



Beka Peralta

Bullfight Huapango, 2020.

Christian Gómez*

Ana Segovia's Painting: Feeling Uncomfortable in The Categories We Inhabit

Over the last decade, and especially for the last five years, contemporary art in Mexico has rekindled its interest in the pictorial. Up against the macro-narratives of globalized and neoliberal contemporary art, which focus on post-conceptual practices and media freedom, the discipline's possibilities have, in many ways, been obliterated. Nonetheless, plenty of research and exhibition projects, as well as the practices of numerous artists, have revealed a plethora of questions.

Among these projects, we might cite *Post-Neo-Mexicanisms*, a curatorial research project undertaken by curator Willy Kautz, the current director of the Siqueiros Public Art Gallery (SAPS) and the La Tallera Workshop at the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBAL) under the ESPAC Collection's program.² Published as a book in 2016, this project shows how the pictorial practice has prevailed among various artists who are often merely catalogued as post-conceptual. Further, the book points toward the discipline's vitality, as new voices and questions continue to emerge. To name but a few

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Original painting at La Faena cantina.

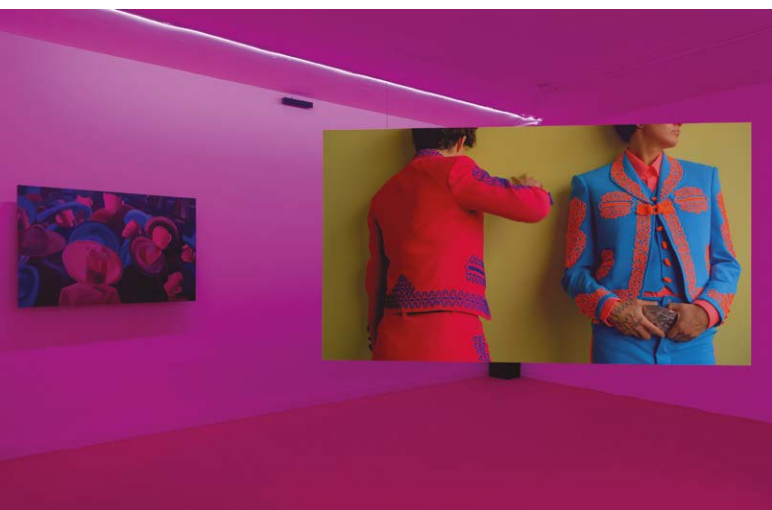
examples, we might look toward the Tamayo Biennial's revamping, the prowess of the José Atanasio Monroy Painting Biennial, and the large scale of the Tijuana Triennial: International Pictorial, first held at the Tijuana Cultural Center (CECUT) in 2021.

As curator Esteban King stated in reference to artist Leo Marz, "In this image-saturated world, dominated by the unfiltered and never-ending scrolling through mobile phones and the 4G Network, painting serves as a decelerating tool to stop time and reflect about images."² To stop the image and reflect about time. There's no doubt in my mind that this art historian's point of view is just as applicable when it comes to reflecting upon the work of other contemporary artists. Painting is still a privileged medium that allows us to stop and consider the visuality of our era.

It is in this spirit that I would like to stop and think about the artist Ana Segovia (Mexico City, 1991), whose body of work —through the appearance and seeming repetition of well-known images, as well as through her intense use of color— allows us to reflect upon the constructions and impositions of gender roles and desire, as well as the influence that the media exerts on them. All of these elements provoke our estrangement with the ways in which we embody such constructions, but also with the ways we criticize them. In many senses, Segovia invites us to feel uncomfortable with the categories we inhabit.

The Charro, Revisited

Having studied visual arts at the Art Institute of Chicago, where she specialized in painting and drawing, Segovia developed her research into stereotypical images of the *vaquero* cowboy and the Mexican horseback riders known as *charros*. She has stated that, through her work, she aims to offer a reflection on masculinity and the sociocultural conventions around it. Her paintings, in which she has recognized the formal influence of artists such as David Hockney, Dana Schutz, and Francis Bacon, are filled with literary and cinematographic references, especially from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema. In them, her interest in performative masculinity shines through.



Images from the exhibition "Well, This Song's Over," at the Carrillo Gil Art Museum, Mexico City, 2021.

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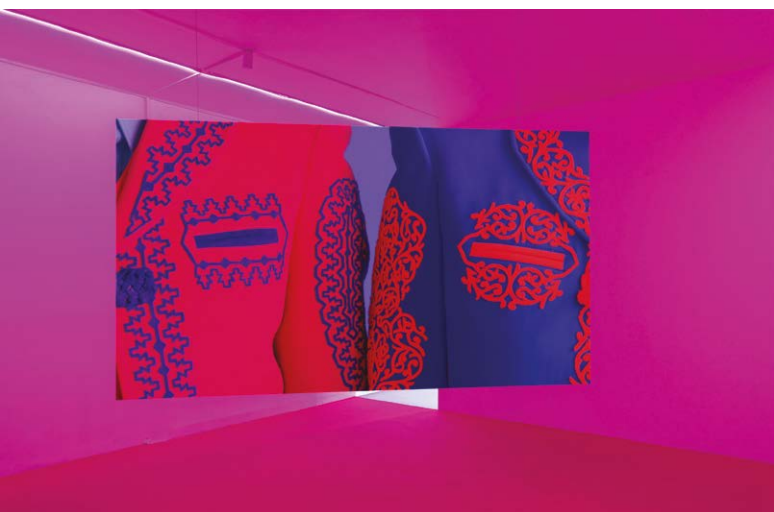
As a lesbian woman, she inhabits the contradiction of seeking to perform certain elements of these stereotypes, despite living in an era that criticizes and dismantles them.

As the curator Andrea Bustillos wrote regarding the exhibition “A Boy Named Sue” at Mexico City’s Karen Huber Gallery in 2017, “One of her main concerns remains the ways of construction —regardless of whether that refers to cinematographic and pictorial images, or gender identity. In Segovia’s work, every object becomes a symbol that reveals, questions, and even disorients; they fill the atmosphere. Her honesty and courage make her go against the current of the gender discourses currently in vogue, for example: its references to hyper masculinity and the objectification of desire and of the other.”

How, then, can a pictorial practice like Ana Segovia’s be approached? I can think of at least three paths. First, I could divest myself of the idea of writing from the perspective of an expert who unilaterally evaluates and describes her practice, instead giving way to another, more situated position that recognizes my writing not as the product of an art historian, but as that of a homosexual man who attempts to enter into dialogue with these images of his time, which address certain issues that crosscut his own experiences as well. Second, I could work with the idea that the artist’s approach to masculine constructs is not reactionary, but rather uses the pictorial space to offer the possibility of decelerating: she offers up a slower time so that we can think about the deluge of images that is incessantly recasting and reconfiguring gender constructions. Lastly, I should recognize that she has ultimately produced a queer space, inviting us to get uncomfortable with the categories where we have been forced to inhabit.

From Forlorn Encounters to Shared Frenzy

The first time I encountered her work was when we both participated in the project *Multiple Gesture (El gesto múltiple)*, a publication, exhibition, and pictorial gathering of many artists in November 2018 as part of the program at the Machine Room gallery (*El cuarto de máquinas*). This exhibition by Marco Treviño, who is from Monterrey, proposed a broad reflection on painting. To this end, we created a publication, printed by S-Ediciones and *El cuarto de máquinas* publishing houses, which included a series of essays on contemporary painting; a collective painting exhibition; and a huge, festive inauguration in which we broadly and collectively discussed our ideas about the discipline. Marco Treviño’s work consisted of building this space around pictorial practices and making it possible to discuss them.



I only fleetingly remember Ana Segovia's work in that context. In passing, I heard someone say, "Ana is making some huge paintings, and these are very small." I barely paid attention, but these small-scale pieces depicted hands gripping guns. The pieces proffered an analysis, through painting, of the gesture of pointing with guns, an eminently masculine gesture at that. I only noticed fleetingly, quick as a revolver, but the image stayed with me.

Some time later, I started running into her work at several collectives, but it wasn't until February 2020 that I encountered one of her most powerful pieces. In the context of Mexico City's art fair week, the artist put on an exhibition called "Bullfight Huapango" (*Huapango torero*) at La Faena, an emblematic bullfight-themed *cantina* in downtown Mexico City. There, a painting several meters long hangs in the cantina as part of its general decor, depicting a man who's raising the barbed wire fence around a bull corral to cross into it. On top of it, in the same scale, Ana Segovia paints an image of herself crossing into the corral. In contrast to the man in the original painting, who wears a beret, she dons a baseball cap and an orange sweatshirt —both painted in her own, vibrant color pallet and resembling the clothes she actually wears. Ana Segovia jumps over the wire of pricks. The artist covers up the man with an image of her own body. Perhaps someone might think of uttering a bullfighting phrase and say that she crosses *brava*, fiercely, but I also think of this image as an artistic gesture that says, "I, too, can cross." Lucky to find myself alone in a place that's usually bursting with crowds, as I observed the painting, I thought of something I'd heard her say before: the idea of the contradiction involved in desiring to perform certain elements of masculinity at the same time that we've distanced ourselves from these same elements. I thought that, perhaps, we were crossing paths, even though we were heading in different directions. In my writing practice, I've attempted to divest myself of the figure of the male expert at all costs. In her case, there is a *thrusting herself forward*, which makes me consider the persistence of asymmetry of gender relations. It occurred to me that I wouldn't know what to do if faced with that barbed-wire fence. It occurred to me that, perhaps, I'd never crossed it.

Then I finally got to meet her. I'd spotted her in several collective exhibitions, but we'd never spoken. I'd seen her work, known her face, and read her, but never met her in person. We met at an exhibition on maternity and care by the artist Tahanny Lee Betancourt. At a relaxed gathering after the exhibition, we danced and sang in the same circle. I confessed to Ana that I'd been following her work, and we talked about a couple of texts, perhaps about the way her work sparks questions around gender roles. At the gathering, the artists and attendees created a collective playlist,

and Ana decidedly chose a song by the traditional Mexican *ranchera* singer Pedro Infante. She chose the song “One Hundred Years” (*Cien años*). I wanted her to sing to me. In this shared frenzy, I became convinced that she embodied the questions in her images.

Octavio Rivadeneyra

Desire across Different Spaces

In 2020 and 2021, her work was included in three exhibitions at influential art spaces. First, she showed in the collective exhibition “Normal Exceptions: Contemporary Art in Mexico,” a twenty-year review of the Jumex Museum; she also showed in “OTRXS MUNDXS: (Some) Other Worlds,” on the works by a new generation of artists, at the Tamayo Museum. However, the exhibition that shook me the most was of her individual project “Well, This Song’s Over” (*Pos’ se acabó este cantar*), which ran from April to July 2021, at the Carrillo Gil Art Museum’s project room. Due to its scale and intimacy, this exhibition was the one that provoked the most thought, emotion, and puzzling feelings in me, given the ways it revisited the archetypes of masculinity that emanate from the same visual culture that permeates Mexican cinema, one of Segovia’s main thematic sources. In her paintings, Segovia pushes us to think about the ways in which these archetypes become widespread, are dismantled, go astray, and re-signify themselves in affective and festive spaces, such as in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual, transvestite, or queer bars. This makes me wonder how we might wrest back these archetypes, which have been imposed by the patriarchy, to deconstruct, re-signify, and transform them into something different and our own. Her paintings push me to question how much of our desire is merely a construction.

“Well, This Song’s Over” is simply a collection of just a few paintings and a brief video. In the video, *Even if I Prick My Hand*, two people dressed as *charros* interact through gestures: they play a hand-clapping game, help each other tuck in their shirts when putting on their charro suits, hug tenderly, experience mutual desire, slap the other’s face, and shake each other. Minute by minute, they perform the *charro* in a cycle that ends with a fist punching the wall until it breaks. This pictorially created video boasts her bright, pastel pallet. Surrounding this video-canvas, one can observe the other paintings: one depicts a bar crowded with men in hats (“INTERIOR, Night at the Cantina,” 2020), with some of the men dancing in a disconcerting light that tints the whole venue in a Mexican pink, making the images vibrate with it; while in the other someone wears a dress, with arms crossed, before two men, one of whom plays guitar, while the other grasps



Exhibition *Bullfight Huapango* at La Faena, 2020.

Octavio Rivadeneyra



La Faena cantina in downtown Mexico City.

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his belt, almost touching his groin (“EXTERIOR NIGHT, Pedro and Company,” 2020). I consider myself in this space: I hope we’re straying, becoming something other than Mexican pink.

Writing about Ourselves

Lastly, in another exhibition at the Zapopan Art Museum in 2021, called “Peeper, join us!” alluding to people who live inside the closet and only occasionally peer outside at gay pride parades, Ana Segovia showed her work alongside artist Alan Sierra and several others. As part of a seminar on the exhibition, they held a talk about queer writing and narratives. They considered the task of writing among ourselves, as people whose sexual spectrums go beyond the heterosexual, which has wielded so much control over our narratives. I wrote down a few of the phrases I heard there, never to be forgotten: “What’s the difference with them, the ones who’ve always written among themselves?” they asked. “Let their narratives become fissured. The rest of us give ourselves over to writing from other places of enunciation.” “When we change this, we’re writing the future,” said Alan. “When we write about ourselves, we don’t wait for permission. I faced problems in my learning space, because I made other people visible who didn’t have their blessing. Then they became interested. With language, we’re producing that space of visibility,” said the museum’s curator.

All in all, the text at hand is nothing but a public letter to Ana, to tell her that I’m writing about my thoughts and feelings on her work, as well as about some of my memories of how we first met. I would like to tell her that we crossed paths on the spectrum of desire, that her work helps me question certain visualities that I don’t believe in, so that I might reformulate new ways of inhabiting them. I would also like to say that her work harkened me back to Sara Ahmed’s thoughts in “Queer Feelings,” where she writes that “We can feel uncomfortable in the categories we inhabit, even categories that are shaped by their refusal of public comfort.”³ This is the case with the “queer” category, too, as it disrupts the hegemonic heterosexual space. As such, all we can do is vibrantly recast our categories, spaces, and identities, just like Ana does in her own work. So, I’m glad to be moved by her and think of her as a spectator who once passed her by, but who won’t ever overlook her again. I would like to tell her that I hope to cross the barbed-wire fence with her. ■■■

Notes

- 1 ESPAC is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study, dissemination, and promotion of contemporary art based on multiple readings and approaches.
- 2 Andrés Gómez Servín, ed., *Monolito. Leo Marz* (Mexico City: Mixedmedia.Press, n.d.), p. 80.
- 3 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004).





Map by Juan Palomino.
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