

## ROBERTO RÉBORA: RECENT WORK, 2013–2016

Erik Castillo

The visual work produced by Roberto Rébora from the beginning of 2013 has been very striking indeed. The artist, trained in the broader sphere of knowledge of the graphic arts (groundbreaking drawing, comic strip, diverse printmaking techniques, book design, together with a love for books and poetry), has synthesized this learning at the highest aesthetic and discursive degree. His painting practice has also been the path through which all this experience has reached eminent heights. Rébora presents us with a collection of images that merge critical brutality with formal elegance. It must be added that the kind of criticism made manifest in each work is both ambivalent and neo-Romantic in character: this is not an artist who flies the flag for one or the other dogmatic cause or who illustrates his political position with regard to the current social dynamics. We are rather confronted with an artist who acknowledges the triumph of art's power of enunciation and resistance, under the sign of a reflection that ranges from clarity to beautiful illegibility.

There is a tradition or lineage of Latin American artists, of whom not a few are Mexican and who only rarely receive critical attention, which runs from at least a very specific grouping of the Mexican School of Painting—I'm referring specifically to the followers of José Clemente Orozco, by way of the "rupture generation" (1952-1968), up to the present day with its neo-Conceptualism and post-disciplinary practices. This tradition, or rather this network of artistic knowledge transmitted in an apparently imperceptible manner, has to do with the Latin American assimilation of the energies of the European avant-garde Formalism. It also refers, however, to the reinvention of the *dictum* of this Formalism's heritage. In Mexico, more specifically, the law of the orthogonal structure (that is, the right angle), the concept of

the hard-edged field of colour, achromatic puritanism and the aesthetics of rigorist plastic diagrams, transmitted by the most reductive forms of abstraction over the course of the first half of the twentieth century were all decanted in an aesthetics of the diagonal and the field of colour that is less industrial in appearance. Contemporary Mexican artists, in love with Formalist Structuralism (Gunther Gerzso, Mathias Goeritz, Vicente Rojo, Fernando García Ponce, Víctor Morales, Francisco Moyao, Gabriel Macotella..), threw their weight behind an irregular chromatic vibration and planimetric schemes that are more open and dynamic. These are artists who positioned themselves within an aspect of Formalism that uses the generic appearance of abstraction to make a metaphor of the real, in the sense of a system of energy flow. Thus they were artists committed to social or cultural reflection in a discourse that was esoteric in nature, for it is unusual for the Structuralist Formalism of the so-called "painting-painting" to be read as an abstract criticism of the social system.

Rébora, as a painter arriving on the scene long after the debate between figuration and abstraction, is an artist who moves in a sphere that draws on the best of both visual models. An admirer and declared connoisseur of the weighty legacy of José Clemente Orozco, he is perhaps the only artist strongly marked by the influence of the great Jalisco-born painter who has successfully dealt with the burden of this influence, and emerge from the hypnotic fascination with Orozco with an output all his own, and a significant one at that. That is no small achievement, since we can appreciate that Rébora's unmistakable and singular work is shot through with tributes to the methodologies used by Orozco to pictographically construct and mold the visual space. Just as in any work by Orozco—I am thinking of the visual tension of the mural *Catarsis* that hangs in the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City, of the *Hidalgo* in the Palacio de Gobierno in Guadalajara, and above all of the series of scenes of humanity spread across the blind arches of the Hospicio Cabañas ground floor, also in Guadalajara—everything is splinters of lines formed as if by knife in the watercolour and paint on canvas produced by Rébora in France and Mexico since 2013. It's all about a diagrammatic principle overflowing with elements whose resulting effect is light nevertheless, as Italo Calvino foresaw in his typology of the art of our times, of what was then the forthcoming new millennium. Interweaving, parallel spots of colour that follow a hierarchy of rhythm and differentiation build up a spatial construction that is

charged with unrestrained, lucid visual energy. Rébora has frequently spoken of his interest, above all in the *Media Star* series, in the representation of the “void that surrounds the human figure.”

It must be said, moreover, that in the discursive core of *Media Star* the artist is making reference to a number of thematic spheres: the current age understood as an era under the media yoke; a glimpse of the entropic facet of experience; the consequences of the crisis of the body; the need to gain access to an ethics of plenitude; the opposition to social control even if only through its representation; and others, too. It is astonishing to note how the conception of the anthropomorphic adventure in Rébora’s works illuminates for us the time leading to collapse that has taken place since the metrical or gnoseological vision of the men drawn by Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer. The formal and instrumental deployment of “modern reason,” to recall the cutting characterization of the Frankfurt School, has cost the species a great deal in order to found its empire of false certainties. Rébora has always built his imaginary in the shadow of this terrible, overbearing reality. Thus his dedication to what I referred to above as the *graphic wisdom*, that from the bunker of visual irony in the development of comics, in the awareness of written journalism and poetry, and through the affirmative deformation of painting connected to this wisdom, has been the territory of dark premonitions and luminous beauty against the prevarications of power.

“I cannot conceive of painting independently of a moral position,” Rébora has written, in the knowledge of what this implies, since we are immersed in a cultural sphere where criticism abounds with commonplaces. Many of his works show the representation—and it is majestic, too—of the individual and community in a state of war, of mania, desolation, exodus. Characters are constructed in a rather gestalt way: the silhouettes’ profiles are barely visible, trapped in the pro-geometric vortices of the fora that represent, image after image, chaotic open spaces or trepidatory habitats. They are beings waging a struggle of almost cosmological dimensions against the metric enemy of control networks, aerodynamic protagonists fulfilling a dream the size of the question over what art might be when it is produced in (and with the elements of) the advanced industrial era and the post-industrial period. The realization that glimmers—both ethically and humanistically—under the rubble of material homogenization, serialization of contents, modular repetition, the coldness of a

mechanized world: in short, what glimmers fixedly amidst the turbulence of the over-organized spectacular mirage, this will be artistic knowledge.

(Translated by Fionn Petch)

Roberto Rébora, *Materia y discurso de fe / Matter and Discourse of Faith*, prolog. Philip Ball, trans. Adriana Díaz Enciso and Fionn Petch, Mexico, Turner-Páramo, 2016. [Critical essays, interviews, and literary texts: Erik Castillo, Eduardo Milán, Jorge Contreras, Juan José Gurrola, Miguel Cervantes, Josué Ramírez, Eduardo Vázquez Martín, José Luis Barrios Lara, Daniel Rodríguez Barrón, Gerardo Deniz, Jorge Juanes, José Kozler, Berta Taracena, and Carlos Prospero.]