

Overneath by Leo A.C. Abaya

Central to this exhibition is cloth. All at once subject and material, we are presented with cloth as protective cover, skin, or surface to signify an upper or outermost layer, a limit, beyond which there is nothing more or something else.

Cloth's association with the visual arts stretches far back. Besides its use as lining for wood panels, it had a distinctive role in the development of the process of achieving (or regaining) for painting, the capability of faithfully depicting the corporeal, physical and optical world, suppressed since Christianity's doctrinal conquest of western culture.

It has been suggested that in the medieval ages, panes of glass placed between an object and the eye have been used to investigate vision in order to make better pictures. This configuration is echoed in Leon Battista Alberti's use of a (sheer) fabric stretched on a frame. Alberti describes the veil or *velo* in his treatise *De Pittura* published in 1435: "I set this up between the eye and the object to be represented, so that the visual pyramidⁱ passes through the loose weave of the veil. This intersection of the veil has many advantages, first of all because it always presents the same surface unchanged, for once you *fixed* the positions of the outlines, you can finally place the apex of the pyramid you started with, *which is extremely difficult to do without the intersection.*" (Alberti 55; 67-69, italics mine). This veil helped the artist to transform "the three-dimensional space of vision to the two-dimensional virtual plane of representation"ⁱⁱⁱ (Ackerman 91).

When canvas became the customary surface for painting, cloth has had run the gamut from being an interface where optical vision and the world itself intersected, to being the support upon which this vision was represented in pictorial space through the (oil) medium. As asserted in William Uricchio's *The Frame*, the *velo* positioned the artist to look through a frame in a frontal relation to the painterly surface.

The idea of considering the painter's canvas as a screen is also mentioned in a passage in Da Vinci's own treatise (89, 106). As such, it is the intersection that connects the artist and the object to be represented, conventionalizing space in a way that anticipated the grid so characteristic of the twentieth century. It is a conception of space that is geometrically isotropicⁱⁱⁱ, rectilinear, abstract and uniform. "It followed the logic of the Gaze, rather than the Glance, producing a visual take that was eternalized, reduced to one "point of view" and disembodied" (Jay 6 - 7).

Jose Santos III's preoccupation with convincing likeness in the early phase of his practice clearly points to the foregoing mindset of representation. Eventually, he deconstructed *trompe l'oeil* effects by introducing his depictions juxtaposed with the depicted, the representamen^{iv} with the object. It is interesting to observe that as the surreal and symbolical impulse receded in his *oeuvre*, human figuration became scarce and an awareness of the body began to emerge. In more recent works, actual dimensions coalesce with simulations in paint, prodding the viewer to shift and move in order to appreciate the dualities presented. His installations beg the viewer to breach the stillness of optical contemplation, replacing what is considered as the "linear, unblinking and fixed lone eye" of the classical tradition with bodily displacement, allowing "saccadic" jumps (of the visual pyramid) from one focal point to another (Jay 7).

This impulse reflects the investigations early in the 19th century that dramatized the productive role of the body in vision. Collectively, the studies of Goethe, David Brewster, Joseph Plateau, Gustave Fechner defined "how vision was an *irreducible* amalgam of physiological processes and external stimulation," changing the previous model, which was uniformly detached and Cartesian. In this phenomenological model, the conception of space is concrete, synchronic and anisotropic^v because the body (not solely the mind) is the ground

for vision; it has “visionary” capacities.^{vi} Once the objects of vision are coextensive with one’s body, vision is dislocated and deposited onto a single immanent (but moving) plane (Crary 34, italics and parenthesis mine).

In this show, the artist synthesizes previous and present tendencies. Self-reflexively, he uses cloth as an activator for (his) eye and body to interrogate mimesis or the imitation of the so-called real world. As an agent of depiction, he foregoes the scenographic position that privileged the arrangement of figures and objects in a matrix of unitary space. Like a camera zoom lens, he hones in on the subjects, optically and haptically scanning textures and surfaces, conjuring them as matrices upon which something may develop or emerge.

Distinguished from mere drapery, cloth is not laid down in sensuous repose or undulated like a hilly landscape. It is depicted as an opaque externality. Like flayed skin or screen, it appears hung and upright, bearing its own weight against the force of gravity. In this way, it is confrontational like a wall or a barrier. It protects that which is inside. It is a border or edge that determines an entity from everything else.

As covering, cloth is also the material that physically wraps rubble, emphasized by the installation of the same in the exhibition. However, since the rock and concrete fragments that make up the rubble are not what they appear to be, being simulations, it makes one ponder. Having exceeded the copies of their reference, the unreliability that underneath the wrappings are either the simulations of objects as suggested or completely something else, begs the question: is a third layer of meaning intended?

What does this shrouding of forms, this replacement of blunt significations do? What is the purpose of all these verisimilitude if depiction hides and covers? Is it the same as camouflage, which, through the mimicry of skin with proximal environment, an organism conceals itself without hiding? What is the artist trying to conceal?

In situating veridical paintings vis-à-vis wrapped and simulated objects within the same spatial field of experience, does the artist intend to make us feel a loss of certainty in what accounts for reality? Does it tell us that reality isn’t only constituted by phenomenon (thing knowable through the senses) but also by noumenon (thing in itself)?

Is the artist trying to free us, the prisoners of Plato’s cave^{vii}, so we become aware that what we physically see in the world are but shadows of the ultimate reality of forms? What does his optical and tactile simulacra interrogate as regards the relationship of reality and their signs and symbols?

These emerging questions register an expanding inquiry, cementing the transition in (his) painting practice. He is proving that having been in circulation in the network, his work cannot be stilled or stifled, but can only be subjected to various transformations in material states (Joselit 221).

This has a bearing on the classical Greek tale about two painters worth retelling here. Zeuxis draws the curtain veiling his work and presents it to an audience. A bird flies down to peck on the grapes of his skillfully painted still life. The bird hits the wall and falls on the ground. The audience is astounded that the likeness has fooled even the impartial animal. Now, the second painter Parrhasios is to present his own mural. Standing around the wall, the audience grows impatient, having looked for sometime at the curtain concealing his work. Zeuxis asks the artist to draw the curtain so that he and the audience may see the painting underneath. Parrhasios apologizes that it cannot be done. Zeuxis and the audience demand to know why. Parrhasios reveals that they are already looking at his painting.

Leo A. C. Abaya
Manila, 10 October 2014

Works Cited:

James S. Ackerman. *Distance Points: Essays in Theory and Renaissance Art and Architecture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

Leon Battista Alberti. *On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of "De Pittura" and "De Statua,"* trans. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972).

Jonathan Crary. "Modernizing Vision" and Martin Jay. "Scopic Regimes of Modernity." *Vision and Visuality: Dia Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, No. 2. Ed. Hal Foster. (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988)

David Joselit. "Painting Beside Itself//2009." *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*. Ed. Terry R. Myers. (London: Whitechapel Gallery, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

William Uricchio. *The Frame*,.MIT Web, 8 September 2014
<http://web.mit.edu/uricchio/Public/Documents/The_Frame-Ch2.pdf, >

ⁱ *The model for vision at the time with the target or point of sight spread out on one end like a view and on the other end, the eye, towards which the same view converges.*

ⁱⁱ *This process is distinct from his contemporary Brunelleschi, who traced the outlines of buildings reflected on a mirror.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Having a physical property that has the same value when measured in different directions.*

^{iv} *C. S. Peirce, pragmatic philosopher, uses this term to mean the signifier.*

^v *Opposite of isotropic*

^{vi} *The investigations of Goethe, et. al. delved on experiences associated with retinal afterimages and its chromatic transformations, direct observation of sunlight, invention of the kaleidoscope and the stereoscope. Some of them became blind or visually impaired as a result.*

^{vii} *Plato's cave is the allegory that describes people who have been chained inside a cave all their lives, facing a blank wall upon which shadows are cast by things passing in front of the fire behind them. In time, the prisoners designate names to the shadows, which is the closest they can get to view reality. The lesson is that the philosopher is like a freed prisoner who comes to understand that the cast shadows do not make up reality because he can perceive the true forms from which the shadows came, having been freed from his captivity.*