in through the cracks of the building called literature, to darken its walls, to cast shadows over all that is excessively visible and strip its insides of unnecessary ornaments. It is not my intention to do the same to all houses. But it would do no wrong, I believe, for there to be at least one house of this kind. And to see the result I am going to turn my light off." (6)

At a deeper level, we are discussing no more than an economy of forms, even if it in the guise of a concentration of objects, as is the case of Bechara's House. An aesthetic energy that is no more than a condensation life experience, the extreme tension of aesthetic experience. The action of the wind, the sun or water, that is, the action

of the elements over things, has a great deal to do with that accumulation of constructive elements in works like *Aranha* (Spider), which, as Agnaldo Farias points out, “corresponds to a sort of explosion, a warning of the dangers surrounding the desire for stability and comfort we aim to satisfy when we arrange our dining- and living-rooms, with tables and chairs, the armchairs and the sofa wrapping around the coffee-table facing the television set, as if all this were something precarious and about to be attacked by a sudden, violent force”. (7) José Bechara, as I was saying, works directly on experience itself and not through imitation. To him drawing is more of a script, an exercise. Which is why his works turn out as dramatic as Piranesi’s *Roma*, by valuing and resolving through contrasts, heightening the power of compact matter. Thus too Piranesi’s marvellous *Carceri* that allow us no room for our gaze, infested as the *Carceri* are with perspectives that pay a kind of homage to darkness. There, amid minute, detailed strokes, where confusion is converted into mass, space into scenography, and drawing into decorative virtuosity. A few months before dying, Giovanni Battista Piranesi wrote a letter to his sister in which he reviewed his life. In it, besides listing his works, he stated his otherwise evident attraction for the city of Rome, the source of his true inspiration. He did so with particular emotion, declaring himself a lover of Rome by conviction. But his Rome is somewhat submerged and dark, contrasting with the earlier view of clearly Vitruvian influence. Piranesi’s Rome is picturesque, fragmentary and incommensurable. It extols the ruins, their losing battle against nature that threatens historical memory. And Bechara’s works seem to have lost their own battles, from his painting by intervention to that object spewing vomit stifling the breath of his houses. We have thus far taken painting as a starting point, the germ and principle of Bechara’s gaze, the blank page before his visual poetry. In any case, it is important to take into account Luiz Camillo Osório’s words: “Although his background and his gaze are associated to the pictorial tradition, it is not the craft of painting that motivates him in his day-to-day activities in the studio. Painting is the horizon of his poetics; it is a standing-point from which he thinks art, but it does not condition his work’s need for expression, it does not suffice as a creative process”. (8) Osório insists that Bechara’s processes do not start from a sculptural sensitivity and perhaps that is why Bechara talks enthusiastically about a sculptor as pictorial as Medardo Rosso. It was by accident, in Santiago de Compostela, back in 1998 that Bechara had his first ‘live’ contact with Rosso’s work. It is worth lingering on this because in fact, although being very far apart in terms of the formal appearance of their respective works, there are common positionings that are meaningful to both artists, and which are vital in order to understand the expanded universe, the perceptive precision

and the luminous intensity of some of José Bechara's projects. I would like to start out by considering a photograph taken by Rosso himself in 1895 entitled *Impresión de boulevard. Paris la Nuit*. In it we see Rosso colouring in empty spaces, which instead of accentuating the sculptured block, reveals what has been left unfinished, what has been purposively dematerialised.

At this point I would like to conjecture that Rosso's *Impresión de boulevard. Paris la Nuit*. is empowering virtuality itself, in the sense that 'virtual' from the Latin *virtualis*, is no more than a derivation of *virtus*, strength/force, or that which is the same thing, power. Proceeding (unafraid of the redundancy), it is interesting to point out in that work the intention to, in fact, empower power itself. In other words, to empower that which has the virtue of producing an effect even if it does not fulfil its potential, that which exists in appearance but not in reality. We are discussing something that exists solely in potential and not in reality, and yet we ally to mistaken synonyms such as 'fortuitous', contingent, or subject to chance, something that might come to be or occur. That tension, that equilibrium, is present in the aesthetic exercises of José Bechara, an artist who knows that the realm of the possible is equivalent to stasis, to that which has already been given shape, a kind of dissimulated reality given that, much like the virtual realm – a fortunate recycling of possibilities – it is conditioned as a response to, or as the sum total of knowledge over reality. (9) Rosso recovers that possibility of imagination from the realm of the virtual, and works on the slightest breakages, in the areas of conflict, precisely in tune with Bechara's obsession with creating various equilibriums among oppositions, and interventions in the interstices that mediate opposing forces.

Medardo Rosso, an enthusiast of ancient Greek sculpture and Egyptian figurative painting, "sought out the multiple tonalities and the fleeting impression of gestures, expressions and movements, barely suggested as incipient signs of form". (10) And, as previously mentioned, the luminous quality of perception. The tense gaze, that restraint, is ever more present in the universe of José Bechara capable of digesting and oxidising his vitality into aesthetic experience. Stains, prints, slight lacerations, oxidations and incisions are the product of his process or, which is the same thing, the result of the dimension of time in his work. Bechara's painting is thus doubly linked to time. We are speaking of temporal processes, of time capable of aesthetically deteriorating a piece thus transforming it into a new piece, marked by experience. To some extent we might compare this to what we feel on witnessing the remains of Renaissance frescoes, a painting capable of keeping its

own history, marked and violated by the passage of time, the involuntary co-author.

Bechara's House is like a great painting of history unhooked from time and space. Like *The Destroyed Room* that Jeff Wall carefully composed in a clear allusion to Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapal*. A work marked more by violence than by disorder. Like in Bechara's accumulations of furniture and objects, everything is carefully disarranged, assaulted and violated; nothing is the product of chance, with the exception of time. Nor is it my intention to point out who is responsible for the apparent disorder that amounts to no more than chronic order. "A good artist depicts the criminal with as much empathy as the victim", stated Jeff Wall in an interview given to Jean-François Chevrier. Is it not true of Goya's painting? Bechara makes no accusations, but it is possible to see in his virtuosity an art that is critical of a certain instability in the world.

In Bechara's work there is a formal need to make contact with the real world, to establish a relationship with the physical aspect of space to the point of needing to break with the boundaries of painting, the limits of representation, and to physically occupy real space so as to impress upon it formal order, a human measure. Bechara draws battle plans between structure and sensitivity so that, as Kounellis once said, he may represent no longer, but only to present. This relationship with Kounellis is also present in Bechara's work with oxides and other structural exercises with metals, work that would also take us in the direction of such stable unstable pieces as those by Richard Serra. (This also has consequences for the gaze, inevitably limited in attempting to achieve a global perception of space.) This post-minimalism capable of reinforcing the physical properties of the work, above all with respects to Bechara, ends by confusing, twisting our vision, disorienting us to the point of losing the sense of the real. Without going to the extremes of the last works (based on iron structures supporting glass and mirrors) by José Pedro Croft, Bechara's House opens up pathways, often criss-crossed and labyrinthine, but also functioning virtually as prostheses, capable of reorganising, activating and granting new meaning to spaces already in existence.

If Bechara inherits part of Serra's legacy, it is precisely that feeling of weight. Perhaps, like Serra, Bechara sees us all condemned and conditioned by the weight of gravity – to whatever degree. Thus, Serra explains that "[the process of construction, the concentration, the daily efforts fascinate me more than any revelation, more than any search for the ethereal. Every thing we chose in life for its lightness soon turns into an unbearable weight]". Perhaps it is true that we are faced with the fear of this weight although it is itself no more than a form of memory, an unspeakable imprint.

On the other hand it is not difficult for me to transcend the real shapes of Bechara's House, deriving from them Malevich's dynamic suprematism, that multiplication of forms, that orgy of manners, of possibilities and apparently unstable dispositions of elements that characterise works like Suprematism # 56, from 1916. A work in which a great diagonal line becomes an axis capable of nesting lines, triangles, squares, smaller circles and semi-circles until generating mysterious motility. I ask myself what lies behind Malevich's masked figures, but also what mystery is incapsulated in the wooden outer skin in Bechara's house. Perhaps that dark space hides another dark painting, or is simply a blind, uninhabitable space, and thus this outward projection, this outward vomit. Malevich broke the boundaries between abstract sculpture and architecture; an inheritance present in Bechara's exercise object neutralisation.

This apparent dynamic repose multiplies the possibilities and seems to tell us that there is no centre, that everything flows and is expanded infinitely. We are at heart, discussing pure aesthetic experience, a violation of functionality used to silence objects, render them character-less, their memory neutralised. In any case, we cannot take this violation of the habitual employment of objects as synonymous with destruction. Instead it creates ready-mades capable of being interpreted as one step further in a sequence of events that, as with his paintings, are produced in preparation of our aesthetic experience. But let us return Malevich, who at a certain point wondered what happens when flat geometry is thrown into three-dimensions. The answer lies perhaps with El Lissitzky's Proun spaces, in those dynamic combinations that seemed ordered at whim. As El Lissitzky saw it: "[Proun beings on the surface, progresses towards the spatial model and from there to the construction of all the objects of daily life. In this respect Proun goes beyond painting and its artists and beyond the machine and the engineer, going on to structure space and to fragment it, using elements from all dimensions, and constructs a new form of nature, which is versatile although uniform]." (11) (Malevich himself experimented with real volumes, based on models, attempting to break the barriers or the boundaries between abstract sculpture and architecture.)

Out of all these juxtapositions and aggregations of shapes, Constructivism was born, along with the greater part of the formal language of the modern movement. All this makes sense when Bechara speaks of the House as "an experience very dependent on its formal aspects, yet also independent of the symbolic associations it might produce". (12) Perhaps all this would be more effective if we take his family situation into account, or more specifically his strangely familiar situation. Which brings me to "Strangely Familiar", precisely the title of an exhibition produced by the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis,

organized around four thematic axes (portable structures; rituals of use; multifunctional objects; and controversial objects), highlighting the importance of design in our lives, but above all of maintaining a critical posture, a non-conformist stance in relation to the visual idleness of daily life. In the spirit of maxims by Berger or by Perec in order to (re-) lead them to the absurd – a criticism of function that could easily apply to what I will call the Ikea malaise – the exhibition was, above all, an invitation to see, transform what we take for granted as strange, in as much as it is rare. Thus Rachel Whiteread's sound manifesto "lost forms" as a marvellous paradigm. Other examples present in the exhibition were: the Rugelan Chair by Julian Lion Bosenbaum, which has a dual function as a cushion and as a chair; the Cabriolet/Ocasuibak Table by Paolo Ulian, which includes within a single design a stool, a table and storage space; or the Kesä-Kontti, a magnificent metamorphosis of the traditional Finnish holiday tent into a transportable living unit. But it is even more disturbing if we consider Bechara's freezing of explosive experience. With Bechara all is sealed up and there is no exit; tables, mattresses, wardrobes and other objects break with their functions to act solely as parasites interpreted according to their aesthetic experience. The house as shelter is perverted, and objects leave us only their echoes, their emotional imprints and gravitations. I imagine that we could easily recall Bertolucci's Last Tango in Paris, in which three lives in ruins – one being that of the Henri Sauvage building in the Rue Vavin in Paris – silently weave a plot out of personal ghosts which at the end succumb to the inexorable fate of the ruin.

It is a syntax through which we can understand that everything remains unfinished, albeit completely shut. I am thinking of its virtual interpretations, and on sort of trick or distortion we could well recall words by Sigfried Giedion in "Space, Time and Architecture", about Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, built for the first world exhibition (1851): ["We have a glimpse of a delicate network of lines without any clue as to its distance or its various different dimensions to the naked eye. The side walls are too far away for us to be able to take them in at a single glance. Instead of running from one end wall to the other, one's gaze is lost in an endless perspective that disappears over the horizon. We cannot state whether this building rises up a hundred or a thousand feet above us, or whether the roof is flat or made up of a succession of nerves, as there is no play of shadows to excite our vision to an appraisal of its measurements (...) all natural elements are diffused into the atmosphere"].

We need the dimension of time to set our bearings. Time to, like Rosso or Whiteread, seek out the space "in between" things. Or simply time to find involuntary relationships imbued with tensions and equilibriums by artists such as Mark di Suvero, the aggressive public interventions

of artists like Olaf Metzel, the criticism through wood by Tadashi Kawamata, or with the flat relations, correspondences and intervals by Anthony Caro... Our careful attention would certainly notice the musical quality of these artists' works evoking an abstract painting by Kandinsky, or by the above-mentioned Malevich; and every single gesture would entertain José Bechara, independently of whether it were all made out of, (or perhaps not), elephant dung. Along with the neo-plastic architecture of Theo van Doesburg and his well-known "counter-compositions" (after Van Doesburg's death in 1931 the De Stijl group of artists lost a great deal of its interest joining the "new objectivity" movement).

Magdalena Jetelová states that "wood has, within it, all the elements of origin, growth and time". (13) Others, like Marguerite Yourcenar, see time as the great sculptor: "The day that a statue is finished its life, to a certain extent, begins." (14) Such is Bechara's painting in progress, a painting that finds its roots in attitudes like those of Yves Klein. In Bechara's work there are no orchestras, female-paint-brushes, nor firearms enthroning the spectacle of certain "leaps into emptiness" of painting. What there is, is a natural play of actions that allows for the fortuitous, gestures such as leaving a canvas outside on top of a car so that the rain might paint it. José Bechara buys used tarps from truck-drivers, by the time they come into his hands they are already paintings, having already lived through so much. Bechara buys according to the imprints and scars that time has left on them, as Agnaldo Farias well describes: "The artist analyses the perforations, scratches, cuts, that is, the wear and tear of a material that has been mercilessly exposed to sun, wind and rain, being contracted in the cold, expanded in the heat, labouring, being compressed from the outside in, lacerated to the point of ripping, forced to mould itself to the body of compact and regular volumes that box up transported goods. Packed volumes that stretch the canvas every which way as the truck brakes, accelerates, up hills, down slopes and round bends, oscillating, made elastic and resistant, like a placenta that at the end of each journey is emptied out and filled once again." (15)

Later, in the studio, Bechara begins the process of oxidation that characterises his recent paintings, or, more specifically, his wounding and crucifixion of the canvas with layers of steel of different thicknesses that he seals together (doing without brushes) in order to then wet them and let the elements (heat and humidity) act and leave their mark. Additional time, more scars and memory tinge the canvas at random combined with the artist's controlled compositional lines imprinted on the canvas with a series of broad strips of adhesive tape that structure the canvas before proceeding to its oxidation. Thus are generated the hues and gestures that make art out of a process that reaches final form through a combination of canvases that will end up

defining the universe of rigorous tensions that compose his paintings. Thus creating his diptychs, triptychs or polyptychs and their different intensities; along with his play of opposites, the zones of conflicts and tensions that speak of a gaze in complicity with life as an aesthetic value.

This is why José Bechara's painting is a gesture that is aggressive but also one that is protective – binding tapes –ultimately the gesture of time. Life, like time, is painting for an artist such as Bechara who might agree with Berger when the latter states that all art based on a deep observation of nature ends up changing one's way of seeing it. And thus Bechara appropriates different "marks" of the passage of time in order to grant them new life, in order to revive them. All of this is true of a series like Pelada (Skinned), which uncovers surfaces of white leather from cows, oxen and even foetuses revealing a texture that spells a history, the biography of marks that once lashed at the now dead animal. Once again life and its random etchings, once again the marks of violence present in Bechara's work, although never completely determining his poetics. Formally, we note In Skinned, the ready-made shows skins and teats from cows in a rich appropriation that once again reveals an underlying indifference, a revelation that repeats itself in Bechara's work (that of professional butchers, of the bucolic passivity of the chalets in Paraná, and of the inevitable erosion of things ...).

Thus José Bechara simply harnesses the passage of time to the aid of this poetics. "The great aficionados of antiquity restored moved by pity. Moved by pity we undo their work. We might have also become more accustomed to the ruins and to the wounds". (16) Are the results of Bechara's paintings not aesthetic mutilations? Is not time the true agent capable of breaking the meaning of each work? The need to restore, or rather to re-fabricate, a complete statue starting from limbs that did not originally belong to it is no longer an issue of our time; perhaps we are no longer living in such a vain period, or perhaps this is simply a change in taste. The truth is that time as a fissure today makes us love those cracks, those breaks, those experiences that are in principle external. And so the curious tale by Yourcenar so well suited to that first vision of Bechara's: "A form of transformation even more amazing than the others is the one undergone by bronze statues. The ships transporting a commission to a sculptor from one port to another, the galleys in which the Roman conquerors had stored up their Greek loot in order to take it back to Rome, or the other way around – when Rome became unsafe – in order to transport loot to Constantinople, sometimes sank, filling the seas with bodies and goods; some of those sunken bronzes, brought to the surface in good condition, like shipwrecked sailors brought back to life in time, keeping only a green patina from their underwater stay, like the Marathon Efebo

or the two powerful athletes from Erice that were recently found. There have been fragile marbles, on the other hand, that came out of the sea corrupted, eaten away, adorned with baroque shapes sculpted at the whims of the waves, encrusted with shells like those boxes we used to buy on the beach when we were kids. The form given them by the sculptor was not for these statues but a brief episode in between the incalculable length of time spent as rock in mountain-side and then their long existence as stone lying at the bottom of the sea. They went through that decomposition without agony, through that loss without death and through that survival without resurrection which is the one that belongs to matter given over to its own laws; no longer belonging to us”.

In this sense sculpting and painting are no more -no less- than an accumulation of events, a grouping of errors disguised as successes or vice-versa, a universe of occurrences, the product of trying to impose order on chaos, a purification of the experience that reveals no more than a consciousness so-tainted of art as life, but above all, it states that in José Bechara everything derives from a fortunate tension of gaze.

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David Barro is the author of the following books: "The Origin as Goal. Words and silences in Richard Long's walk", "Gary Hill, Poet of Perception", "Imagens (Pictures) para uma representação contemporânea", and "Rita Magalhães. Journeys through time." Barro also co-authored "Sky Shout. A pintura depois da pintura" and "Voces de Atlântica," and is co-editor of "Seducidos polo accidente." David Barro has contributed to the magazine "Lápiz" since 2000, he founded and directed the magazine [W]art (2003, 2004, 2005) and

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