

## Stephen Friedman Gallery

Artforum  
Juan Araujo, Culturgest  
Alexandre Melo  
February 2018

# ARTFORUM

### Juan Araujo



Image: View of "Juan Araujo," 2018–19. From left: *Il ettelaP*, 2018; *Mickey*, 2018; *Il yekciM* 2018; *Palette II*, 2009.

In drawings, paintings, and objects, Juan Araujo combines conceptual sophistication with technical virtuosity, the former evinced in his evocation of art history (modernism in particular) and the latter apparent in the methodology of his installation, which allowed this survey exhibition to function equally as a whole or as a collection of individual components.

In the first room of the show, the display strategy for the works followed strict rules of duplication (via works that are copies of pre-existing images) and reduplication (via further copies of the same images, a repetition of the repetition). Araujo paired a small painting of his own palette with reproductions of two illustrations that would inspire Roy Lichtenstein's paintings: the first, the fragment that inspired the 1964 painting *Craig*, and the second, the illustration behind the 1961 painting *Look Mickey*, in which Donald Duck manages to hook himself while fishing (in yet another instance of recursively) as Mickey Mouse looks on. Araujo then produced additional copies of these images, hanging the works and their mirrored doubles symmetrically along two walls to form a right angle in a corner of the room. The colours in the second version of each image were less present, as if these copies were somehow older than their sources or perhaps had been subjected to further processing. In another corner of the space, two reproductions of a Barnett Newman painting followed the same logic, but in this case the mirrored reversal of the artist's signature allowed us to distinguish between the "original" copy and its echo.

Through such manoeuvres, the artist suggested that citation, reproduction, and repetition are not only the tools that drive the work of artists today, but also provide the rhythms underlying the foundations of art history. Araujo delved further into that history in another room, with paintings of photographs of both Michelangelo's Laurentian Library in Florence and the ancient Roman Villa of the Mysteries on the outskirts of Pompeii. The Lisbon-based artist's systematic method and pristine technical execution point to an obsessiveness that is, in its own way, also radically personal. Born in Caracas in 1971, Araujo also engaged the specific cultural context of his own biography in this exhibition. A room dedicated to Venezuelan painter Alejandro Otero (1921–1990) included sketched self-portraits that appear as duplicates of or stand-ins for Araujo. Elsewhere, a collection of the covers of magazines such as *National Geographic* or *Elite* offered real or imagined visions of the havoc that might be wreaked by an earthquake in Venezuela, while other galleries were dedicated to the works of Brazilian architects.

Taken together, the works in the exhibition reflected on the significance of modernism within the history of art and architecture, as well as on its impact on the broader social and political history of Latin America. Araujo

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linked this historical investigation to allegorical speculation about the sense of imminent catastrophe that has made itself felt at particular moments throughout the region's history.

As an aid to understanding the logic of his exhibition, Araujo drew his title from a 1941 story by Jorge Luis Borges, "El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan" (The Garden of Forking Paths), bringing into play the idea of the labyrinth so dear to the Argentinean writer. It can be said that the artist, whether in his studio or in his relationship to the history of art, is forever in the middle of a labyrinth that is always unfolding and doubling back on itself, offering no means of escape.

Alexandre Melo

Translated from Portuguese by Clifford E. Landers.