

art

Pablo Carpio: An Artist's Life in New York

Jonathan Goodman

Pablo Carpio is from Madrid, but hasn't visited home in two years. Currently he lives in the seam between the Bedford Stuyvesant and Clinton Hill neighborhoods in Brooklyn; his studio is small and roughly divided in half between his living and working spaces—he has a loft to sleep in. The bathroom and shower are outside Carpio's space, but he feels at home in his single room. In his mid-30s, Pablo represents the kind of artist moving into Brooklyn today; he is smart, talented, international, and open to the complex multicultural circumstances that make Brooklyn an ideal place to be a young artist. Brooklyn is already filled with artists; space is at a premium, and the cost of living there is exorbitant. But painters like Carpio find ways of beating the system; tiny garrets are common. Actually, Carpio's particular situation is really quite good by current standards; his space allows him to work on four-foot-square paintings, the largest size that has occupied him so far.

Generally speaking, Carpio's forte is abstraction, of a highly balanced kind; his taut compositions remind us at this point that he worked as a graphic designer for years as a young man in Madrid. The combination of a strong compositional intelligence and the wild colors on the cut strips of canvas that the painting is composed of make for a group of abstract works that connect with the visual complexity of New York City, which Carpio now calls home. The city's art scene is no longer dominated by a particular style; however, a certain kind of abstraction, originating from the gains of painters working in the middle of the last century, persists in New York. I have seen the abstract expressionist style particularly affect Asian painters who stay in New York, and at the same time additionally rub off on almost anyone working abstractly in the city.

Carpio's art is no exception to this general rule; his work fits in well with other artists roughly his age. It looks as if he has a double allegiance, like most artists coming to New York from foreign homes. For example, the high-culture physicality of Antoni Tapies' paintings and sculpture can be found in Carpio's art, which includes a sculptural piece in which red paint has been draped over a wooden chair and left to dry. At the same time, the considered intensity of the New York School has made its way into his paintings. Here his impulses are primarily about paint as its own material, its lively effects extended by Carpio's highly successful sense of composition. The two-inch-wide strips cross over each other on a regular basis, building a momentum that comes close to the representation of movement.

Interestingly, Carpio is an artist whose work cannot really be situated in a geographical place or even a particular time beyond that of modernism. He belongs to a youthful generation whose eclecticism carries the work beyond boundaries. As a result, it is impossible to discuss national origins in Carpio's paintings; pinpointing just how Spanish it fails. This causes a new group of problems, which emphasize the floating world of

the artist and his inspiration. But, at the same time, it complicates—in a good way—the sophistication of a new generation of artists whose grasp of contemporary art is inherently international. As a result, the scene is multicultural and even global, with artists picking and choosing their way among styles and materials that belong, in an intuitive sense, to most everyone. This does not mean that everyone's story and influences are the same, or that even the best of the work decays into a cultural merger. Instead, the art produced by someone as talented as Carpio shows us how abstraction, always an international idiom since modernism conceived it, remains a language of infinite interest and variety.

This means that the open cultural space available to Carpio must at the same time be treated with internal discipline. Again and again, I have seen foreign-born artists do well in New York, mostly because the city's atmosphere of freedom doesn't turn their head. Carpio brings with him from Spain an internal discipline that American artists find harder to establish, fed as they have been a diet of libertarianism and excessive theory. The real work that needs to be done often escapes the American artist, who proceeds as if his psychic development was occurring for the first time in history. It is, sadly, a narcissistic position, one not so generally found in the psychological outlook of artists from other cultures. So, as a result, Carpio is to be commended for his focus and specificity of purpose; he has explained that Spain's economy in the last five or six years has not recovered from the world recession—New York's more buoyant financial circumstances brought him to Brooklyn.

Another side of Carpio's creativity is found in his use of paint as a *sculptural* material. He has rolled up sheets of acrylic paint to make works that seem both flexible and taut—as happens in his sheet of red paint over a chair. To reduce the purpose of paint to the point of being an end in itself, as opposed to its usage as a material, a means to an end, is an act of sabotage. It is not a rhetorical stance, but rather a genuine reaction to the truth of paint's physicality. Steeped in the history of perspective, we often forget that the materials of art are materials first, before they sketch out the illusion of three-dimensional depth on a two-dimensional plane. As a contemporary artist, Carpio realizes that making it new is an esthetic demand that will not go away—hence, his penchant for exploration with paint as an end in its own right. Works such as his sculptures of paint posit a working space where anything can happen. Suddenly a material becomes the site of a transgression.

And the idea and act of rebellion remains central to the young artist, who must act as an iconoclast before he can build an imagery with the shards of his destruction. With these paint sculptures Carpio has worked out a problem particular to his esthetic: to change the notion of paint from its traditional role as a bridge between artist and canvas to a newer function where it mediates nothing but itself. While the idea of putting forth paint as a material first is not a new idea—it has been part of the abstract artist's esthetic since the middle of the twentieth century—Carpio's treatment of the issue is particularly inspired. His technical competence reminds us that he has earned his living doing graphic design. But there is more than mere skill here: there is an exceptional energy contained in the paintings that revolves around both compositional structures and the existence of paint as

a material. It is clear the Carpio knows what he is doing, but, more important, he finds a way to bring abstraction forward into contemporary dialogue. Despite the solemn liturgy of the critics who are convinced painting is dead, it is clear that the medium will remain alive, partly because it can illustrate ideas distinctively, and partly because it has tremendous attraction as material.

The sculptures continue Carpio's distinguished investigations with paint as materials—they deploy paint *structurally*, rather than illustratively. This of course results in sculpture, which we know of course is a different medium than painting. The real contemporaneity of Carpio's paint sculptures has to do with their transformation of one medium into another in a way that is counterintuitive but works even so. Interestingly, although of course there is a conceptual underpinning in Carpio's decision-making here, the sensuousness of paint remains dominant as an esthetic issue. The sculptures hang like paintings or are rolled up like paper, but they maintain an orientation that is three-dimensional. Carpio doesn't always solve the problems he devises for his interest and amusement, but he is consistently aware of the implications of awkwardness and even doubt when one medium is treated physically like another. Such an orientation operates as a kind of playfulness; it is also partially subversive in the sense that such play undermines received notions of what art should be. It is interesting to see how the esthetic choices of an artist would have conceptual consequences and not the other way around. For this alone, Carpio is an original.

The nature of contemporary art often involves challenging pre-existing assumptions about painting and sculpture. In painting we have someone like the American artist Roxy Paine, who is best known as a sculptor but who has made painting machines kept to task by computers. In sculpture we have architects such as Frank Gehry, who push the physical boundaries of a building to its limits, at least in part to build and discover what can only be called a sculptural style. These are artists whose work translates one kind of artistic meaning into another. Carpio belongs to this kind of artistic intelligence, and has done quite well in working out some of the problems described above on a smaller scale. He is not transforming the boundaries of his art so much as he is translating one kind of creation into a different language. His intelligence is restless and searching, much like many of the young artists who have settled in Brooklyn. Additionally, as a fairly young artist, Carpio has time to develop and grow in his field. It is my opinion that the most interesting advances in art are being found in the interstices of allied media: the point at which painting becomes sculpture, the point at which sculpture becomes architecture. This requires intellectual acuity, but also a kind of adroitness that rests on exploring the inherent properties of a particular medium. As time goes on, it will become clear that Carpio's inventiveness takes abstract art another step forward, to a place where his originality is vehemently evident.

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