

Sculpture relative

« These are relative languages where one does not say: I hit the dog with a stick, or: I inhabit the house outbuildings, but, in two steps, hit by me the stick, hit by the stick the dog. Or else: inhabited by me the outbuildings, inhabited by the outbuildings the house. I'm hardly exaggerating. »

Jean Paulhan, *Les incertitudes du langage* [1952], Paris, Gallimard - Idées NRF, 1970, p.113.

In 2004, Peter Soriano spent six months at the Calder atelier in the town of Saché. It would be tempting to regard this sort of residency, with all it implies in change of habits and lifestyle (not just because the artist swapped the New York scene for the Touraine countryside), as a rupture in the artist's work. As a matter of fact, this period seems to have triggered a specific focus, indicated by the increased number of pieces produced, not to mention their sheer quality. For several years already, Peter Soriano's artwork had been visibly evolving and leaving the fairly clear-cut terrain where he'd set up camp for twelve years or so, dubbed Abstraction Pop in 1998 following a group show in Philadelphia. At the time, his colorful polyester-resin sculptures took on the shape of hybrid creatures, somewhere between cartoon-strip and radical non-representation; unitary, although sometimes rather monstrous (the titles often seem to be their names in extra-terrestrial gibberish). They thus continue a tradition initiated in the 60s, and trapped early on by Minimalism's purification concerns, yet sustained in the U.S. partly by George Sugarman (Peter Soriano, who was in touch with him, noted that his 60s pieces done in the 60s are among the best post-war sculptures). In Europe, however, this tradition was largely ignored in favor of more blatant categories, and as a result, singular works done in the 60s by English sculptors such as Philip King and William Tucker branched out to a shoddier formalism or went back to more expressionist modeling values. In a way, Soriano's so-called rupture of 2001-2002 prompted an in-depth probe into the most striking features of his entire output: his ability to situate himself IN-BETWEEN and rightly refuse to stick to one terrain (even if historians and critics always manage to coin a single name for whatever resists precise demarcation) - between the U.S. and Europe (taking into account their gaps in visual and intellectual culture), between sculpture and painting (notably in how color plays a major role in the final product, reflecting the artist's training as a painter, before he turned to 3-dimensional objects, and also in how the relationship to the wall is sometimes just as important as the relationship to the ground), between unitary form and motley assemblage (the use of modeling doesn't necessarily foster distinct units), between abstraction and image-making.

There is still an excessive tendency to view the traditions of abstraction and image-making as irreconcilable opposites. At best, it is granted that abstract images are a citation from the history of abstraction (in light of the early 80s Neo-Geo movement) or a duplication / purification of the outer world (found abstractions in the vein of Ellsworth Kelly's already-made, pursued nowadays by artists such as Francis Baudevin and Stéphane Dafflon). At first, after his initial attempts at neo-modernist wood

constructions (1990-1991), Peter Soriano toppled the above opposition by reactivating the biomorphic aesthetics that had been largely discarded by art history (precisely because it didn't involve aesthetics of ontologization and essentialization, but rather aesthetics of the in-between, as recently demonstrated by Guitemie Maldonado). His aim at the time was to create unitary beings, friendly colored monsters from hyper-space with alien customs: starting with a wax model, a mold is made to allow for as many colored resin sculptures as necessary (and in however many colors), in order to create, for instance, globular clusters with primitive apertures (Elephant, 1993 or Wax Annually with Paper Towels, 2002), creatures with pseudo-paws in orange and purple, or green and blue (Polyester Points of Contact, I and II, 1998-1999), as well as replicated elements that give the sense of a proliferating organism (Mission Mobile, 2002).

This methodology and iconography have not totally disappeared, but for the time being they are kept in check – quite literally so in the small mauve sculpture Rinke's Gift (2004) that lifts off the ground in a wave motion, but remains attached by a green strap to a rolled felt blanket found in the Calder atelier, and which was probably left there by the previous guest artist, sculptor Klaus Rinke. Little by little, two directions unfolded, seemingly contradictory but displaying joint traces in their outcome. On one hand, the abstraction tendency strengthened, to the detriment of the specific iconography – and the shapes underwent some sort of deterioration until they turned into mere ghosts (or distant sources) of identifiable references. On the other hand, the objects were meant to refer, in a more or less obvious and lighthearted fashion, to our habits and attitudes, how we move around, look at, touch and grasp the world, rather than refer to the world's outer appearance (which is not rejected, but just freed from hypostasis).

Right when Peter Soriano began varying his construction procedures – without abandoning hand-modeled wax (and often retaining its imprint), but linking it to found objects and chunks of wood, left as they are or sketchily carved, the ensemble subsequently molded in resin in order to assume a more unitary aspect, albeit slightly divergent, or else maintaining its innate multiformity – he also increased his duplication practice, repeating an element within a single work or, more frequently, combining it with others and thereby dissolving its iconographic specificity for the sake of an abstract or generic value. This does not just replay the elemental serial strategy that Leo Steinberg identified in Rodin's work and that Yve-Alain Bois located at the root of Cubism, but broadens and shifts it. From the outset, the shapes are far too generic to mimetically represent a sole object (as with Rodin) and too complex and idiosyncratic to serve as elementary units (morphemes) in an arbitrary writing system (as with Braque). The first time the same shape is repeated within a single work, which so far is just a sign of proliferation (such as the circular shapes in Mission Mobile, 2002) or variation (such as the yellow wall-variants and turquoise floor-variants of an angle-shape in Wood Is Cozy, 2002). Coinciding with his residency in Sach, Peter Soriano started frequently using replicas of the same shape in widely different configurations. There are too many examples to cite here, but I especially recall the long shovel-like structure, a stick with two handles, crudely affixed to a thick punctured receptacle. This object could be a work in itself, displayed on a wall for instance: which would emphasize its resemblance to a shovel, as if Duchamp's ready-made snow-shovel (In Advance of the Broken Arm, 1915) had transformed into a monstrous object, through pustule-profusion

(which brings to mind the relationship between Dorian Gray's picture at the time it was painted, and then what it becomes by the end of the story, especially in the 1945 film by Albert Levin, which ends with a painting of Ivan Le Loraine Albright presented as the monstrous derivation of a smooth academic portrait). The same object can also be used within an assemblage. In *Kittyfat (Red)*, 2004 _ at least the way this work was displayed in Paris at the Galerie Jean Fournier in the spring of 2006 _ leaning against the wall (it might just as well have been hanging from a rod or perched on the floor, since there was something random about its position, that might be altered at every exhibition), attached to an orange strap, itself attached to a horizontal steel rod,

much like the other eleven elements to which it is immediately compared. The setting bears resemblance to a workshop, where artisan or handyman selects a tool by singling it out from the others, which are often extremely alike. In *Zugunruhe* (2006), it is replicated three times in two colors (blue and yellow) and linked to another item that is replicated twice (in green and yellow): hanging from a metal wagon that is over two meters high, it still comes across as a tool available to anyone who wishes to grab it, but also takes on an anthropomorphic aspect (underlined by its position next to a painting displaying human figures of about the same size, as was the case in the show *La force de l'art*, at the Grand Palais, spring 2006).

The suppleness of significations is due to the abstraction process which, like any non-essentialist abstraction, tends to make his artwork vastly concrete, as Eric Suchère remarkably pointed out regarding Peter Soriano's work: Something that has its own rules , that could resemble but doesn't really, that could evoke but not quite, which gives us a sense of familiarity but is nevertheless foreign. And if we detect a bone, we are bound to praise our associative thinking, to each their own perversions.

It is also, and perhaps singularly so, the effect of a creative process that turns the outcome into a stockpile of jumbled memories of various objects and sensations. Because this isn't about essentialism, it is not a precipitate of objects (in the chemical sense of the term) but rather an a-logical assemblage of their traces within memory, a ghost of ghosts. When the artist says he wants to make sculpture that consists of scraps of previously seen shapes, it is the word scraps that must be underscored. This accentuates how resorting to abstraction is by no means a dissociation from the concrete world, the world of here and now, but on the contrary, a means to grasp it more directly, without the intellectual distancing triggered by the use of mimetic figuration, with the resources offered by the flow of common images (i.e. from the realms of popular culture or humor, gleaned by artist from Guston's later work, and even in the possible gaps between different ways of evincing images).

The decision to construct 3-dimensional objects _ rather than paintings, drawings (even though these abound, and reveal the step-by-step process of amassing memories and transforming prior images, whatever the reference, into new images that are composite and specific), or digital imaging (while the project exists, it's unlikely it can replace tangible objects) _ nonetheless merges these scraps into a single object, which implies a certain specificity, even beyond the fact that the act of making is also a concrete way to elicit memories (ÒI think that the repetitive action of my hands when I'm shaping objects helps me remember and organize these images, writes the artist). In 1998, Peter Soriano explained: ÒI want the sculpture to be specific and designed as some fancy tool you can order by mail and also as pointless and emphatically abstract as possible.

While during the creation stage it is the ghostlike facet that prevails, during the reception stage it is the core-like facet, like an ongoing source, that prevails. This ensures that the viewer's relationship to memory is as vigorous as the artist's. Peter Soriano's work thus increasingly focuses on creating shapes that are as open-ended as possible, which also allows for summoning as many memories and usages as possible.

It is notably for this reason that the unitary works, the definitive objects, done over the past ten years have largely been replaced by composite assemblages, which have a temporary quality that is rhetorically underlined. The Speedboys (2004) were shown in 2005 at the Villa Tamaris de La Seyne-sur-Mer like cars in a parking lot — a drawing dated February 21st 2004 compares the parking lot in Sach_ to an Ode to Judd_ — while simultaneously l

ikening it to merchandise on display-shelves (but without playing up this merchandise aspect, as in works from the 80s by Haim Steinbach, it is merely about suggesting availableness and setting up possession of the wall to match that of the floor). The works in the series Kittyfat (2004) thus come across as highly distended bas-reliefs: one item (storage or vintage, depending on your standpoint) is placed on the wall, unleashing thick colored cloth straps like a bunch of appendages (but different in kind) fastened to a whole gamut of shapes/objects (placed on the ground in a frequently unstable position, leaning against the wall or tucked into the rack). This spawns a network of signs that are provisionally maintained in an unruly coexistence, triggering visual and semantic pile-ups.

For the same reasons, the objects' massiveness and fullness often yield shapes that could be termed visually feeble: they do not hold our gaze on their own (even though they display a great deal of uneven

ness and jaggedness); they structure our gaze, or rather they propose a physical structure that applies to imagination. The shape has lost its claims to completeness and self-containment. It now appears incomplete, while also taking on an irksome aspect (we art-amateurs, while we wish this were otherwise, prefer facing shapes that look like passive objects of contemplation). The evolution from the first version of the sculpture Sled (2002) and the most recent versions, Second Speedboys (2005) and Solo Speedboy (2006) is therefore significant. While Sled displayed shapes that could be read like the artist's handwritten traces supplemented with two odd concretions, Second Speedboys are merely assemblages of plastic tubes found in a hardware store. All that differs from one object to another are details in the geometric motif and the spots where the fusion is visible; whereas Solo Speedboy was made simply by affixing metal bars to a load platform placed on the ground (the Speedboys that w

ere made in Sach_ display traits that lie between the extremes of fabricated and ready-made). The recent insistence on the object's structure to the detriment of its plenitude corresponds to a shift in the body's role. In 2000, Peter Soriano declared: "I think that my work has always consisted in entrenching the body in abstraction".

Nowadays he manages to churn out objects that contradictorily combine a maximum degree of concreteness with a maximum degree of semantic and physical availability. The body is no longer in abstraction, which, now open-ended, becomes available to another body, the artist's body being merely the first potential user.

A genuine formal kinship — and this encounter is not fortuitous, but nor can it be put

down to influence _ exists between a work such as Sled or some of the Speedboys and the first Paßstücke (adaptable pieces) by Franz West, notably one that dates from 1975 and consists of a thin wooden frame covered in white plaster, which one can either sling over one's shoulder like a sort of fishnet (if we take our cue from catalog photos) or mount on a pedestal. Although he did not follow the Austrian artist's shift in the mid 80s to making furniture for practical use, Peter Soriano shares his desire to dis-autonomize sculpture, to pull it away from an exclusively visual goal severed from potential usage (i.e. in how Eva Badura-Triska demonstrated that none of Franz West's illegitimate sculptures have ever been an autonomous sculpture).

Opening sculpture to practical utilization, or at least a target that is not solely visual, had been one of the neglected achievements of the 60s artists who located themselves between Minimalism and Pop (notably Richard Artschwager), and Peter Soriano was their conscious heir for the work he did in the 90s. But the emphasis on formal opening as well as the heterogeneous structural component ultimately gives less value to the ambiguity of usage (is this a sculpture or a piece of furniture?), which is where Franz West often stands (even though the abstraction of many of his objects ensures that it's up to the viewer to decide on how they should be used), than to the plurality of potential usages and multiple modes of grasping.

There has been a tendency, especially in American art theory over the past twenty years, to condemn the visual as inherently linked to the register of authority and hierarchy _ and this led to reinstating the sense of taste and touch, as supposedly being more direct. The recent development in Peter Soriano's work took place after the limits of this reinstatement became obvious. Sensitive, as a sculptor, to the tactile dimension, he is also aware that appealing to vision is the very means to potentially summon all the other senses, without confining the object's usage to a single dimension. What matters isn't to bluntly enable the viewers to grasp the object with their hands for some bodily usage, but to let them SEE that such grasping is possible, and to I

MAGINE what it might be. Quite logically, the first works revealing the impulse to leave abstract pop were fitted with handles, conjuring accessory-usage, especially for hypothetical and bizarre sports (a literal invitation in the work Buoyancy Belts, where three green structures equipped with white clamps or hand-slots stand on blue mats). But this had less to do with suggesting practical applications than opening up meanings and significations, without a previously programmed reduction. This opening has since widened _ while continuing to make extensive use of handles or grips, now used in their ready-made state. This has allowed Peter Soriano to rework one of the three structures of Buoyancy Belts by pulling it out of its original context and just adding a towel rack along with its standard accessories, without explicitly blending this new potential usage with the sports usage mentioned above (if the white slots are a hands-on invitation, are we supposed to use the towels first or l

ater, and why?), the major adjustment has been to dis-autonomize the created object by underlining its motley nature.

Once again, traces-of-traces is an essential feature. If we let ourselves see the above-mentioned sled-sculptures as objects wavering between autonomous art-objects or sports tools that have been somewhat tinkered, their entire presentation reminds us that they are primarily springboards, provisional open-ended situations, with a profoundly hybrid character (similarly, the provisional structure of Tobogisant II, done in 2004, also brings

to mind a sort of raft, as shown in an undated drawing, thus implying a material transformation of the sculpture's straps into an easily imagined drifting thing, the ground having been replaced by water). They do not denote direct and precise usage (most of them are far too fragile to go sliding down any hill, and certainly not a bobsleigh track), they are not necessarily body-sized (but not incongruous either). What they chiefly resemble is our memory of their usage, or images of other people using them. After seeing recumbent figures in a Parisian show, Peter Soriano tells how astounded he was 'by the extent to which these sculptures were shaped like torpedoes to launch the soul into another world, right down to the hands lifted in prayer like perfect tillers'.

In other words, the usage of any sculpture is not initially concrete and practical, i.e. the practical and metaphorical meanings dissolve, when the object fulfills the artist's attention, in an assemblage that is rather heterogeneous, enmeshing memories and potentialities, where what catches the eye is the capacity for openness. The specific objects created by Peter Soriano are channels, not endpoints for meanings and significations, like the yachts he has been building and steering ever since his teens.

The works made by Peter Soriano in *Sach* bring about the experience of a particular sort of tension, a genre we are rarely allowed to observe (perhaps in certain pieces by Franz Erhard Walter – but their monochromy restores order – or by Robert Grosvenor – but their sobriety reinstates a more comfortable harmony). Or rather, a genre that we rarely observe in art, but that we experience unawares in certain daily activities – those that have value, because of their openness to all sorts of hybridizations.

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¹ Peter Soriano, in Tristan Trémeau, « Entretien avec Peter Soriano », catal. expo. *philippe richard – peter soriano, peintures sculptures 1990-2000*, Tourcoing, Musée des Beaux-Arts, 2000, p.18.

¹ Éric Suchère, « Peter Soriano, ceci éclaire ceci. », in catal. expo. *Peter Soriano*, Marseille, Red District, 1999, p.6.

¹ Peter Soriano, *La Mémoire Fautive*, trad. Éric Suchère, Paris, Little Single, 2006, p.7.

¹ *Ibid*, p.9.

¹ Peter Soriano, Artist's statement, 1998, cité in Paul Cabon, « Les douze travaux de Peter ou les voyages de la sculpture », in catal. expo. *Peter Soriano*, Montbéliard, Le 19, Centre d'art contemporain et Mulhouse, Le Quai, 1999, p.15.

¹ Peter Soriano, in Tristan Trémeau, *op. cit.*, p.26.

¹ Eva Badura-Triska, « Producing Situations of Various Kinds : Franz West's Notion of Thought and Its Historical Context », in catal. expo. *Franz West: Early Work*, New York, Zwirner & Wirth, 2004, n.p.

¹ Peter Soriano, *La Mémoire Fautive*, *op. cit.*, p.14.