

a través del silencio - Alto Gallery - June 3rd - 25th 2022

Cinema was forever changed when it was made possible to synch dialogue with moving images. From this point on, films became “talkies”, increasingly reliant on spoken language to convey narrative. Previously, cinema relied on a visual language, particularly on the capacity for prelinguistic communication. Charlie Chaplin, cinema’s most famous actor at the time of this transition, adamantly opposed talkies, pointing out that silent films had an appeal that transcended linguistic barriers. With the introduction of dialogue, he argued that films would alienate audiences along linguistic lines. Chaplin was thus not merely being nostalgic, but arguing the unique communicative potential of silence.

Despite accelerating technological innovations in the arts, the practices of drawing and painting persist. The persistence of the drawing and the painting is not due to nostalgia, but to the ever expanding capacity of the still image, in all its silence, to communicate. Whereas the history of art has often been culturally specific, as with depictions of allegories or grand events, its capacity to communicate has been broadened as photography and film took over art’s historic role. Liberated from the need to communicate culturally-specific concepts, drawing and painting have come to focus on the expansive language of color, shape, and rhythm to transcend linguistic barriers.

These ideas have been explored before, notably by Clement Greenberg. But there was something dictatorial as well as teleological in Greenberg’s formalism. In a way, Greenberg’s approach to formalism was still very much dominated by language, by a historical narrative communicated by historians in which drawings and paintings merely served as illustrations. Cultures from around the world have communicated visually well before the 20th century. They have communicated in the patterns and colors of textiles, for example, or in the simple organization of tiles on the floor. Perhaps it’s their silence that causes these things to sit in the background of our historical narratives. What if we were to foreground these examples of the mundane?

Lucía Rodríguez-Pérez explores this possibility. As much as she is an artist, she is also a collector of secondary qualities, of those aspects of a thing that fail to be deemed essential. Whereas the organization of a pattern of bricks might be treated by the contemporary architect as superficial, it is this very pattern that Rodríguez draws inspiration from, that she chooses to celebrate. Likewise, she persists in investigating the expressive potential of color. If the contemporary palette can be represented by the image of an Apple Store -white on white- Rodríguez chooses a pallet that owes much more to the theater. Whereas the first is chromophobic and advertises on the promise of absolute illumination (with all the epistemological implications that follow), Rodríguez is a chromo-phile who prioritizes ambiguity.

For Rodríguez, the seductiveness of the surface is not to be rejected, as it is in the Platonic tradition at the root of Western epistemology. Rather than concealing a “more real” essence, the superficial is a language. It responds to the urge to express. What it expresses cannot be pinned down by words. It’s like a dance or a song. In trying to capture the “essence” of these things, we completely miss the point. The “meaning” is right there, on the surface. Such knowledge is the very opposite of the esoteric, with its hidden depths only available to an elite few. It’s more like common sense. In being common, it’s open to anyone, across borders.

-Aaron Michael Mulligan