

Peter Soriano: Interior Drawing

by Patterson Sims

“Drawing is a vehicle I use to locate myself in various spaces—physical, metaphorical, and psychological. I use the paper to show how those spaces intersect, to help clarify and understand them.” — Peter Soriano, 2012¹

Peter Soriano started drawing seriously around the age of fifteen during summers spent in Spain. His instructor was his uncle, the distinguished Spanish artist Fernando Zobel (1924-1984) whose atmospheric and linear compositions are subtle, elegant examples of the global abstract expressionism of the 1950s and 1960s. Zobel wasn't only an artist, he was also an erudite art collector and founder of the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art in Cuenca, a medieval town east of Madrid. He taught his nephew that drawing is a way of learning to see and make sense of the world around him. Together, they spent hours in the Prado Museum discussing and drawing paintings “not only as an exercise in copying,” to quote Soriano, “but as a way of observing and understanding what an artist is trying to say.” In many ways Soriano feels he is now “beginning to circle back to my uncle’s notion of drawing as a form of conversation.”

Soriano’s first decades as a mature artist were devoted to, as aptly described by Raphael Rubinstein, “colorful biomorphic sculptures made of polyester resin that explore a kind of pop abstraction via eccentric shapes that seem part human body, part tool, part toy, and often flirt with modularity.”² These early, organic sculptures were developed and essayed in a stream of preparatory sketches: like other sculptors, Soriano uses drawing to develop and work through ideas and possibilities. To exemplify “the classic dilemma of sculptors who draw,” Soriano cites Eva Hesse and Robert Smithson. “One medium deals with three dimensions, and the other with two,” he says, “Does one depict a three-dimensional shape in two dimensions? Or does one find a two-dimensional equivalent? For years I struggled with this dilemma until I found a place for both.”

Soriano has found his “place for both” with, on the one hand, conceptual wall installations that use metal pipes, wires, and spray paint, and, on the other, with seemingly unrelated drawings on Japanese paper. These large, irregularly edged works on paper shun studied lines and smooth mastery to capture a distinct graphic impulse and methodology that defy—as do his wall sculptures—easy classification. The drawings appear at first glance to be abstract, but are in fact quite concrete and grounded in the close observation of his surroundings. He conveys what he sees in a loose, even casual style of drawing, yet uses forceful, controlled surface exploration and formal interplay. He folds his paper again and again, a process that refines and constructs his compositions until the drawings take on an almost sculptural dimension. The end result has much to do with “mixing languages,” he explains, “in moving between the two dimensional and the three dimensional.”

Soriano’s new drawings chart, on site, the private rooms and interior spaces of his life, from the distinctly modernist interiors of his childhood to working studio lofts in Brooklyn and downtown Manhattan, from intimate domestic interiors to impersonal hotel rooms. Tracing a life that borders on the nomadic, Soriano’s drawings document the ever-shifting interiors of his migratory life; they serve as a means to locate himself and express how he perceives and positions himself in his environment. Working in graphite, ink, watercolor, and spray paint, he loosely records the construction, features, and measurements of these spaces. His drawings bring to mind the late 1960s and 1970s process-and-installation documentation and measurement drawings of artists

like Barry Le Va, Robert Morris, and Mel Bochner. Soriano makes informative, though idiosyncratic, selections of salient details in his surroundings: not only objects and furnishings, but doorways, pipe work, electrical circuitry, ceiling fans, water sprinklers, vents, ducts, and other fixtures and their shadows. At one point, for example, while working in his Manhattan loft, he became fascinated by the “layers of electric agendas” crisscrossing his tin ceiling, a fascination that translated into a series of drawings that includes thin sprayed lines charting the dangling cables and exposed wires.

In the process of portraying interiors, Soriano employs lines, arrows, circles, measurement annotations, and color codes. In some drawings, to delineate a floor, he combines ruler-sharp threads of spray paint with softer, feathered streaks. In other drawings, grey watercolor is used to represent shadows. Well-worked, handled, and creased, Soriano’s drawings are treasure maps of seemingly unremarkable interior spaces. While precisely recorded, the dimensions and details of his interiors appear to be quickly transcribed; multiple minutiae recorded in artful haste. Their structure and flows of energy are affixed on his own and now others’ consciousness.

Soriano’s tracteries of graphite markings, faint notations, and written dimensions are counterpointed with spray-painted passages in vivid colors: “espresso brown,” “sail blue,” orange, and aluminum, among others. For Soriano, spray paint is the connection between his painterly works on paper and his three-dimensional wall works. His briskly sprayed marks—bands, arrows, brackets, circles, and Xs—have understandably been compared by Raphael Rubinstein to the markings on New York City street pavements and sidewalks that alert construction crews to the City’s subterranean armature of power lines and water pipes. Although the artist was not consciously aware of the connection until Rubinstein noted it, he has acknowledged that he applies spray paint “with the same economy, urgency and clarity as the spray marks one sees on the street made so unselfconsciously by utility workers.” Soriano’s sprays read as spontaneous streaks of color, light, speed, and process. They can be compared to graffiti, to gestural Abstract Expressionism, and to Cy Twombly’s calligraphic line.

In *Memory and Remembering Badly*, an essay published in 2006 in France, Soriano writes that his art, or the process of making his art, reflects, “some need I have in continuing to invest inanimate objects with meaning.” He suggests that it serves as a kind of “transitional object,” as described by the English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Woods Winnicott (1896-1971). In other words, his art reflects a desire to locate himself: to be settled, to establish order and a sense of place and security. Certainly one could argue that Soriano’s drawings of interiors and their contents are a response to his peripatetic existence, an itinerant childhood split between the Philippines, the US, and Europe, and an ongoing propensity for travel.

In 2007, Soriano launched a new series of works using, for the first time, spray paint on large single sheets of Japanese paper, or several sheets glued together. These early spray-painted compositions were “sort of Abstract Expressionist,” he says, meaning that they were gestural, sprayed quickly and loosely. By overlapping successive sheets of paper, one over the other, he created a carefully structured patchwork of subtle yet distinct layers, tones of white-on-white and gauzy veils of translucent colored spray. Two years later, while a Senior Artist in Residence with the Terra Foundation in Giverny, France, the series took on a powerful new dimension as Soriano began to fold and pleat his sheets of Japanese paper. He creased the paper horizontally and vertically to redo or “erase” parts or areas of his drawing and to conjoin disparate sections.

Soriano’s top-to-bottom or side-to-side folds mimic and reflect the way his eyes—and human perception—apportion, segment, rupture, or slide across space. Folding the paper vertically or horizontally allows him to deftly shift up, down, or across the space he is transcribing. His paper sheets vary in size, starting as long or high, depending on which direction he folds, as 180 cms.

(which happens to be around Soriano's own height). His folding process is similar to an accordion pleat. Once the fold is established, it is glued and cannot open again. Folding is a very physical, sculptural way to manipulate paper. It allows his drawings to retain, inside and invisibly, their past—and to take on a physical and psychological complexity that doesn't exist or that is purged in his minimalist wall works. Soriano's individual layers of folded paper become subtle fragments of the completed drawings; the creases provide subdued horizontal and vertical delineations. The fluidity of his folding process, the ease and openness to alteration, can be compared to Richard Diebenkorn's *Ocean Park* studies (one of which Soriano's uncle Fernando Zobel owned).

Influenced by his uncle, and by a deep intellectual and aesthetic curiosity, Soriano has always spent a great deal of time in museums and galleries. He is known among friends for his eagerness to visit even the most obscure or remote art museums, installations and cultural sites. Thanks in part to a multi-lingual and cross-cultural background, his frames of reference are unusually wide-ranging. When asked what pre-1900 art he finds particularly interesting, he cites 17th-to-19th century Indian Rajput miniature paintings (“for their wonderful line and color sense”), prehistoric French cave paintings (“for their economy of line and merging of drawing to the rock surface... where a charcoal line outlines the back of a cougar, but the powerful shoulder of the animal is the bulge in the rock”), Swiss 19th century drawings, and Japanese ukiyo-e prints. In constant “conversation” with art, his enduring objective is to securely establish his place within his shifting surroundings. Having done just that, Soriano has freed himself to make his most distinctly personal, original, and potent drawings yet.

1. This and other quotes are from conversations and emails with the artist in 2011 and early 2012.

2. Raphael Rubinstein, “Peter Soriano's New Direction(s)”, in *Other Side..(IDOL, AJAC, IONA, EMEU...)*., Paris, Jean Fournier Gallery, 2008, p. 5.