

MOUSSE

Mario Cutajar: There are a number of notable features about your work, but one that immediately stands out is your use of shape. I'm curious about how you come up with your shapes, how you develop them.

Michael Rey: I used to have a very simplistic idea of the format of painting. It was either horizontal, which recalled landscapes, or vertical and associated with portraiture. I tried to get away from that and at first only succeeded in coming up with a square. I broke out of the square when I started using scraps of wood and testing the limits of chop saws and table saws. I just started arbitrarily cutting angled joints and then slapping a substrate on top and routing it to get a shaped panel. There was really no rhyme or reason to it, it was just kind of playing with what was there. It got me out of a very restrictive notion of what a painting surface should be.

MC: You're one of very few artists I know who can genuinely claim a working class background. You are quite knowledgeable about carpentry tools and techniques and comfortable enough with their use that you are able to employ them as drawing tools.

MR: I realized when I was in school that I have a certain kind of what I would call material thinking or intuition. I have always been curious about materials and how they can be shaped and manipulated. My high school teacher taught me how to weld at an early age. Wood-shops and metal shops became a second home to me because I figured out that's where I could learn how to build things. I was a total shop junkie. I wanted to know everything there was about how to cast bronze, how to use a lathe, how to curve wood... Then, after 9/11, I remember thinking about how I might survive in a world that didn't have civilization any more. I'm not one of those doomsday preppers, but I remember trying to figure out what it would take to become self-reliant. Subsequently I ended travelling across America and getting a bunch of manual jobs including one in a bronze foundry and another in a high-end cabinet making shop.

MC: Let's talk about monochromes. In a monochrome, shape becomes very important because once you have a uniform color, you start noticing the edges that are the boundary of the color field. So with your use of the monochrome what is highlighted is...

MR: The edges.

MC: The edges. I think that connects with your investment in shaping the support and not accepting the rectangle as a default.

MR: And, as you know, around 2009, I also started perforating the surfaces. It took me a while to come around to putting holes in my shapes.

MC: A lot of things start happening when those holes appear. Because you are not just shaping the exterior, the boundary, but also creating an internal structure. Your shapes are often symmetrical, but the holes do not follow the contour, they are in contrast to the contour. Now, of course, with the holes we can start seeing what's behind the holes. I mean the wall actually is visible through these holes, so you are not looking at an undivided surface, you are actually looking at a surface and seeing the wall coming through the holes, and I was suggesting to you earlier that I thought that was a way to connect the painting of your surfaces with another type of painting, with what tends to be pejoratively dismissed as house painting. Let's get back to how you create your shapes.

MR: A lot of it comes from drawing. I draw all the time. It's almost automatic drawing. I just sit there and draw. Sometimes weeks can go by and nothing comes. Then I'll suddenly do 20 drawings. I have a kind of sense of what I want in a shape. Afterward, I'll pick a drawing and transpose it onto graph paper, using French curves and templates to create symmetry.

MC: Why do you think symmetry is important for you?

MR: For me it organizes the form.

MC: Maybe what I'm really asking you is what makes a shape resonate for you?

MR: I'm looking to surprise myself. What I'm looking for is something uncanny, something unfamiliar. That's why I have to do a lot of drawing to get anywhere. The uncanny is not something you can produce at will. You have to get over your own "natural" impulses, which can be derivative. I also have to work to avoid anthropomorphic references. If things become like claws or hands or faces or crosses, some kind of recognizable thing, I become wary.

MC: It's funny because I think your work always seems to be hovering on the edge of iconicity. I find myself asking: Where have I seen this? Have I seen a Christmas decoration that sort of looks a bit like that? Have I seen a computer icon that maybe reminds me of this? Have I seen a...

MR: Corporate logo?

MC: Sure, a corporate logo, or any number of things.

MR: When I was first making these, people would say they were tools or some kind of utilitarian thing. However, I actually work very hard to retain ambiguity in the shape, to allow it as great a degree of polyvalence as possible.

MC: This polyvalence you're keen on also suggests an elusive gendering or a paradoxical one.

MR: It's a way to bend these things away from taking on macho trappings. My background is working class, but I'm not interested in glorifying testosterone.

MC: You coat your surfaces with some kind of clay substance related to Plasticine, right? You are creating an allusion to skin.

MR: The clay adds another factor, beyond color and shape.

MC: This clay layer retains the impressions of the fingers or whatever tool was used to spread it, and that's separate from the nuances of the paint layer on top of it.

MR: Well, actually, the interaction between the clay layer and the paint on top is more complex because the clay introduces variations in the way the oil paint gets absorbed and dries. You'll notice that the surfaces are not uniformly glossy or matte, something difficult to make out in photographs. These surface variations continue to shift for some time after the painting is finished.

MC: There is something odd, perhaps even perverse going on here because the shapes you use are not suggestive of body parts but they end up being fleshy.

MR: It's like android flesh over a machine armature.

MC: And this clayey, painted flesh is easily damaged.

MR: Yes, it's very much like skin that way. It bruises. It's susceptible to injury.

MC: So you have these objects that are very robustly constructed but then they present a surface that's completely vulnerable. I'm tempted to call them hysterical bodies.

MR: But it's a vulnerability that's largely hidden. The only clue, if you pay attention, is the exposed clay on the edge of the pieces. I'm playing with flirtation, with diva stagecraft. Frontally, you get the alluring silhouette and color and from the side you get a hint of nudity. I want the painting to draw you close but at the same time forbid touching. Noli me tangere. Isn't that perhaps the essential hysteric injunction?