

# I Enter What I See

“I am a sculptor who no longer makes sculptures,”<sup>1</sup> claims Peter Soriano when looking back to the 1990s from the vantage point of his current work. A flashback to those early years shows him working on colorful pop-inspired resin sculptures, informed for the most part by his everyday surroundings. Although he destroyed the resin molds in 2004, when he was artist-in-residence at the Atelier Calder in Saché, France, he continued nevertheless to work with the same material, combining it with other elements, such as rigging slings or straps that evoke a potentially prehensile dimension.<sup>2</sup> During his residency, in line with his research into volume, Peter Soriano’s diagrams, sketches, and notes on loose sheets of paper were complemented by observational drawings. These were shown together on three occasions: in a reconstitution of the residency at Atelier Calder itself, then, in 2007, at the FRAC Auvergne and at Galerie Jean Fournier. In all three venues, he pinned the drawings directly onto the walls as if to recreate the informality of a studio. They form an impressive ensemble in which observation is tinged with reminiscence and interpretation supersedes memory. The onlooker has the impression that she is following the artist’s meandering thoughts, his oscillations, and his hesitations.

From then on, Peter Soriano was to juggle two artistic practices that ultimately merged into one. Sculpture, which he ‘reduced’ in 2008 to steel tubes and taut cables affixed to walls marked with spray-painted symbols, work that he referred to as “*situations*.”<sup>3</sup> And drawing as an autonomous entity, in notebooks or on loose sheets—a graphic process that has been evolving ever since, culminating in the monumental wall drawings of today. At first glance, this graphic evolution seems to bear only a tenuous link to his earlier work with volume. And yet it reflects a continuity of thought, irrigated by notions of space, movement, and memory, which Peter Soriano had already touched upon in 2006 in his illuminating text *La mémoire fautive*.<sup>4</sup> This introspective essay conveys his sensitive connection to the world, his feelings, and aesthetic experiences. It opens with a sentence redolent of Proust: “For some time I was aware that the memory of objects played a crucial role in the construction of my pieces.”

It was during a visit to his Brooklyn studio in 2008 that I first came across an ensemble of relatively small scale-models made of raw plywood. These architectural maquettes stemmed from the memory of a house Peter Soriano had lived in when young. He had retrospectively ‘revisited’ the

space in his mind in order to materialize it through volume. And it was certainly possible to discern domestic touches such as corridors or rapidly roughed out wooden staircases. The result conjured up those blurred childhood memories in which the images are evanescent but the perception of the physical sensations still acute. These plywood objects are emblematic of the artist’s unique way of viewing the world, melding the vital impetus with the crucible of memory.

The year 2009 marked another turning point, the result of a residency at the Terra Foundation in Giverny, France, where Soriano turned the numerous rooms of the house into a one rambling artist’s studio. He spread sheets of paper across the floor, introducing ineffable, mobile pointers (such as the gaps between the furniture and electrical systems) which appeared incidental but actually enabled him to commit the space to memory. As he drew, he would fold and refold the sheets as though creating an adaptation in real time of the observational process involved when choosing a particular spot for a drawing. The gaze pauses, settles, looks away, and then turns back (pp. 8–9). And in that precise moment when the outline comes into contact with the sheet, it is already a recollection, stored away in the twists and turns of memory. By folding the paper, he is synthesizing his ideas, like a temporal precipitate of what he is seeing, feeling, and depicting. This is a crucial stage for Peter Soriano because it encompasses both the observed and the experienced space through a combination of several representational systems, from perspective through vanishing points to plane drawing.

The Giverny experience enabled him to hone his signature colorful graphic lexicon, which he explored and elaborated further through the association of flat sweeps of color and transparencies, rapid strokes, and ruler lines. An ingenious intuition had also led him to introduce the perfect new material to his works on paper: spray paint. What could be more appropriate when rendering speed? Even the sound of paint sprayed from a can evokes swiftness and immediacy. This technique would serve as the basis for his next body of work: enormous wall drawings made of acrylic and spray paint, each executed according to instructions that permit the works to be re-installed.

Since then Peter Soriano has devoted himself fulltime to drawing, concentrating essentially on three surfaces: the notebook (to condense his ideas), paper (for his everyday practice), and walls (for his monumental installations). Although he jots down his ideas in the notebooks, the drawings on paper are not, however, necessarily directly linked to the murals, which form a natural offshoot of specific sketches. The range of folding methods together with the variety of dry or pictorial techniques (watercolor, ink, pencil, chalk, stencil, spray, etc.) introduce an experimental aspect that raises the question of the status of these drawings on paper: do they constitute rapid sketches or actual studies? In an interview he gave in 2010, Peter Soriano explained:

1. Comments at the Colby College math colloquium, Colby Museum, Waterville, Maine, 21 September 2015, cited in Elizabeth Finch, *Permanent Maintenance*, 2015, p. 1.

2. Peter Soriano, *Running Fix*, FRAC Auvergne, Clermont-Ferrand, 2007.

3. Raphael Rubinstein, “Peter Soriano’s New Direction(s)” in *Other Side... (IDOL, AJAC, IONA, EMEU)*, Galerie Jean Fournier, Paris, November 2008–January 2009.

4. Peter Soriano, *La mémoire fautive*, Little Single, Éric Suchère (ed.), Paris, 2006.

“These drawings convey how my eye roams round the space, darting from one element to another [. . .]. I become aware of my gaze. I enter what I see [. . .]”<sup>5</sup> (pp. 10–14).

One should not overlook the fact that Peter Soriano is not simply driven by an irrepressible need to capture the world that surrounds him, *in progress*, but that he has also gradually adapted his artistic practice to his life.<sup>6</sup> He travels widely and frequently, by plane and by train. Furthermore, he is a consummate yachtsman who has been sailing since childhood and has even built his own boat. He knows how to orient himself in space. He is a very good skier, with a feel for speed that has taught him to appreciate space from the standpoint of his own body in motion. In *La mémoire fautive* once again, he declares: “I have long had a fascination with trains [. . .] I thought that the train was a perfect vehicle to pass through space and let the eye remember quickly, almost instinctively, and no doubt imperfectly.”<sup>7</sup>

In 2012, landscape became the cornerstone of his *Panorama* series, but without naturalism. This series—encompassing drawings on walls and on paper—is based on the different views from his studio in Maine. Intrigued by the shifting natural light of the room, Peter Soriano captures in his graphic, colorful style the impact of these light effects and their undulating shadows. By covering and obliterating, and by using transparency and various other processes of deletion, he is getting as close as possible to the object of his desire, he *enters what he sees*, in real time. These drawings provided the launching pad for his monumental installation at Galerie Jean Fournier in 2014 (pp. 22–23).

In 2015, while working on a series of wall drawings for the Colby College Museum of Art in Maine, Soriano produced a substantial number of drawings on paper resulting from the hours of observation he spent on Colby’s campus before tackling the walls. The nature of the campus itself became a vital element of the work, symbolizing itinerancy and exchange. The drawings recreate the mental and functional mobility of this vast campus. It was the purpose of the space, and not the space itself, that inspired him here: he was fascinated by the details of its infrastructure such as the air-conditioning system or fire hydrant, pointers linked to notions of dynamics and flux. The diagonals, vanishing points, and folds of the paper materialize the perpetual motion expressed by the title of the series, *Permanent Maintenance*. Although these drawings derive their inspiration from his onsite observations, they are above all an attempt to recreate the underlying feelings and memories of those particular spaces (pp. 32–34).

Since then, in the course of his travels, Peter Soriano has made drawings incorporating views from his hotel rooms (pp. 15, 31). Sometimes the drawings are based on

actual landscapes as observed by Soriano. Other times, the landscapes are here again ‘revisited,’ as with the drawings *Klosters* and *Klosters #2* wherein the Alpine scenes are in fact artfully arranged bedsheets that evoked for Soriano mountain peaks (pp 24–25). The shadows are there regardless, and so too are the sun’s trajectories and the wind. Their movement and spontaneity are highlighted by the variety of formats and techniques—pencil, watercolor, spray paint, and pen. Different registers are also called into play, spanning the realism of the landscapes and the abstract, mathematical lexicon of the arrows and vectors.

The imaginary dimension of landscape is ignited once again in the significant series titled *Cresta*, which includes drawings on paper (pp 42–49) and a 2017 installation spanning the entirety of the exhibition space at Circuit d’Art Contemporain in Lausanne. This time, however, the reflection does not stem from a specific landscape or place but from a mundane everyday ‘emblem’ of Switzerland: a small, aluminum chocolate wrapper. Unfolded, its exploded shape conjures up a mountain range. Immensity is thereby conveyed through a mere twist of scale. As the artist himself puts it, the challenge in this instance is to convey a “gigantic potential.”

With the works on paper that complement his imposing wall drawing at the St. Jean chapel in Le Sourn, Brittany, part of the 2018 *L’art dans les chapelles* festival, Peter Soriano has concentrated to a greater extent on the notion of displacement, both his own as he discovers and moves through the chapel as well as the projection of a fellow visitor’s movements. One detail in particular immediately captured his attention: the layout of the granite flagstones that divide the space and create a path to the altar. This project heralds a new departure for Peter Soriano, paving the way for increasingly pictorial and colorful drawings imbued with a new formal freedom. He is moving away from diagrammatic markings and mathematical abstraction to forge a new course in the realm of the imaginary. The rectangular shapes can be seen as particularly dense opaque blocks but also, in an imaginative leap, as an alignment of translucent stained-glass windows in fluid, shimmering hues (pp. 7, 51–57).

Ever since antiquity and Aristotle’s first treatises on the art of memory, thinkers and artists have been continually examining ways of recording the continuum of life. How can one memorize a space or convey the multitude of sensorial states triggered by the memory of a place? “Behold in the plains, and caves, and caverns of my memory, innumerable and innumerably full of innumerable kinds of things, either as images, as all bodies; or by actual presence, as the arts [. . .]—over all these do I run, I fly; I dive on this side and that, as far as I can, and there is no end.”<sup>8</sup>

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5. Marion Daniel, “Peter Soriano, du dessin-signé à la pensée visuelle”, in *Roven*, no. 5, spring-summer 2011, Johana Carrier and Marine Pagès (eds), p. 90.

6. “Tracing a life that borders on the nomadic, Soriano’s drawings document the ever shifting interiors of his migratory life [. . .]”, Patterson Sims, “Peter Soriano, Interior Drawing”, *Other Side . . .*, op. cit., p. 46.

7. op. cit., pp. 13–14.

8. Aristotle, *De memoria et reminiscentia*, cited by Frances A. Yates in *The Art of Memory*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966, pp. 59–60.