

Umbra

“If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.” William Blake

As America seems to be coming apart at the seams, Luis Roldán invites us to enter *Umbra*, a space where we are engulfed in shades of white that challenge our perception. Despite varying dimensions, each monochromatic painting seems nearly identical, yet a subdued murmur emanates from the choir of elegant white hues ranging from creamy ivory to oyster and foggy gray. Even with the apparent embrace of repetition, each panel bespeaks an intensity of care and feeling which is evident in the nuanced shades and the delicacy of their textures, at times a scintillating weave of vertical and horizontal brushstrokes, at others an open and frothy surface.

Here we are confronted with an art whose pleasures stem from an amalgamation of different elements from the history of art, from the Classical to the Contemporary. In an attempt to “recover an irrecoverable history,”¹ Roldán used red ochre to tone the grounds of every painting, a pigment often used for the ground by Old Masters from the Byzantine through the Neoclassical periods. This same ground provides a unifying element, which creates an atmosphere that envelops the viewer in something they can feel but cannot see. The base coat is followed by different shades of yellow, red, blue and green, and two or more coats of white paint that Roldán uses to build up the front and back of each piece. Each shade seeps out in subtle streaks and bleeds from under the white layers and is sometimes visible in the edges of the aluminum panels.

Stripped of their two-dimensionality the paintings float off the wall. They are installed with custom-built hinges as pivoting windows in a non-symmetrical arrangement that echoes the thirty-seven windows of a fanciful wood maquette that is suspended in the center of the gallery, as if they were the ghosts of the windows in the house they copy.

¹Roldán, Luis. Personal interview. 14 Dec. 2016.

But is everything as it seems? Have we entered a mind-bending play of the inside being the outside created by Roldán's febrile headspace or has he recreated Nietzsche's concept of "eternal recurrence," the indefinitely repeated cycle of all things? The maquette is an enigmatic object of an uninhabitable space that resembles a birdcage, a traditional metaphor of imprisonment. An oddity is that the space is impossible to enter unless you slide horizontally through one of the gaps, perhaps a relief given that the stairs lead nowhere as there is no roof and no base, meaning the viewer could plunge into nothingness. Is it the recreation of a home once lived in with the twists and bends that memory brings or is it the model of a dream house that was never built? In either case, its presence turns the viewer into an active element in the installation as he or she replaces the figure commonly present in nineteenth-century interiors featuring open windows, a favored motif of Romantic painters. Since then many artists, ranging from Henri Matisse to Jan Dibbets, confirm the enduring attraction of the window as a subject and its potential to turn into a "picture within a picture."

Trapping the viewer between *Umbra* (2016) and the amplified windows, Roldán invites us to look through them. However, the expectation of a view through the cage's pint-sized windows and the ones on the wall is thwarted by their opaque nature, highlighting human's perceptual limits. As we cannot gaze through them, we are forced to look inward through the big gaps in the cage or to look outward and focus on the quality of the light reflecting off the pivoting paintings and their shadows, as well as our own.

Roldán bestows his works with movement by allowing each painting to move on its perch. Therein lies a poetic message of shadows as something fleeting, changeable and intangible. This evokes Victor Stoichita's statement that "the whole dialectic of Western representation has taught us that frontality – and the mirror – constitutes the symbolic form of the relationship between the self and the same, whereas the profile – and the shadow – constitutes the symbolic form of the relationship between the self and the other."²

² Stoichita, Victor I. *Short History of the Shadow*. London: Reaktion Books, 1997. p. 221.

The relationship between the self and the other is a question Roldán has continually addressed throughout his career. We exist within the realm of duality. He has explored this duality in myriad ways, whether it is via shared intimacy and the domestic as seen in *Calendario* (1996) and *Dreams* (2003-6) or through the relationship between the artist and viewer, as is now the case. Moreover, Roldán is an artist so comfortable in his own skin that he is unafraid of acknowledging connections to historical artists in his own work. He addressed this head on in *Other Voices* (2010), a body of work that channeled Martín Ramírez's vision through his own.

The idea of all white or white-on-white painting is not new. However, *Umbra* gives the Modernist monochrome a twist due to Roldán's transformational power and his desire to wed contradictions. He has after all managed to combine Kazimir Malevich's search for purism and infinity, the magisterial reductionism of Robert Irwin and the austere beauty that touches the found objects present in the work of Fernanda Gomes. We are also reminded of Johann Erdmann Hummel's provocative reflections on space and light in *The Grinding of the Granite Bowl* (1831); of *Fresh Widow* (1920), Marcel Duchamp's witty pun on the notion of the tableau as an open window; and of *Living Cells* (1991-1993), the tiny all-white dwellings by the Israeli artist Absalon.

Gabriela Rangel claims, "the retrieval of found objects capable of quoting from art history constitutes a strategy of archaeological fiction that recurs often in Roldán's work... [it] does nothing more than demonstrate that the density or validity of a work is not reinforced by its parallelism to others, but by its resignification in a quote whose purpose is to disorient rather than inform or, at best, to elaborate a parenthetical comment."³ Roldán's inclusion of the cage as a historically charged element in *Umbra* is yet another example that corroborates Rangel's statement.

³ Rangel, Gabriela. "Luis Roldán y las formas líquidas de lo moderno." *Luis Roldán, Periplo, Una retrospectiva 1986-2016*. Bogotá: Museo de Arte del Banco de la República, 2016. p. 86.

Other common threads from Roldán's artistic output include the "intangible frontier between interior and exterior"⁴ previously explored in *Eidola* (2015); the suspended objects and the amplification of an image found in *Circunstancias* (2009); and the complex relationship of the double, shadows, repetition and variation that can be traced back to *Cantos* (2008).

Roldán's labyrinthine complexity is embodied in *Umbra*. The viewer is delicately perched between a range of allusions, both personal and historical, that attest to the syncretic and eclectic nature of his sensibility. We are caught between the tension of seeing and spying, among the beauty of the projected shadows that turn the perceptual political. In short, *Umbra* is an installation that immerses the viewer both in its space and the present, as well as its movement through history.

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⁴ Méndez, Mariangela. *Luis Roldán. Eidola* [Brochure]. 2016. New York: Henrique Faria Fine Art, p. 2.