

AN APOLOGY FOR DEBRIS
A CONVERSATION WITH GUILLERMO MORA

By Susana Blas

I meet Guillermo by my house, next to the statue of Eloy Gonzalo at the Plaza de Cascorro. Our idea is to take a walk down to his new studio near the Paseo de Extremadura because, although it would have been more comfortable to conduct the interview in La Latina, I insist on recording this conversation surrounded by his pieces, suspecting that this framework might be more suggestive.

Guillermo arrives wearing a T-shirt whose color blue is most present in his work. I make a mental note to breach the subject of his palette from several angles. We buy a tape for the tape-recorder and start walking. It is one of those workday Madrid mornings, in which the walk is enjoyed twice as much if you are not working because, while idly observing, you have access to a city that works in full capacity.

S- I imagine you walk this way regularly, from home to your studio. Broadly speaking, what would one of your days be like? Do you set a work schedule for yourself?

G- I have a set work discipline. I walk this way to the studio on a daily basis. I spent most of my day there, some eight or nine hours, the equivalent of a workday. Then I go back home for dinner, read something, watch a movie, or get hooked on some gossip show. Sometimes I really appreciate that there are people who work to get your mind off of things, whether you want it or not...

S- Exactly the same as if you were going to the office.

G- I don't know if the office worker considers it a luxury to work eight hours. We would have to ask about that. It is for me. The situation I enjoy right now is quite a luxury. Since I don't know how long this situation might last, I take full advantage of the opportunities I have at the moment.

S- I am guessing that your old studio had become too small. It was a tiny space and that must have had an influence on your conception of the work.

G- I felt quite limited in the studio that I had in central Madrid. There was a lot of friction between the new projects and the little space available to me. My pieces were getting bigger, growing larger and more complex. The option to move came suddenly. I found myself sharing a huge warehouse with other artists overnight. This space is much larger than the older one and we are all investing a lot of effort and hope in it.

S- Tell me about how you conceived *De un soplo* ("With one puff"), your exhibition at the Casa de la Entrevista in Alcalá de Henares, and about the old convent... How will you fit your work in this space? Won't the pieces feel strange there?

G- The space is one of the places where the Catholic Monarchs interviewed Christopher Columbus, hence its name ("House of the Interview"). Later on it became a Franciscan convent and today it functions as an exhibition space. I have never faced a space like this: for its dimension, its spatial qualities and also for its historic charge.

About the strange connection that may appear between my work and the space, it is something that I am taking into consideration as far as making the pieces. I am aware that it is not a common exhibition space, but I plan to take full advantage of this strangeness. I think that the physical tension that might arise between my work and that kind of XVI-century brick bunker is very stimulating. It's quite a challenge.

As we chat we reach the studio. It is an ample shared nave, in which he has his own space, with spotless and luminous white walls reminiscent of an art gallery. Despite their initial chaos, the

fragments of dismembered paintings, the leftovers of acrylic paint, the intertwined stretchers and canvases, the proofs or color layers fermenting on the floor, come to adopt a harmonious conjunction. There are neither spurts, nor the gesturing of a vehement or bohemian painter. There are orderly little wood planks and embalmed fresh painting. The disposition of each piece and their coloring allow me to imagine myself within one of his exhibitions, because that is kind of what his studio is: a gigantic installation turned into a permanent testing field. While thinking about all this I become momentarily aloof from the conversation. When I return, Guillermo is telling me about his attraction to impurity, to that which is left behind after the execution of the work:

G- Look at all these remains... paint that aspired to be a Painting, the kind that is usually spelled in uppercase letters... they were all left halfway from their ideal. And despite their error, their absence, there is something impure about them that attracts me and keeps me going back to them. Everything that is broken, dismembered or fragmented also has something that is human. It is as if it belonged more to us than to anything else.

I nod because what Guillermo is noting is true. Remains bring us to that which is human... His whole studio is like a laboratory of small cadavers, of memories of other things... and I don't know why I come to think of the soundtrack that may accompany this array of fragments...

S- And what kind of music do you listen to here, between these walls?

G- I like to work to electronic music, like that of Ellen Alien or Fischerspooner, although lately I've been hearing more Latin music, such as Lola Beltrán, La Lupe, Alejandro Marehuala... All the music I listen to I owe to some friends, who educate me and bring me up to speed with the music scene. I am very lazy when it comes to finding new bands or tendencies... I am not a good music scout. I am drawn to what people recommend to me.

I have never been quite interested by the polemics generated around work that is open, such as Guillermo's, regarding whether this is or is not painting, or whether it would be better to call it sculpture... but it is true that labels and classifications are difficult to escape, and work such as his or that of his admired Jessica Stockholder are controversial. Some years ago, Luis Gordillo made the following remarks about the work of the notorious North-American painter: "I want to note that when I speak of painting I am referring to *painted painting*, which is a concept that I used for the first time. To me, Jessica Stockholder is a great artist, but not a painter."¹ Without bringing this quote into our conversation, because I suspected it would steal away half our time, I ask Guillermo his take on this issue.

G- Right now I have a hard time understanding painting as a system of representation. Representation was the learning method I was exposed to as a student in Madrid. It was made to look like the only possible solution. Slowly, I became aware of the highly interpretative sense of the image within painting and distanced myself from that type of practice. What could be one of its main weapons was also its trap. It was for this reason that I wanted to reopen a debate around the medium itself, to question its language.

S- It seems like one can either be slain for not making paintings, or for becoming too enamored of its language...

G- To me, painting is a masturbatory act, something you do for yourself. I think a lot about the extent to which painting is linked to reality or it takes reality to build itself up and speak about itself. This provokes a certain entrancement with the medium that I must measure up and overcome.

As far as the comments on whether I make paintings or not, I always listen and pay attention to them, but I never take part in the game of sharing or denying something that is purely an opinion. Making a comment or a judgment call is taking a position, but never

¹ GORDILLO, Luis. "Equilibrios," *Exit Express* number 6, October 2004, p.8.

the same as stating the truth. The truth, my truth, will be what I decide it is, not what comes from the outside.

S- To change the subject a little bit, tell me about the playful and “edible” side of your work.

G- The playful and the edible that I deal with in my work are also related to the issue presented by the language of painting. The medium itself expresses the pleasant and the unpleasant, that which is fake in the material, what is malleable, deceitful...

S- In reality, these are issues of representation... But, what is your work process like?

G- No, it is not a matter of representation. My paintings do not operate in the structure of “this is that,” of identification, nor in that of the symbol or the projection of meanings. About my work process, I would say that I work in two modes: a highly programmed way by which I execute the pieces exactly as I think of them, as is the case with the work that references Minimalism (*Dan_Dan_Dan_Dan, Ordenando el cielo con Donald...*) (“Dan_Dan_Dan_Dan,” “Arranging heaven with Donald”) and another that is born in a much more chaotic way, by assembling the debris generated by the aforementioned work with other work that has been damaged, or with older pieces (the series *Mensajes* and *Señales*) (“Messages” and “Signs”). It is a process in which everything can be re-read and deserves a second chance.

S- Can this debris come to interest you more?

G- Sometimes the works that I dwell on the most are less interesting than those that I make out of their leftovers... If you are not able to turn this into a weapon it can be frustrating. Think about it. If the great majority of my projects do not fulfill their intent and end up as failed pieces, should I then believe that my ideas are not valid? I have come to assume that the idea, the error and the revision of what is left are at the same level within my work process. My ideas come with cracks, and it is through them that I allow myself to explore.

S- This means that some work disappears in the process of taking down the exhibition only to be reassembled in a different way for the following show...

G- Let me try to explain this. Two pieces can share the same fragment. In using the same debris, I am creating a system by which both works exist, but not at the same time. If one has the fragment they share, the other one is incomplete. They cannot exist in parallel. Since you mention the disappearance of the work, I would like to explain this aspect of my work. As long as I have access to all the fragments, I can make an indefinite number of permutations with them. What happens when someone buys one of these works? Well, this piece is then separated from the rest. It is confirmed as a piece, while another one vanishes. It is someone external who indirectly decides the disappearance of other works.

S- But I find this to be a very beautiful thing, because it seems like you end up passing your spirit on to the receiver, your capacity to endlessly transform things with your eyes... But let us go back in time a little bit again... When did you decide to become an artist? Did you always draw as a child?

G- I’ve been buying books and magazines on art history since childhood... I attended different courses... I have always been interested in painting.

S- So you did not end up studying Fine Arts by chance, or in a roundabout way, as it happens to many other artists who encounter certain impediments before being able to devote their career to art... it sounds like you were always certain that you wanted to be a professional artist and that your family was supportive.

G- I have always been sure that I wanted to study Fine Arts. And I had full support at home. Speaking now about my career as a student in general, it is peculiar now to think about how it began and how it ended, how I progressively managed to corrupt painting. As I told you before, I studied all those methods based on representation and copying. I treated work with a great amount—an excessive amount in fact—of respect. I was extremely methodical and perfectionist. I think that this is where the rebound effect comes from: to start with an error, to attempt to dislocate the painting... perhaps all this has been a reaction to the rigid education I received...

S- Which was self-imposed for the most part, I can tell...

G- Absolutely. You can try to dump the blame on others, but I have come to realize that I was the one who put me between a rock and a hard place, the one who limited me the most. During this whole time I did not enjoy painting at all. This is why I have left all that behind and have taken more of an interest on the enjoyable, physical, side of painting... on creating a game around each piece, each joint, each construction...

S- That is why I can see you as a child playing with a colorful wooden block architecture set.

G- I can't remember that so well... Actually, perhaps some *Lego* construction set.

S- Right! Of course, that's what I wanted to get at. And were you ever able to copy the example?

G- The first thing I would do was to look for the instruction manual in the box and see if I was able to reproduce the example exactly as it was.

S- Could you do it?

G- With a lot of determination and rigor I would achieve my goal. But once I had built it, I would take it apart and build whatever I wanted with the pieces...

S- And once in university, did you always have a preference for painting?

G- I was always interested on painting courses, although I also took photography, and trying other media such as printmaking. I did not want to restrict myself to one field. I wanted to have a base, to be able to learn several techniques and have access to enough tools. You never know where your work might end up in the future.

S- And what did you observe around this decision? It seems like in the last few years, and despite the repeated *excellent health of painting*, the tables have turned and it is now looked down on, amongst some groups of teachers and students, to be a painter.

G- I have always felt like I was going against the trend, more so as time goes by, to be honest. And the problem is that the place where I feel this way the most is in this city. The type of painting I was taught has been very partial and limited compared to what is happening nowadays. At the Universidad Complutense it was hard to find a teacher who told you about Gerhard Richter, Peter Halley... and these are already icons of contemporary painting, not unknown artists. This year I went back to the university to attend a Masters in Contemporary Art. My surprise was to find out that teachers, not all, but many, showed no interest in the medium. If the word "painting" was mentioned, all their defenses went up. I guess this was mostly about killing the father. Everybody has a right to despise something, as long as they can justify their reasons for it. The problem is using "I just don't" as a valid reply. These positions toward painting are, in my view, quite peremptory and retrograde.

S- Going back to your time as a student, what would you highlight about the work you did prior to studying in Chicago?

G- That it burnt down. It is the most significant fact about the earlier phase of my career. My studio caught fire in late 2005 with almost all my work inside.

S- What a metaphor! Are you saying that all your student work was lost and that you started again from scratch?

G- Almost everything that was in the studio burnt down: five years of university work, a lot of material, books, documentation... It was quite strange to see all my work blackened or turned into ashes. Few things escaped... So much time that I put into it... all those years of discipline had vanished, just like that.

It's not that I started from scratch, I had learned a lot by then, but this fact changed the way that I saw my work. I lost a lot of respect for painting, and for the art object in general.

S- What would you highlight from all the work that burnt down?

G- There was one artist book that I spent one year making in college. It hurt a lot to lose it.

S- I can't be sure, but it seems like in time you have come to see it as a liberation...

G- For the first two weeks I was really pissed off. I was so enraged that I decided to go study abroad. I applied for a grant in Stockholm and another in Chicago. I was awarded the second one.

In time I came to accept it. What started as a very negative feeling became something positive in time. If it happened, it's because it had to happen.

S- I can imagine that painting had a privileged position at the Art Institute of Chicago.

G- Yes, the painting department there was the elite. It was the only one that had studios. You had to go through a number of interviews in order to be granted one of these spaces. It was not an easy process. Only around 15 students had one each year. I managed to get one. Once inside, no one would ask you why you painted. We had fantastic teachers who cared about current issues in painting, about helping you reach what you were aiming for. This was my true encounter with contemporary painting.

There it was that I really asked myself what I wanted to do... I saw myself as free... I could do what I wanted without the need to justify myself on a daily basis.

S- Would you point to any particular teachers who helped you in this process...

G- Yes, of course, there were three very important people during my stay at the Art Institute. One of them is Michelle Grabner, a splendid woman, very charismatic, who writes for *Artforum*. During our pin-up sessions she would place a lot of emphasis on the idea and on how to introduce the language of painting into contemporary art... she made me think a lot... another professor was Theodore Halkin, the most lovable of all. I could spend hours talking to him. He was the one who pressed me the most to not forget where I come from, my roots. And there was a Japanese professor who was really tough...

S- Her name is?

G- Michiko Itatani, a very strict and severe teacher, but also very important for my education. She would always walk through my studio, carefully observing the leftovers of my work, what I would reject from the painting. Slowly she made me see that what I was pushing aside, the debris, could deserve a second chance. She made me study my own studio, be able to look within it.

S- Have you two kept in touch?

G- I am still in touch with Michiko. I usually send her information about my exhibitions and projects... she is the one I feel closest to.

S- What are some Spanish artists that interest you?

G- The truth is that I keep my eyes on the outside. In Chicago I discovered the work of Arturo Herrera, a Venezuelan artist who lives in New York and works with the superposition of meaning through the use of collage. I have also always been a big fan of Jessica Stockholder, whose work, writings, and ideas I follow closely. I really like her conception of painting.

There are also very interesting painters coming out of France, such as Bernard Frize, whose work still deals with the process of painting. The problem is that German painting has lately eclipsed the entire European—even world—scene. I find this type of painting from Northern Europe at once seductive and repulsive. There is something there that doesn't quite seem to fit. To me, it is too descriptive and cryptic.

And in Spain, what can I say... the two artists I am most interested in -Ángela de la Cruz and Miquel Mont- have mostly worked abroad, what a coincidence...

S- How about film, does it interest you?

G- I feel the same way about it as I do about music. It's not that it doesn't interest me, but I don't give it that much time. I can tell you about my favorite film: *Hedwig and the angry inch*, by John Cameron Mitchell. Despite its frivolous appearance, it speaks deeply of how to deal with border territories, how to move within the undefined. In short, it is a human gesture. Recently, I was also impressed by *All about Eve*, a film that shows how ambition and false modesty go hand in hand. Very similar to the condition of contemporary art these days...

S- Let's get into the subject of painting, because in a way it is another one of the characteristics of your work, your palette, your *pantone*, the blues, the pinks... the neon colors... perhaps if the color scheme was not so attractive, the reutilization of materials would come off as rather gray... very different from what it is.

G- I am interested in its current degree of artificiality. As soon as you walk out on the street, color turns into a kind of tart sweetness. It is not that I am not interested in the colors that you find in nature, or in those gray tones in the history of art, but I believe we should use the colors of our time. During an interview, Luis Gordillo stated that color should define your time period. Working with the colors of your time is just as important and revealing as working with the concepts and preoccupations of the present.

S- The contemporary debris that you use, however, are not what we would find in a dumpster nowadays. These would perhaps be more like the recent work by Daniel Canogar, for example, with his obsolete technological leftovers, etc. Yours are still those traditional of painting: pieces of stretchers, canvas, chunks of oil paint... And the quality of contemporariness would be given by the color, the palette, as you say. In general you do not pick up objects that you find on the street, is that right? And if you find something, it must first "get a paint job" at your studio, doesn't it?

G- My studio is a place for production, destruction and regeneration, a complex system that feeds off of its own virtues and flaws. Sometimes I find objects foreign to painting that I can use in my work, but not as objects in their own right, but as structures to be manipulated and easily turned into painting. We could say that if I find a piece of plastic on the street, for example, it first needs to go through my car wash...

S- It needs to be around for a while, I imagine, have some paint fall on it, and then become a piece of debris, a "leftover".

G- No! I cannot plan the production of a leftover. My leftovers are a result of the original process, not the process itself. To create objects that look like debris would be like giving my painting the tools to immolate itself, to break its own internal structure. This would break the chain.

S- I meant if this were to happen by chance...

G- I am not looking to produce leftovers, but complete and coherent pieces. The problem is that my search for an ideal of painting provokes many frustrations and errors. Very few times do I come out satisfied with what I have done, obtaining the results I expected. That's why a big part of my production goes on to a second phase, to be fragmented and become a leftover.

Going back to the example of a found piece of plastic, if paint were to fall on it, it would not serve to turn it into a leftover, but this intervention would be part of a work plan. It is quite a different thing if this were to work as I want it to work... most often, it does not accomplish what was expected and it joins the ranks of many failed projects.

S- And when it comes to setting up your pieces within the space of the museum or the gallery, it is somehow like starting all over. I have always thought of the *drama* it must be to relocate the pieces in a space that is totally different from the studio in which the pieces were created... that is why some contemporary artists only make site-specific pieces, it's the case of Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, for example... but in your case, it seems like you take a different approach to it... you bring the pieces and the leftovers of those pieces to gallery, without really knowing what you are going to do in order to create something on the spot, even letting your intuition guide you... and sometimes it appears that it's the debris and their energy that win the battle.

G- That's true. Sometimes it is humiliating to observe how some pieces go from being the studio's treasures to being surpassed by others that seemed insignificant at first; or how an accumulation of debris that were originally conceived as satellites of other pieces take center stage, become important and eclipse everything else. We could say that there are pieces that are looked over in the studio and then "pay you back for it" at the gallery.

We have been in his studio for a few hours, and more and more I feel like we are inside one of his study-paintings, like two uncertain objects, in a testing field rather than a battle ground, in a lab, and suddenly I realize that I need to turn it all into words:

S- I am wondering with what literary genre you would identify your work... A novel? A book of poems? An essay?

G- It's hard for me to identify my work with a literary genre. I work from a method, it's purely self-referential, not at all narrative. More than any of the genres you mentioned, I would say that my work comes closer to an incomplete instruction manual. Could we define it as a self-referential instruction manual? Or as an instruction monologue? I'll have to think about this more carefully...

S- Yes, but I think that there is nevertheless an essay... Do you write about painting? Do you keep a work diary? A work as discursive about the medium as yours calls for a theory...

G- I always keep a journal with me, and it is there that I attempt to write down my thoughts and worries about painting. During the past years I have tried to organize my thoughts and write something a bit more elaborate about my work. The result has been a small number of writings on my doubts about the current condition of painting. Other writings are revisions and self-criticism, which helps me polish my concepts and consolidate the basis of my production on a daily basis.

S- On a slight change of topic, I was thinking about the connection between your work and the wall, but not only in physical terms, also metaphorically, as a theory... to the white wall of contemporary art, of the art museum that we know from the twentieth century. Although lately

your work has come away from the wall slightly... Would you ever exhibit your work in a public space? Outdoors, for example?

G- It is true that my pieces are almost always linked with the wall, even if it is through a small point. Whether they hang, rest, project, or hook, the wall always plays a fundamental role within my work. It is not just an element to hold them up, most often, it is their very essence. It connects the work with history.

Right off the bat, I do not really see the possibility of placing one of my pieces in a public space... I am rather more interested in the relationship formed between the studio and the exhibition space, how the work gets relocated and how it manifests itself. I don't fully reject the possibility you are proposing, though. Perhaps I could produce something by way of an exercise or a trial, even if it resulted in complete failure. I am very interested in failed work. We are getting used to the *Operación Triunfo*² model in the art world, to the monthly genius. Less and less we are able to see the artist's human side, his failures, his mistakes. It would help us to gain a much better understanding of the complex structure within which we live.

It's gotten very late and I have to leave. Guillermo walks with me to find a cab. His last sentence resonates in my mind for a while:

G- Why not allow room for uncertainty, for doubt, for trials... for failure?

² *Operación Triunfo* is a Spanish television show similar to *American Idol* in the US (Translator's Note).