

IKON

Exhibition Guide

Arturo Herrera

First and Second Floor Galleries

28 March – 20 May 2006

This is the first solo exhibition in the UK of work by Venezuelan / US artist Arturo Herrera. Born in Caracas in 1959, Herrera studied at the University of Tulsa, Oklahoma before spending a number of years living in New York. Following a period of research in Europe and numerous visits returning to Venezuela, he gained his Masters in Fine Art from the University of Illinois in Chicago in 1992.

Although Herrera started making collages in the late 1980s, it was in Chicago that these collages became less pictorial and instead focused on the process of their making – cutting, splicing and layering. As is still the case in Herrera's studio, a vast amount of 'raw' material, cut paper – printed, painted and coloured – in all shapes and sizes is manipulated in hundreds of experiments as a means to generate imagery.

One series of these typically untitled collages from 1997–1998 can be seen in the first floor galleries. Here, disjointed fragments from children's colouring books remain strangely recognisable, inviting the viewer to overcome a familiar reading of the image and to consider multiple, possibly disturbing and uncontrollable associations that probably never occurred to the original illustrators. A severed limb appears abandoned against a foreign backdrop; a dismembered yellow hat rests atop an improvised, abstract shape.

Herrera's experimentation with collage as a process is taken further in other work presented on this floor. In the large cut-outs, *Untitled* (2002 and 2003), *Birthday* and *Grid Wedding* (both 2006), traces of oddly recognisable figures can be glimpsed, despite their deconstructed, abstract form. Delicate filigrees operate both at a distance and close up, where the viewer is thwarted in reading the fragmented graphic surface. Looking at these images therefore becomes somehow intimate and personal. The same can be said for *Untitled*, 2005, a large-scale powder drawing installed directly on the gallery wall. Red and black pigment is applied in the same

way as traditional frescoes, through a stencil (a 'cartoon') of tiny holes, forming complex layers of imagery stretching out in front of the viewer. The lines seemingly dance across the surface, abstract gestures weaving in and out of barely-there, Disney-esque motifs.

Herrera's use of such disembodied images creates a sense of ambiguity. He deliberately undermines any figuration, leaving only glimpses of what went before. In *Keep in Touch #1* (2004), the artist commissioned an illustrator to produce sixty-five gouache paintings incorporating thirteen different motifs selected from animated film scenes. These provided Herrera with a series of backgrounds onto which additions from newspapers and colouring books were added, obscuring the original image to varying degrees. We also see the artist's strong addition of paint, applied both to mirror linear elements in the cut-outs and as an improvised response to the emerging image. The results are light-hearted, surreal and remind us of a sequence from an animation – as a frozen moment in an otherwise busy scenario. In this way, the artist challenges the literal and traditional understanding of collage as a process of simply 'gluing' or 'cutting and sticking'. Herrera demonstrates a desire to re-compose or re-order an existing image as opposed to simply joining together disparate elements.

The sensual nature inherent within Herrera's work can also be seen in *Lapa* and *Lomo* (both 2006), two new pieces comprising large felt shapes onto which acrylic paint has been airbrushed. The paint appears almost part of the felt itself, adding a sense of depth to an otherwise dense, flat material. Here the artist stresses the physical quality of his work – colour, surface and material – unashamedly encouraging the viewer to enjoy its sensuousness. They hang from the wall like poured ink and perhaps constitute the most abstracted, pure realisation of Herrera's practice to date.

On the second floor, the first gallery is dominated by *Les Noces* (2007), Herrera's first ever animation presented here across four walls. Set to the music of Stravinsky, performed by the Pokrovsky Ensemble, the animation comprises a series of fading and dissolving stills - abstracted, painterly forms generated by recomposing details from existing works. This sense of disorientation, not quite recognising, yet being reminded of once-seen images, is heightened by the irregular rhythm of the music combined with modernist composition and Russian folk song, again nudging us into remembering something once heard, an almost familiar melody.

Subsequently, we find *Plot* (2006), a sculptural piece that appears to have been poured onto the floor just as the felt in *Lomo* and *Lapa* appears to have dripped down the wall. The 'cut-out' is of laser-cut steel and the background simply the

floor, yet the playful shape and solid density of the work derives from the same references to popular culture and modernist gesture as Herrera's vibrant collages. In *From the Top* (2003), this drive for abstraction can be seen in a series of nine, double-layer, paper cut-outs, comprising areas of flat colour, devoid of narrative or pictorial reference.

Finally, entering the last room in the exhibition, we are faced with an explosion of pattern and movement in the form of twelve large-scale collages from 2006. However, their depth and richness offers no more narrative insight or 'meaning' than *From the Top* or in fact, any of the other work presented here. Instead, Herrera continues with motifs and strategies featured elsewhere, using a process for the realisation of the work revealed by the complex layers of collage and paint. The works are originally derived from two images that Herrera came across in a children's book on a trip home to Caracas. The two images were photographed and sent to an illustrator who produced drawings of what he imagined the backs of the two figures to look like. The resulting illustrations were enlarged and used by Herrera as the basis for a number of improvised linear drawings, characteristically cut up, re-photographed, projected onto the wall and copied before paint was added. The results are beautiful, chaotic and tactile and yet are derived from what could be read as a very ordered process. They dispense with narrative but through their making suggest another story. As the artist himself comments,

"You're on your own when you look at these images. Fragments offer a point of entry that you can identify in the piece. Once you're there, you are in a complete process of association. And that process is completely different to another person's process... you will be able to form whatever information you want from this image..."