

carmen araujo arte®  
ornament and crime  
exhibit #92  
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»ornament and crime« by manuel vásquez ortega

Weep not. Behold! What makes our period so important is that  
it is incapable of producing new ornament. We have outgrown ornament;  
we have struggled through to a state without ornament.  
Adolf Loos, 1908

The need for ornament is inherent to human nature. Man's desire to embellish –both his body and his environment– has pervaded historical narrative ever since his most primitive impulses, helping him to »rid himself of his natural excesses«<sup>1</sup>, up to the origin of plastic and visual arts. However, the passage of time has transformed Western ideals of aesthetic taste. The beginning of the 20th century brought with it a radical position regarding the search for beauty in the aggregate form. Such a stance made certain approaches and manifestos possible, such as Adolf Loos', where he states that »the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use«<sup>2</sup>.

Condemning the use of decoration thus became an unequivocal premise of modern aesthetic taste, proposed in the midst of an intellectual age that rejected everything added to primary materiality as a coating. This dictum reveals a relationship between judgment and taste, and in turn allows us to ponder the correlations between what is understood as good (or bad), both ethically and aesthetically. The modern 'cleanness' of forms is then consolidated as the language of a hegemonic and dominant class that by default determines the place of art intended as ornamental decoration: one associated with the uncultivated and, in general, with the lower ranks of society.

However, in the particular hybridization process characteristic of Latin America, the aesthetic taste inherited from the colony —determined by families of 'lineage'— focuses on a figure that is neither European nor aboriginal: that of the *criollo*, or Creole. A social subject that creates a different domination strategy, »establishing a power that is not that of castes or manorial hierarchies, but a domain imposed by the force of social prejudices and by an economy [that intends to be] capitalist«<sup>3</sup>. As a manifestation of such authority, the conception of a Creole visual culture takes shape from the mixture of Western taste with *mestizo* traditions from colonial times, referential for the establishment of social hierarchy schemes such as that of the master and the subordinate.

In »Ornament and Crime«, Gerardo Rosales (1967) takes a critical stand towards the customs created by hegemonic privilege. The Venezuelan artist presents a scenario composed by decorative objects in which ornament works as an intertextual image, creating multiple visual associations within and beyond what it illustrates: the hardships and misadventures faced by displaced people and migrants, diametrically opposed to the comforts enjoyed by the upper classes. Rosales tells his story through elements such as tablecloths and placemats, bells and ceramic figures, fantastic figurations that pose postcolonial questions about a society with its own identity, but still subject to economic, political and cultural codes imposed by colonization and modernity.

The figures present in the artist's works obey processes of the imagination: those in which »things are first seen and then imagined«<sup>4</sup>. It is in this transformation and combination of what has been lived and what has been imagined that Rosales' personal story intersects with the current drastic situation of worldwide migrations, in which the »other« (the refugee, the migrant, the foreigner) is singled out as the culprit for not being known and reduced to stereotypes.

The symbols used –part of a long-standing repertoire in Gerardo's work– consist of graphs of people on the run, insects and animals, mythological and polycephalic figures, along with weapons, drones and walls, articulated by ornaments and crimes of realities and reveries of a world determined by the now. A globalized present in which the ability to produce and assimilate images allows us to learn about events like mass shootings in the United States, the crossing of migrant caravans or the circumstances of war refugees in real time. In this scenario, the capacity of the intertextual image allows the artist to »see and recognize his own stories, with which he can shape common ground«<sup>5</sup> with others, near or far from his place of origin.

The beauty of Gerardo Rosales' ornamental elements is thus based on the crimes of a dominant system that determines the nature of an unstable present, characterized by recurrent surveillance, information control and the exclusion of borders. Defiant of this time, works such as »*Campanas*« (or »*Bells*«) blur the definition of their silhouettes to associate themselves with phallic and penetrating elements that speak of human violence on different scales –from the violence implicit in the differential dynamics of power (of machismo, of exploitation) to the violence exercised by means of firearms.

On their part, the pictorial images present in the room (textiles and murals) display diverse hybrid imaginaries –animals, characters from world history, immigrant detention centers and domestic servitude– that act as metaphors for the vicissitudes of a stratified society, embellished by points and lines of modern references, appropriated and present in our collective memory, which corroborate that colonialism does not cease to exist when the colonizer withdraws, but rather draws on in social imaginary, dominated by the codes of the earlier power.

Finally, in the act of dressing the table, Gerardo Rosales transfers the public sphere of global information to a domestic space, breaking through the limits around the intimate comfort of a

privileged home with the rawness of a conflicted outside. With this gesture, the artist sets forth the certainty that the post-colonial world is a perpetual consumer of modernity and its errors; those in which there is always a subordinate subject at disadvantage –for social, ideological, race or gender-related reasons. A testament that our time may truly be incapable of producing ornament different from the forms of the past, yet is able to attempt against the differences that power considers threatening.

Manuel Vásquez-Ortega

<sup>1</sup> Loos, Adolf (1972): «Ornamento y Delito y otros escritos» (1908). Gustavo Gili, Spain.

<sup>2</sup> (Ibid).

<sup>3</sup> Pinedo, Andrés (2015): «Apuntes sobre el concepto de poscolonialidad de Latinoamérica». Universum Magazine, Talca University, Talca.

<sup>4</sup> Bachelard, Gastón (1991): «La tierra y los ensueños de la voluntad». Fondo de Cultura Económica, México D.F.

<sup>5</sup> Guasch, Anna María (2004): «Arte y Globalización». National University of Colombia, Bogotá.