

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: VIDEOPAINTING: A DIALOGUE
 Juan Rojo, Master of Fine Arts, 2009

Directed By: Professor Brandon Morse, Department of Art

My video installations refer both to the pictorial quality of cinema and to the artist's role as a voyeur. The videos depict simple processes or actions, such as eating, cleaning, or applying make-up. These actions are deeply interiorized and they recreate "true" moments of intimacy by capturing the natural way in which the body communicates. The emphasis is on the actions *per se*, the importance of the time spent performing them, and the emotional associations that they carry.

The contrast between the qualities of the new media and my recent work's content and form, has transformed my previous self-indulgent activity into a meditated exercise of nostalgia. Formally my body of work bridges the distance between a Spanish Baroque painterly aesthetics and the apparently opposed qualities of the digital medium.

VIDEOPAINTING: A DIALOGUE

By

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Introduction

I have always been a somewhat classical portrait painter. I was educated and trained by looking at the work of German Expressionists and painters of the School of London, so my inclination toward portraits and textures was predictable. However, in the last few years video has slowly taken over my work and has compelled me to redefine not only my subjects, but also my approach to painting.

The first step towards this change was the incorporation of collage to my pictorial process. I was looking for an environment where I could juxtapose photographic materials and painting in order to create hybrid, more layered images. At some point the paintings became too crowded --both in terms of content and of physical elements--, so I decided to get rid of these excesses and started to transfer photographic images directly onto the surface. Projecting videos onto the paintings seemed the natural next step, since I found that the blending of the projected image and the pictorial surface gained in subtlety thanks to this technique. From that moment on, video has reclaimed its own space in the form of stand-alone projections that create a game of light referring both to the pictorial quality of cinema and to the artist's role as a voyeur. Moreover, video has replaced reality and photography as the starting point for my pictorial work. In this way, the use of video initiated a transformation in my paintings' form as well as in their content, from which there is no turning back.

Starting to Blend

The way in which different media are intertwined in my work has developed through a slow process in which both painting and video run as parallel threads in my artistic practice until recently, when they “naturally” blended together. I have always considered painting as my main practice, even though I have been interested in video from my early training. Video was a pastime, something that I enjoyed but did not have a connection with my pictorial practice. The key for the union of both practices was my interest for portraits, coupled with the lack of a studio in which I could paint during a summer in which I was working as a waiter. Necessity met chance and with a small digital photo camera I started doing video-portraits of barflies (Figure 1). I used to leave the camera in front of my subjects when I was closing the bar, letting them talk about their lives or just stare at the camera while they enjoyed their last drink of the night. This was the first of several projects related to the field of documentary, edited with the intent to create a lyric form; another of this works documented my daily trip from DC to College Park with a voice-over reciting a different poem for each metro station along the way (Figure 2). These were amateurish attempts, but they represented the necessity to find my own voice in a medium that I did not master at the time and of which I did not have preconceived ideas. Therefore, I felt free to experiment and play with the new possibilities of the medium.



Figure 1



Figure 2

Although I was enjoying the freedom of this new medium, I felt that the videos I was doing did not really reflect my artistic interests and did not belong to the same world than my paintings. In an attempt to bring both worlds together, I created what I consider my first successful attempt to “paint with video:” “Detalle,” a five-minute video of a friend looking at the camera (Figure 3). While I was testing the light she received a call to her cell phone and I recorded the conversation without her knowing it. The footage that I chose for the final editing was a mix of the unnoticed, spontaneous recording, and the “actual” shooting in which I gave her directions about what to do. There was an intense dialogue between the “stolen” images and the shots in which the model acknowledged the presence of the camera. On the one hand, the spectator was being allowed to watch a “true” moment of intimacy, but at the same

time the viewer was not tricked into believing that there was a hidden camera, since the parts for which I had given instructions clearly showed the work's performative character. I recorded the model against a green screen so that in the editing room I would be able to take out the green and then place her, quite literally, between two layers of videos showing close ups from my paintings.

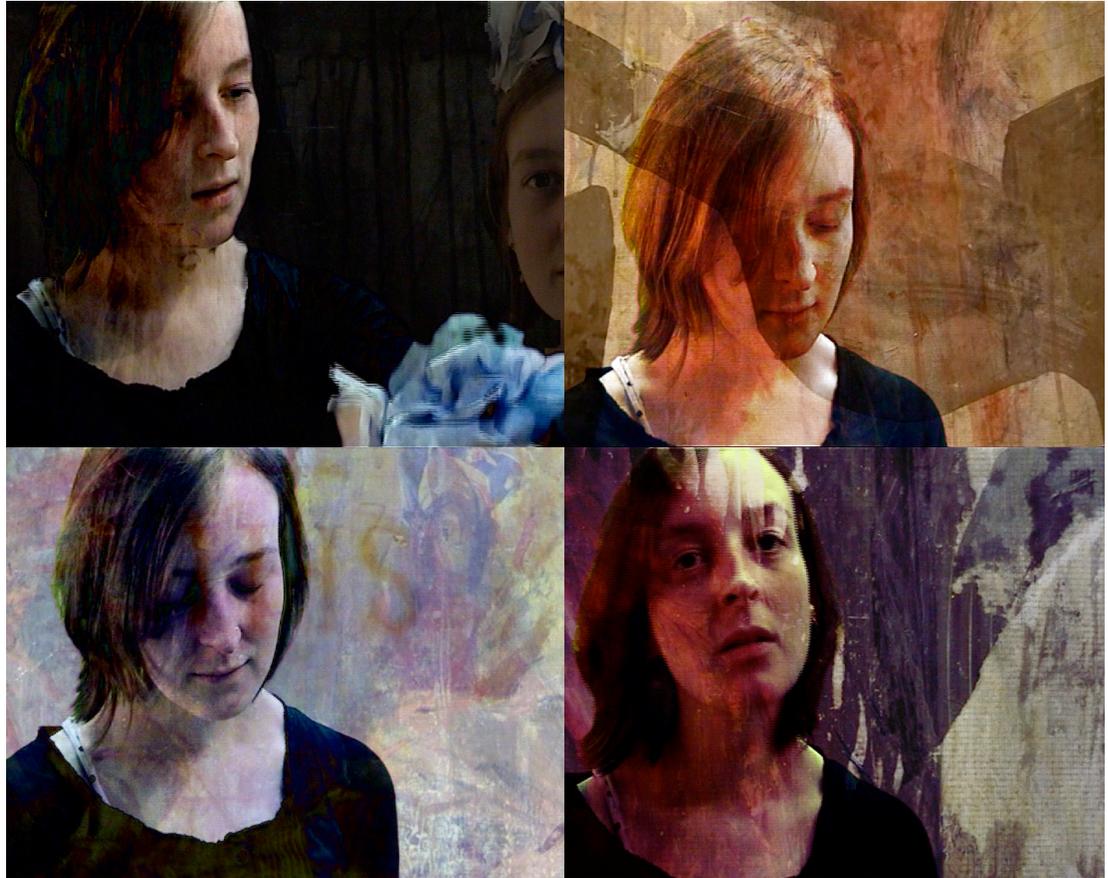


Figure 3

This video became the first satisfactory sample of what I thought a portrait in the form of video-painting should be (literally, since the portrait was “enclosed” between the two layers of “painting”), and also what I thought it should avoid. When I was still playing with the idea of the video-portraits in my mind, I came across Andy Warhol’s “screen tests,” which helped me realize what I did not want my

video-portraits to be. I did not want them to be in black and white, I was not going to have just one point of view, and the subjects of my videos were going to be active in order to try and acknowledge the spectators and engage them into viewing the work.

Painting with Pixels

“Detalle” was a very literal video-painting, the result of directly translating my paintings to the new medium. The videos that I produced afterwards departed from this simple construction of a painterly feeling. I felt that I needed to find a different way to describe a painterly aesthetic while embracing the video as an artistic medium in its own right, and not just by displaying my paintings in the videos. Pushing towards this goal and within my studio practice, two different formal approaches have slowly emerged.

First, on one side of the spectrum I create very minimalistic videos with black backgrounds and a natural treatment of light that gives a monochrome feeling to them. Women doing common tasks --originally used so that the video would have a continuous movement and action in order to engage the spectator-- inhabit these videos. On the other extreme, I produce videos where the color and intensity are very saturated and the pixels are forced to become visible, thus making them an exercise of light and color. One could refer to the former as “documents/videos” and the later as “painting/videos”.

Documents/videos

I will briefly consider the first of these videos, “Make-up” (38'21), which shares many qualities with the rest of the documents/videos. It consists of three videos showing three different women who apply make-up, edited into a large strip of video (Figure 4). Both the background and the clothes are black, so only the women’s heads and arms stand out. I asked them to apply make-up and, once they had finished, to clean it up. They repeated the action as many times as needed until I had a similar amount of footage from each one; therefore, when attaching every take in chronological order, the footage of each model had a similar length. The editing was limited to placing the videos next to each other, respecting the order in which they were taken. In this way, editing does not interfere with the performance of the models, and the video is as “objective” as possible. The resultant work’s aesthetics has a clinical feel, as if it were an experiment done in a visual lab in order to analyze and decompose routine actions into their simplest parts, although what is being studied with the experiment remains unclear.



Figure 4

Painting/videos

These videos are characterized by the use of cheesy and simple video editing strategies that produce a classical pictorial quality reminiscent of the old Baroque

masters. I turned up contrast and tone, and played with the color wheel of the editor in order to emphasize the difference between cold and warm colors in the video. Both strategies are part of an unapologetic use of expressive resources and effects that seeks to recreate moments of intensity and to elicit the spectator's aesthetic response - -basically the same principles used by baroque painters.

“Polvos de tocador:” Inside the Process

To date, my more extreme exercise in trying to recreate the pictorial process is “Polvos de tocador,” a two-channel video shot in high definition (Figure 5). On a wall, a video is projected showing multiple headshots of a woman to whom an unseen person applies make up. Facing it, there is another projection consisting of close ups of a woman who is applying make up to someone who remains outside the frame. The spectator is thus placed in the middle of the action and forced to mentally connect both images in order to understand the whole action.

The piece can be understood just by analyzing the title, which works on multiple levels. “Polvos de tocador” means face powder, which was used in the making of the video. “Tocador” also stands as the word for vanity/dresser table, the piece of furniture where make-up can be applied. Moreover, it is interesting to remember that “tocador” comes from the verb “tocar” (to touch), and therefore can also be taken as a reference to the tactile quality of the video.

In terms of content, there is yet another meaning of the title, the most subjective and illuminating one, because it discloses the motivations behind the work. “Polvos de tocador” were the words used by one of my college professors to describe

the way in which Goya painted one of his more famous works, “La maja desnuda.” He was trying to explain the care and tenderness with which Goya applied the painting onto the canvas –he thought that the painting was executed as if, instead of oils, Goya had been using face powder. Just the sound of the words “polvos de tocador” evokes in a Spanish speaker the sense of softness, attention to detail, thoughtfulness, and care that the work exudes.



Figure 5

Performing Processes

Most of my videos are born from a very straightforward idea --the recording of a simple process or action usually performed without any thought, such as eating,

cleaning, or applying make-up. The importance of choosing this kind of actions is two-fold: first, they are deeply interiorized, a fact that makes the non-professional performers play their part without really feeling that they are acting, just repeating something that they have done thousands of times; second, I can recreate “true” moments of intimacy by capturing the natural way in which the body communicates. For this purpose, whenever the technical characteristics of the shooting allow it, I leave the model alone while the performance takes place. I also do this because, since I do not have a preconceived idea for the video, I prefer to interfere as little as possible with the performance of the models and watch the recordings for the first time in the editing room. My only role resembles that of an “archaeologist“ searching for meaning in an object of the past. This way of directing, or more accurately of *not* directing the actors, is aimed towards a balance between control and accident --the search for the unexpected in the source material.

The non-professional actors that I use in my work are means, bodies that carry ideas and understandings of painting. They are canvases where the pictorial process happens; their bodies undergo this transformation without showing any physical changes. Instead, the only action at work in the videos is their own creation. Women who apply make-up and wipe it out right after, women playing with their hair for no apparent reason, encounters and hugs between two women with no narrative behind them –I have tried to emphasize the actions *per se*, the importance of the time spent performing them, and the emotional associations that they carry.

Women, Gender, and Identity Work

My choice of working just with women was not a premeditated decision, but something that happened gradually. The fact that they are normally young springs out of necessity. Since I work with friends and people with whom I share some level of intimacy, my options are limited. They are generally beautiful and their beauty is enhanced in my work because this is the way in which this sector of women is normally portrayed in publicity. This fact gives me the opportunity to easily reference the aesthetics of publicity, but with a shift towards a more natural display of femininity and sensuality, established in the way I direct my videos.

As I explained before, the videos start from a very simple action, and usually I do not have an exact idea of how the final product is going to look or the possible narratives that the editing will produce. Because of this, I tend to work with wide shots in order to have more possibilities in the post-production phase. What is more important, since I do not have a particular message to transmit, I do not really “direct” my models --I tell them what to do, but never how to do it, and I try to make them comfortable and relaxed. In publicity, women are portrayed with half-opened mouths, looking down in submissive poses; a huge effort is made in order to create the image of a weak woman in need of a man, the man obviously being the viewer/consumer.

My work appropriates some aesthetic elements from publicity, most of them technical and necessary to create a beautiful image, but in my videos the women are everything but weak. They are conscious of the camera and therefore of the viewer. However, instead of a relationship of need with the spectator, these women show indifference and independence before the presence of an audience, and the certainty

that their performances are not dependant on any level of a masculine response in order to be completed.

Their presence should be read on two levels. First, they are being themselves, sharing their intimacy and their unique gestures as a generous present through which it becomes possible to represent the characteristics that I find appealing in painting -- gesture, repetition/layering, or tactile qualities. Second, female performers help me to hide my presence behind a display of femininity, blocking a direct reading of my work in terms of identity. By hiding my own presence, I hope that my work will raise more questions than offer pleasing answers.

“Al calor del hogar” or The Cold Fireplace

The word “hogar” in Spanish stands both for home and for hearth/fireplace. “Al calor del hogar” alludes to the warm feeling that is felt both when being close to a fireplace or to home. The piece consists of three monitors of different sizes and shapes, all lying on the floor inside a small dark room (Figure 6). Each of the monitors has a slightly different version of the same action; a series of women making themselves beautiful by applying make-up, jewelry, etc. The bigger the monitor, the more subjective and closer to the model is the video. The light has been manipulated to have a golden/orange/fire and very warm look, and when lying on the floor the monitors project a light that resembles the one coming from a fireplace. The room where they are installed is just big enough for the monitors and two chairs facing them, so that no more than two people can fit into the installation space at the same time. This device stresses the intimate component of the piece and its silent

character. Every element of the work is directed to create a straightforward response in the viewers, pushing them towards a feeling of nostalgia similar to the “There is nothing like home” line of Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz.”

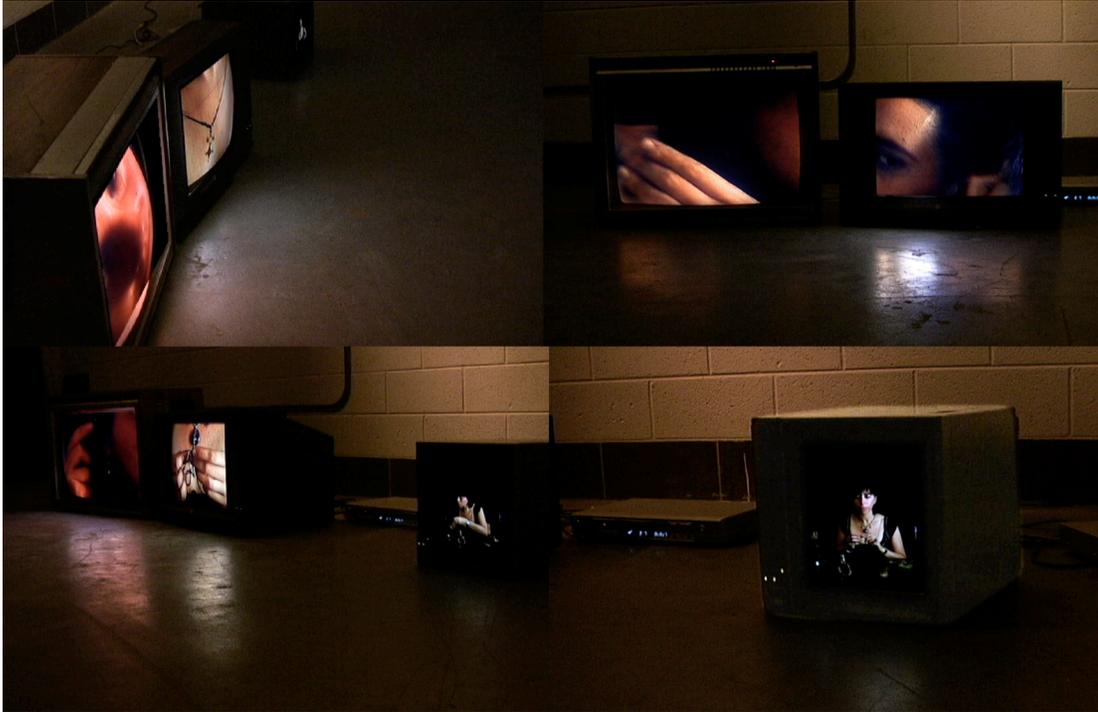


Figure 6

Somehow, however, the viewer gets feelings that contradict the warm sensations that I have just described. After all, there is nothing truly warm in the piece. The room is an empty, clean space within the surgical ambience of an art gallery, and the spectator is just watching a film in a TV. Although the content of the videos implies a motherly figure, it does not really disclose a clear narrative that would help to emotionally connect the viewer with the piece. What is at the core of the piece, keeping it from a unidirectional, sugarcoated reading, is precisely this contradiction or paradox. I find extremely appealing the inherent cold quality of

video when it combines with the warmth and humanity that usually permeate content and form in my work.

Spanish Touch

By looking back at my recent production, I have come to realize the existence of a common element to most of my work: human contact, hugging, or a more general feeling of touch. Coming from Spain, where even the most formal relationships are developed through a lot of protocol that involves touching and hugging, I have found that I miss that way of communicating since I arrived to the United States. The longing for that kind of human contact has found a way into the iconography of my work, and most of the works presented in my thesis deal in some level with the sense of touch. This realization has helped me not only to be more effective in the transmission of content in my current work, but also to rediscover the actual motivations behind my original interest in a tactile painting.

From Film to Prints / Multiple Monoprints

The relationship that my videos have to a painterly aesthetic is not the only direction in which the dialogue between both media has developed in my work. One strategy that I initially employed was to pull stills from the videos, which served as starting points for paintings. I usually transferred a fragment of a face to the canvas and worked around it with paint. I was looking for a balance between the photography pulled from the video and the integration of painting, trying to keep a tension between both elements. This way of working was still visually attached to

my traditional training, even though it was trying to escape it at the same time. The graphic works presented in the Thesis depart from the work just described visually and conceptually, in a way that will be best explained by looking at two pieces in the show: “Farewell/Comb” and “Mi cuadernito rosa.”

“Farewell/Comb”

These two pieces, as well as most of my new work, are a product of an intense studio practice. They have been developed in a highly irrational way, and thus actively fight a reasoned explanation. However, I still believe that an analysis of these works can be useful in order to illuminate my new way of working.

The process for “Farewell/Comb” started with the shooting of a short film. The script was a very simple one; two women who share some kind of relationship, never fully disclosed, meet after sometime and several rituals take place. Along the editing process I started to print stills of the film. I first intended to tell the story exclusively through a series of stills, as a kind of homage to “La jetée,” a film similarly assembled by Chris Marker. As soon as I had printed enough stills to depict the whole movie, I realized that displaying the story from beginning to end lacked interest, so I narrowed the printing of stills to just two moments of the video --a farewell hugging and a section that involved combing hair, the moments of maximum emotional intensity. This decision about the printing project translated into the video project, as the short film was transformed into two videos, one depicting the hugging segment and the other, the hair-combing part. After this point, the relationship between the painting and video projects became even more intertwined, up to a point

in which it is impossible to determine which decision taken for one of the project triggered a change in the other one. The video was exported as a sequence of images, some of which were selected and printed, and then imported again to the timeline of the editing software, creating in this way the illusion of a stop-motion movie.

Both processes, the printing of stills and the creation of video through the exported images, share the common strategy of manipulating the digital image in order to create a bridge between manual and mechanical reproduction. In the case of the video, the stills are prolonged and blended by placing a dissolve transition between each image and the next. The resultant video has a softer and blurrier look, a vaporous quality reminiscent of the Renaissance *sfumato* technique. On the other hand, the process followed to “humanize” the printed stills took consecutive steps. First of all, I introduced a distortion in the printing process by running the same print several times through the printer and using several cartridges with different levels of ink every time, thus producing offset effects and unpredictable errors in the printed image. The next transformation was produced by rolling acrylic color over the print and, after a while, rolling it again to eliminate the excess of paint in the middle of the image –this operation left a frame of painting around the center as well as a transparent color over the whole picture. The color was mixed differently every time, so each set of prints was slightly different in color and opacity.

At the end of the process, four different works sharing a visual aesthetic were produced: two big mosaics (Figure 7), one blue and one red, built with the stills pulled from each video, and two videos constructed with the sum of all the stills. The installation in the gallery allows the spectator to watch simultaneously all four pieces,

revealing the similarities and the subtle differences in the ways in which the digital image relates to the pictorial realm.



Figure 7

“Mi cuadernito rosa”

The only work in my thesis where drawing is the main protagonist is “Mi cuadernito rosa” (‘My little pink sketchbook’), a collection of c-prints made from scans of small sketches of frames, decorative structures, and keyholes. They have been printed with the same techniques employed in the “Farewell/Comb” pieces; indeed, the work is printed over a set of sienna impressions that were originally part of a “Farewell/Comb” set but had been discarded. Yet, somehow, they look radically different.

The printed images block the view of the photographic and painted material already present in the pieces. This combination creates so many layers of information in the work that it becomes almost illegible. Nonetheless, the last layer --that is, the printed frame/keyhole images-- has a relationship of figure-background with the rest of the elements of the work. The fact that the subject of the prints are frames or keyholes, instead of the images inside or behind them, calls for an analysis of the function of drawing as the representation of new concepts and ideas.

Another characteristic that separates this work from the rest of the show is the manifest manipulation of the image in order to create a narrative movement by playing with the size of the frames at the time of printing. Most of my videos and prints create an impression of reality by hiding the hand of the artist. In this work, however, the viewer is instantly aware of the idea of authorship associated to Renaissance drawing or *disegno*. It is significant that the work where I am a more active creative force is in the depicting of frames or devices used to look through, and not in the creation of the images that those devices are supposed to show. As

keyholes block the view of the images behind them, painting becomes just a surface where the digital image is printed.

Conclusion

Even if I use video as a means to speak about tactile perception, color, gender, or the relationship between artifice and reality --topics with which I have been dealing since I started painting fifteen years ago--, the shift of medium has dramatically changed the response from the spectator to the work. I believe that my previous art practice, in which my way of painting was easily classified within the “School of London” figurative/expressionism style, made the final product very coherent and understandable. The spectator was very comfortable with the work and it hindered the uncanny or secretive reading that I was looking for.

The contrast between the qualities of the new media and my recent work’s content and form, has transformed my previous self-indulgent activity into a meditated exercise of nostalgia. These pieces bridge the distance between a Spanish Baroque painterly aesthetics and the apparently opposed qualities of the digital medium.