

Peter Soriano Interviewed By Matthias Waschek

Matthias Waschek: Your practice and that of Old Masters is radically different. Currently, you are working with pieces of cable, which are connected to the wall and covered with spray paint, so that there is a two- and a three-dimensional aspect. How did you come to be interested in Old Masters?

Peter Soriano: I think my education was always tied up with art history. I was taught art by my uncle who was an artist. I would pick a painting and start drawing or painting it under my uncle's supervision. If, for example, I was copying, say, a Cezanne, I would try to imagine which the very first stroke would have been, which the second, the third ... and I would try to find the logic behind these successive artistic steps. In that sense, I had a rather different form of art education. That went on until I went to Harvard where I spent a lot of time looking at Old Masters, mainly drawings, in the Fogg Museum, where I spent a good deal of my afternoons.

Matthias Waschek: Would a display such as the Pulitzer's have been helpful in your training? What did you think when you heard about the idea of installing Old Masters at the Pulitzer?

Peter Soriano: I don't know about then. Now, I think that, provided there is a respect for the integrity of the art work, displacement is enormously helpful. It can open your eyes to seeing things in ways that are extremely stimulating. For that reason, I cannot say that I was skeptical, because I wanted to see something I hadn't seen before... however, I am coming away with something different from what I imagined.

Matthias Waschek: For instance?

Peter Soriano: My expectation was informed by previous visits to the Pulitzer. As you may remember, I saw installations such as *Art and the Spiritual*, *Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue* and *Water*. Now, for the first time in my memory, there is no sculpture included. The gallery walls become much more prominent. Along with the paintings, the walls have become receptacles of light, surfaces that are as fragile as the light effects are fleeting. The walls have a tender, skin-like feel to them.

Matthias Waschek: Now that you say this, it seems to me that the paintings have a skin-like quality, too.

Peter Soriano: In those galleries that receive more natural light, the canvas and the wall surface appear as layered skins. In darker spaces, such as the Entrance Gallery, the backgrounds of the paintings seem to fuse with the walls and the painted figures are part of the spectator's space.

Matthias Waschek: As you mentioned at the beginning, half of the paintings in this exhibition are good old friends from the time you started to study the collection of the Fogg at Harvard. Did you see any of these works differently here from how you remembered them? Does it open up something new?

Peter Soriano: The Entrance Gallery of the Pulitzer definitely changed my way of looking at the Caravaggesque paintings, such as Caracciolo's *Saint Sebastian*. In the darkness, the figures look like floating cut outs, like visions. But these are perceptions that one would find in Italian churches, and in that sense, the presentation is only new by museum standards. I was particularly struck by the juxtaposition of Ribera's *Saint Jérôme* and Kelly's *Blue Black*; the Kelly looks all of a sudden like a religious painting.

Matthias Waschek: Is there anything you would have done differently?

Peter Soriano: I don't know. If pushed, I might have tried to re-hang the Main Gallery, which strikes me as an art historical conversation rather than a radically new visual experience. But what would I have done differently with that gallery space? What would have been "radical" in terms of visual experience? I don't know. Drilling a whole lot of holes into the walls for different hypotheses of hanging?

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Matthias Waschek: But that would have turned into an artistic installation, which is outside the purview of art historians. This is probably where the artist's perspective and that of the art historian part. Are there cases where our perspectives could come together again?

Peter Soriano: Possibly in the installation of drawings. It might be interesting to expand further on Jerry Cohn's idea of different degrees of dialogue between the drawings. Right now we have the dialogue between the drawings on one wall and between opposite walls. What about using a third wall and having just two drawings or a maximum of three hung there. Take the surrealist phrase of the chance meeting of an umbrella and a sewing machine and see what happens—what happens when you put things together that initially weren't intended to be.

Matthias Waschek: In a way, you also describe what happens in museums that show works from cultural and religious practices that weren't ever meant to be seen together as aesthetic artifacts...

Peter Soriano: True.

Matthias Waschek: Let us go back to one idea you brought up earlier, that of the wall as skin. You were also talking about drilling holes into the walls of the Main Gallery. Isn't this very brutal? Paintings are stapled onto the skin of the wall?

Peter Soriano: Yes, it is definitely brutal. But isn't the wounding of the skin and the body of Caracciolo's *Saint Sebastian* in the Entrance Gallery equally brutal?

Matthias Waschek: Absolutely. I assume, had you had a choice of works to install in our galleries, you would have picked as many representations of Apollo flaying Marsyas as possible (laughter). As you might know, the Saint Louis Art Museum recently purchased a wonderful painting by Manfredi of this subject... I wonder if your idea of the skin is inspired by your current work.

Peter Soriano: You know, it was something that just came to me. But now that you've brought it up appropriately, I think it is clearly related. I work on sculpture largely. I call it that but it is getting more confused between painting and drawing and sculpture: abstract pieces of cables, which connect to the wall with spray paint. So there is a two-dimensional and a three-dimensional element to my work. I've been thinking a lot about the way space and objects, or works of art, in that space connect to the wall, and what I've actually done in my work is to paint those areas where those connections happen...those places where I'm connecting the cable to the wall as well, beginning with spray paint at different points of contact. So, obviously these ideas are really relevant. In my own work I don't think of walls as skin exactly, but you are bringing up something now which I'll have to think about myself. Here, in this space, I really do feel it as skin. So I'm sure there's a deeper sense in which this notion of skins is on my mind... Maybe how and what we see isn't so far from the source, from what is already on the mind. So I'm pleased, thank you.

Matthias Waschek: Thank you very much.