

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Juan Araujo

By Inês Grosso

January 2015

“A house constructed by Artigas does not follow the rules dictated by the life of man’s routine, but rather imposes on him a vital law, a moral that is always severe, nearly Puritan. On the inside, Artigas’s houses are entirely open, with glass walls everywhere and low ceilings; often the kitchen is not separated, and the bourgeois person who allowed himself to be swept away by the novelty and requested a house by Artigas is often shocked by the ‘lack of intimacy’ and blinded by so much clarity, so he quickly hangs thick curtains along the glass walls, makes hedges grow, strengthens the doors, to continue his well-defined and unconcerned life among his Chippendale furniture and hand-painted table lamps...”

– Lina Bo Bardi, 1950ⁱ

It was at a café in Belo Horizonte, in the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, in February 2014, that Juan Araujo (Caracas, 1971) shared his first ideas with me for the exhibition planned for the following year in London, at Stephen Friedman Gallery. Araujo had come from São Paulo, on one of his brief research trips, this time to visit three residences designed by Brazilian architect Vilanova Artigas – the Architect’s Second House, the Baeta House, and the Rubens Mendonça House. Such trips are part of his work process. He begins his research by surveying various documents and visual sources. In the case of projects that involve the representation of architecture, he then travels to the actual buildings themselves, gathering statements and an extensive photographic record.

Since his participation in the 2006 Bienal de São Paulo, for which he produced a set of paintings on Lina Bo Bardi’s Glass House (1951), Araujo has relied on an intercultural, postmodern, and even anthropophagic perspective to approach the trajectories and impasses of modernism in Latin America, especially in relation to twentieth-century Brazilian architecture. Fascinated by architecture as a subject and by the modern house as a parameter for a conceptual approach that reexamines the legacy of modernism in contemporary culture, the artist is ultimately mainly interested in exploring the complex and sometimes controversial relationship between painting and architecture. How to represent the unrepresentable? How to present a tangible representation of the intangible? How to reveal the atmosphere, the experience, and the space itself?ⁱⁱ Araujo’s paintings begin with this paradox. Painting and architecture seem to be bound together in a sort of unavoidable dialectics, which the artist proposes to explore through a continuous crossing of references and by means of a series of strategies of appropriation, citation, and mediation.

Stephen Friedman Gallery



Residences in São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, as well as Caracas, have been the subject of many of his series. With an informed gaze and a peculiar curiosity, Araujo spends a great deal of time investigating the interior of these houses, the nature that penetrates into them through the glass, the reflections on the glass and the reflecting pools, the modernist artworks and furniture that is found in their rooms. The silent recovery of an intimist, private environment is, after all, a poetic and fictional exercise of painting. A chair by Alexander Calder designed for Carlos Raúl Villanueva's Caoma House (1951–52), and a silkscreen print by Victor Vasarely found within the Milan Residence (1972), by Marcos Acayaba, for example, serve as a sort of *mise en abyme* and an exercise of unfolding the visual planes over the space of pictorial representation. The artist has also dealt with significant episodes surrounding Brazilian modern architecture, like the one related to the construction of a hotel by Oscar Niemeyer in the baroque city of Ouro Preto – the Grand Hotel of Ouro Preto (1938–40), one of the first modernist insertions in Brazil's historical sites, in the series *Mineiriana*, commissioned by Instituto Inhotim in 2013.

For his first solo show in the United Kingdom, Araujo has moved nearly two decades ahead to present a trilogy of single-family residences that Vilanova Artigas designed in the second half of the 1950s, in the same period as the formation of the São Paulo School and the political-ideological content of São Paulo brutalism. A key figure in the teaching and practice of modern architecture, João Batista Vilanova Artigas (1915–85) developed his own architectural language based on the synthesis between the organic architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright (Prairie Houses) and the legacy of Le Corbusier. The

Stephen Friedman Gallery

first residences of the brutalist trend, which include the Architect's Second House (1949), the Olga Baeta House (1956–57), and the Rubens de Mendonça House (1958–59), ushered in a new model of design for the middle classes, based on the articulation between the modern and the archaic, and on a set of constructive and spatial rules linked to the national modernisation project promoted by the Brazilian Communist Party, of which the architect was a member.



It was in those houses designed by Vilanova Artigas in São Paulo – especially the Olga Baeta House – that Araujo found a new subject for the construction of a narrative that is both conceptually and visually fascinating. Supported by just six (blue) pillars and totally alien to its surroundings – it was the first residence the architect designed with a windowless façade – the Olga Baeta House was a pioneering design in Brazil that introduced colour as a structuring element of the space: yellow for the private areas, red and white for the common areas, blue for the load-bearing elements. The distribution of primary colours on the structures, floors, and masonry – like in a painting by Mondrian – proposed a new scenario for family life in keeping with the proposal that art be integrated into daily life and social reality, as espoused by the De Stijl group and applied for the first time in the Schröder House (1924), by Gerrit Rietveld, in Utrecht, the Netherlands. This explains the path that led the artist to his encounter with Goethe's Theory of Colours (Zur Farbenlehre, 1810), a reference to the history of painting. Colour is the thread that connects a vast set of paintings related to three intertwined themes: the abovementioned residences, Goethe's experiments, and the colour palettes.

Stephen Friedman Gallery

As a starting point, I will take the first group of paintings, which constitute the central segment around which the other references of the exhibition revolve – the houses by Vilanova Artigas. In these works, Araujo explored the formal abstraction of the windowless façades, but also, in opposition to this, the transparency of their interiors with their glass walls looking out to gardens, in contrast to the cloistered and austere look of the exterior. Some paintings reveal details of pavement, corners, and wall surfaces in smooth homogeneous fields of colour, representing a link, a gesture towards abstraction. With subtle variations of format, angles, and support, his tight framings generate an interplay of correspondences, making it impossible to decipher anything more than slight clues of figuration. Here and there, we see the marks resulting from the uneven surfaces of the reinforced concrete or the roughness of the walls of an architecture that privileged the structural truth of the buildings, displaying the vestiges of the construction process and the purity of the materials. This group includes a series of compositions projected onto the gallery walls by overhead projectors using glass slides painted with the four-colour technique – a technique that he had already experimented with in his works on the façade of the Library of the College of Engineering at the Universidad Central de la Venezuela (2011). These pictorial situations are actually installations carefully conceived in spatial terms, in which the reference to the RGB system and Goethe's premises deepens the reflection on the graphic representation of stark architectures constituted by colour planes. The fresco on the windowless façade of the Rubens de Mendonça House – an abstract composition with blue triangles made in partnership with a duo of artists of the Brazilian concretistⁱⁱⁱ movement and which garnered the construction its nickname, Triangle House – is projected on the wall, incorporating its texture. Here, the representation takes the form of an analogue image, to which Araujo confers the material properties of its referent.

Stephen Friedman Gallery



Another group of works symbolically evokes Goethe's studies and experiments on colour while alluding to his significant influence on the history of painting, spanning from romanticism (William Turner) to the master teachers of colour at the Bauhaus (Wassily Kandinsky, Josef Albers, Paul Klee, Johannes Itten). These include the works in which Philipp Otto Runge's Colour Sphere (Farben-Kugel, 1810) and Johannes Itten's Colour Star (1921) appear overlaid to architectural scenes or to a landscape of the rural settlement of Osma, in Venezuela, as an experiment of visual collage involving a series of artistic and visual paradoxes – abstraction/figuration, nature/geometry, opacity/transparence. This led him to the paintings that reproduce the palettes on which he prepared and blended the paints for some of his works. The apparent compositional freedom (and improvisation) of these paintings is definitely deceptive – Araujo reproduced these palettes based on photographs that he took during his processes of chromatic investigation, when he was trying, for example, to obtain the colours of Itten's star. They are an experience of colour, retinal vibration free of semantic-formal content, a meticulous (naturalist) representation of an abstraction that evinces a subtle romanticism that culminates in *Nocturno*, but also in the painting of a still frame from the film *Fausto* (2011), by Aleksandr Sokurov.

I have left for last the paintings that reproduce pages of the book on Vilanova Artigas, published in 1997 as a joint effort by Fundação Lina Bo Bardi and Fundação Vilanova Artigas. The paintings that belong to this group of works about the architect's houses involve one of the most singular aspects of the artist's oeuvre. The thematic sets that Araujo has produced in recent years reveal his growing interest in different instances of mediation with architectural spaces, recurrently appropriating images in which these very spaces emerge reproduced. Mediation and appropriation are fundamental processes in his practice, which since the outset has been linked to the compilation of preexisting

Stephen Friedman Gallery

images drawn from a wide range of media, such as the Internet, books, or his own photographs. For example, there is a series of paintings from the beginning of his career, when he reproduced covers of paperback books by the masters of Western art, National Geographic, or magazines about the practice of horseback riding in Venezuela. Araujo constructs images from other images, with the difference that he incorporates the visual deformations he discovers in them, such as, for example, chromatic alterations arising from the printing process or the signs of deterioration brought about by time passing and handling. Here, mimicry becomes an ambivalent principle, an unsettling game of simultaneously approaching and gaining distance from the world.

The son of intellectual, economist, and writer Orlando Araujo, a key reference for contemporary culture in Venezuela, Araujo grew up in an effervescent social, artistic, and political environment, in contact with some of the most important representatives of modernist abstraction in the country, such as Mercedes Pardo and Alejandro Otero – the latter was a reference for the series *Reflejo en coloritmo* (2005) and *Ortogonal* (2011–12). Situated in an *entre-lugar* [space in-between] between the European and South American worlds, between the canonic repertoire of the centre and the periphery, his work concerns the history of twentieth-century Brazilian architecture, based either on the modernist heritage or on the new solutions for resolving the housing problem he encountered in the context of São Paulo brutalism. But, above all, and in an irreducibly singular way, it concerns the history of painting – in this specific case, the history of abstract painting, evoking big names from the 1950s (Mark Rothko), while simultaneously paying homage to the harbingers of the beginning of the last century (Piet Mondrian).

Text included in 'Juan Araujo' published by Stephen Friedman Gallery, London.

¹ Lina Bo Bardi, in *Fundação Vilanova Artigas, Instituto Lina Bo e P.M. Bardi, São Paulo, 1997*. Translated especially for this publication.

² 'The essence of architecture is, therefore, something intangible and unrepresentable: space itself. And, being something that arises from the void, and not from solidity, the space is much more an atmosphere than a wall.' Guilherme Wisnik, 'Arquitetura e música: artes do tempo', *Revista Auditório 1, Repensando a Música, Instituto Auditório Ibirapuera, São Paulo, 2011*, p. 146. Excerpt translated especially for this publication.

³ Vilanova Artigas was involved with the Grupo Santo Helena, formed by a group of painters close to Brazilian concretism, including those who did the mural painting at the Triangle House – Rebolon Gonzales and Mário Gruber – along with Waldemar Cordeiro, who did the house's landscaping. The houses he designed together with Carlos Cascaldi for Olga Baeta and Rubens de Mendonça were related to the movement of artistic and cultural revision that Brazil was then going through. Besides being contemporaneous with the construction of Brasília, they date, respectively, from the same year of '1 Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta' and the neo-concrete dissidence, formalised in a manifesto and an exhibition.