

He Also Paints Self-Portraits: Recent Work by Herman Aguirre

by Matthew Girson, 2019

“Possibly the moral is that art cannot and should not be made.”¹

-Philip Guston

In the late 1960s, painter Philip Guston (1913–1980) abandoned abstraction and spent his remaining years making paintings, drawings, and prints in a cartoonlike representational style. His subjects included existentially bereft heads, despairing still lifes, and members of the Ku Klux Klan. Most of the heads were large, round, grey-haired, chin-stubbled, and attached to burning cigarettes. For contemporaries who knew Guston, they were self-portraits. His most famous painting from that period is *The Studio* (1969) in which a hooded KKK member works at an easel, paints a self-portrait and smokes a cigarette. Guston’s work invites us to ask what it meant for a painter to portray himself as a perpetrator of *voilá*² during an era of social unrest that was marked by the Vietnam War, multiple assassinations, and student uprisings across the country and the world. Perhaps the luxuries of being an abstract artist in a painting studio during such a moment carried enough guilt for Guston to render himself a perpetrator of *voilá* in a culture dominated by *voilá*.

Fast-forward a few decades and witness *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) and *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) by Los Angeles-based photographer Catharine Opie (b. 1961). Although neither portrait provides access to her face, these color photographs challenge traditional practices of other artists who present themselves in their work. In *Self-Portrait/Pervert* the photographer/subject is wearing a hood and the word “Pervert” has been cut into her bare chest. In the other we see her from behind, with an image of two stick-figure girls holding hands in a landscape etched into the skin of her shoulders. Both images are made visible by the traces of blood in, and dripping from, the incised marks. Opie chose to make these works in this fashion to draw attention to S & M culture and lesbian identity during the AIDS crisis. With these themes as the backdrop, Opie’s self-inflicted gestures position her as both perpetrator and victim of *voilá* at a moment marked by severe losses in queer communities.

¹ It is also possible that art cannot and should not be written about. If so, then every word that follows may not be moral. It is also true that every word in this essay argues for writing about art. Some words do so more than others. The quotation is from lecture notes prepared in 1965 and published as “Faith, Hope and Impossibility” in *Philip Guston: Retrospective*, ed. Michael Auping (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 94.

² Throughout this essay, the words violent and violence will be spelled *voilánt* and *voilá*. The change is made so that the French *voilà!* – “here it is!” – is heard as an emphatic proclamation in each instance of violence. None of the other words in this essay call for any alterations.

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The self-portraits of Guston and Opie, combined with the realities of our current moment, frame an approach to the work of Herman Aguirre and locate his work within ongoing conversations of *voilánc*e and loss.

Herman Aguirre lives and works in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, where gang *voilánc*e is a constant threat.³ He, his immediate family, and his neighbors are constantly reminded of their vulnerability on walks to school and commutes from work. His extended family is split between Chicago and parts of Mexico where drug lords have seized family-owned property. His relatives living in Mexico need to clear weddings, birthday parties, and other social events with local gangs before they can be scheduled and conducted. For Aguirre, his family and his neighbors, there is no distance from *voilánc*e. Unfortunately, it permeates their lives.

In form and content the paintings provide direct opportunities to reflect on *voilánc*e and loss. His images are derived from combinations of personal experience, documentary photography, and imagination. Each painting is fully representational, made with bold marks and colors and fits within one of three categories: paintings that depict the residue of *voilánt* acts, paintings that commemorate losses, and self-portraits. Titles for each are suggestive, without ever being descriptive.

Each painting includes areas of flatly applied paint and other areas are rendered with thick agglomerations of paint that extend up to four inches in front of the painted surface. The thin areas rely on the traditional tricks of a representational painter to suggest the illusion of depth and atmosphere within the flat, painted plane. Shadows in these areas are made by mixing darker, duller colors and highlights are made by mixing lighter, brighter colors. The thick areas may include similar color shifts but the quality of the images is also affected by the physicality of the paint that catches light or is obstructed from it. The combination demands to be viewed from various angles to determine which parts of the paintings are rendered as illusions of space and volume, and which parts are actual masses of paint.

The actual volumes are made by either knifing paint thickly onto the surface or draping thin films of paint over bulbous areas. The thin films are made by painting onto sheets of plastic, letting them dry, then peeling the paint off the plastic and adhering them with wet paint. Often these films emulate pieces of fabric (see *Mártir/Martyr*, 2018, *Testigos de guerra/Witnesses of War*, 2018, and *Colores/Colors*, 2018) and sometimes they are cut to form flower petals (see *Y que nunca morirán/And They Will Never Die*, 2018), pieces of trash (see *Cenizas nada mas/Nothing More than Ashes*, 2018) or paper currency (see *El verde se pudre/The Green Rots*, 2019).

The flowers often appear in paintings that depict commemorative events or the informal memorials set up to remember victims of *voilánc*e. The funereal *Para Aquellos que no pudieron estar/For Those Who Could Not Attend* (2018) is a large five-panel composition that depicts the artist's uncle in a foreshortened, flower-draped casket. *Los Revolutionarios/The Revolutionaries* (2018) is based on a neighborhood memorial near Aguirre's home and *¡Vivos los queremos!/We Want Them Alive!* (2017) refers to a group of 43 students who went missing from Iguala, Guerrero, Mexico in 2014. *Colores/Colors* (2018) shows a tree wrapped with clothing, a gesture that commemorates loss and marks territory. The

³ Information about Aguirre's life and work is based on conversations with the author conducted in the months leading up to the exhibition.

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colors of the clothing are associated with local gangs and are made by layering and draping folded sheets of paint.

Thick areas of paint in the images that depict crime scenes and sites of *voilánc*e begin to embody the subjects of the paintings with disturbing immediacy. *¡Todos en línea!*

All in Line! (2017) depicts a row of dead bodies that are lined up, face down, by a fence at the side of a road in Sinaloa, Mexico. The painting is 4' x 5' and the grotesque figures at the bottom of the composition are offset by a mountain range and blue sky above. The largest figure at the very bottom has an awkwardly arched back. This strained pose is made more disturbing by the fact that his face is pressed up against the left side of the painting and his left foot protrudes off the right. The excessive paint used to render this nameless man bulges off the surface like a bloated corpse. *Sangre/Blood* (2018), *Mártir/Martyr* (2018), and *¡Ni una mas!*/*Not One More* (2018) are other examples of paintings that graphically depict the overt residue of *voilánt* acts and do so with bulbous areas of paint that give bodily form to images of mangled victims. In *Niños sin tambor/Children Without a Drum* (2018) contoured volumes of paint transform images of murdered children into horrific indexical equivalents of the actual victims of drug-related gang *voilánc*e.

These unsettling qualities become even more problematic in the self-portraits. Collectively the series is referred to as *Espejo/Mirror*, although each individual portrait is called *Vidrio/Glass* and followed by a number. Their backgrounds are flat and pale. The faces are rendered with naturalistic colors.

Each face painted in the series is built with thick paint. Some are easily read as portraits (see *Vidrio/Glass No. 1*, *Vidrio/Glass No. 21*, and *Vidrio/Glass No. 32*) and others bear no resemblance to the anatomy of chins, lips, noses, and brows (see *Glass No. 14*, *Glass No. 17*, and *Glass No. 33*). Instead the distorted volumes of paint in these portraits operate as mangled facial features. As opposed to other types of painted distortion, such as anamorphosis or Cubism, which are based on altering the mechanics of perspective and illusion on a flat surface, Aguirre's distortions in these paintings are in the physical volumes themselves. Despite the visual dynamics of their material presence, these self-portraits are disturbing because they take on the same qualities of the bruised, broken, and bloated figures from the other paintings. In this way Aguirre is painting himself – repeatedly – as a victim of *voilánc*e.

The number of these self-portraits in the *Espejo/Mirror* suggests a ritual internalization of victimhood. Their repetition becomes a willful determination to recognize the ubiquity of *voilánc*e. As the artist who makes them they also mark Aguirre as the metaphoric perpetrator of the *voilánc*e, a role that links him and his work to the self-portraits of both Philip Guston and Catherine Opie.

In his landscapes, still lifes, and figure paintings Aguirre locates himself – and us, his audience – in the position of awakened bystander. Whether we see it or not, we know *voilánt* acts are happening all around, near and far. From this position we recognize that Aguirre has removed the negations from the Guston quotation that opened this essay. For Aguirre, it is moral that art can and *should* be made.⁴ In the self-portraits Aguirre is perpetrator, victim, and – like Guston and Opie before him – survivor. The art these artists make allows them to face *voilánc*e and model the agency that allows them to move past positions of passive bystander and victim.

⁴ Guston certainly knew this, but framing the idea the way he did provided a platform for him to work against the negation rhetorically.

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Perhaps the ongoing series of brutalized self-portraits is a reminder for Aguirre that he is vulnerable. Such a position is as threatening as it is empowering by simultaneously recognizing his near-constant exposure to *violánc*e and his ability to make work about it from his Back of the Yards studio. Understood this way his continued work as a painter is an affirmation of his agency. If art cannot or should not be made, then even more energy would be at risk of expression through *violánc*e. If, however, art can and should be made, then Aguirre's choices allow us to recognize an active moral position within the thin boundaries between bystander, perpetrator, victim, and survivor.

Et voilà. We all have choices to make.