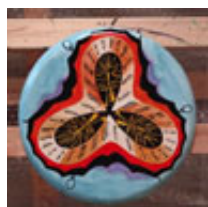




Thu, 21 June 2012

American artist Ray Smith on his work, faith and passion for Spain



Ray Smith is an American artist expat who exhibited at the Álvaro Alcázar Gallery in Madrid. The exhibition is a re-interpretation of Picasso's *Guernica* and Smith's own take on Dalí's iconic melting clocks. Kristen Bernardi sat down with Smith to discuss his work and how *Las Meninas* keeps pulling him back to Spain.

Why did you decide to re-examine a work as well-known and important as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*?

I got the idea from watching TV, when the US began to bomb Iraq in 2003. [Then-Secretary of State] Colin Powell stood in front of a reproduction of *Guernica* at the UN and announced that they were going to bomb Iraq.

I said: "Don't these guys know what they're standing in front of?"

So I'm not really painting *Guernica* – I'm actually painting *Guernica's* reflection on the UN's black marble floor. It projects itself onto the floor. I ran it through a computer programme – the kind that scans your brain for an MRI – and then [touch up] the edges in Photoshop. Then, yes, I did look at the original to paint it. Now it's a melting *Guernica* in a sense. It has a high-technology edge to it; it isn't exactly a reproduction or a copy. It's running it through the mill. That, in a sense, digitally modernises it and distorts it in a different way.

Unguernica is a painting about something falling apart. It's a metaphor of a time where it's the *un-Guernica* or the *UN Guernica*.

Was Unguernica a political statement then?

I'm not really interested in politics, because I don't think that politics last. You can make the work topical and it fails. I think a lot of times when you're trying to make political art, it becomes simply topical. There is to left, there is no right; you can't really say that one thing is this way and another thing is another way. What you *can* say is that people are always coming together or splitting apart, or people are killing each other.

I think one looks more towards the humanity of things rather than the political. By the simple fact of mentioning politics, there's an inhumanity already. Art should be wordless, and politics is full of words.

What about the distorted watch faces that make up the majority of the exhibition? Were they inspired by Dalí's well-known painting, *The Persistence of Memory*?

I suppose it kind of comes from Dalí, but it came by accident. It started with an exhibition I did with images of cars that were being distorted using a computerised cartography programme. I realised what the programme could do and I applied it to a watch.

The cartography programme was designed by NASA to make flat images of the universe. I got it from a friend, Lee Smolin, who's a theoretical physicist. When applied to a watch face, it morphs the watch. It's a type of distortion of time. The watches are all pictures of friends' and families' watches, distorted.

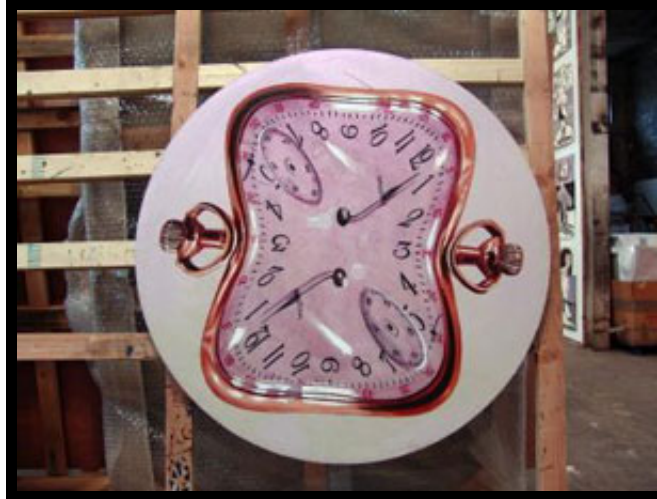


Do you think you will try to tackle any other famous Spanish artists' work? Miró? Juan Gris?

No. It is about Spanish painting, but it's not trying to chase after Spanish paintings. Picasso is the master of metaphysics– he's sort of all over the place, this big icon. If I were going to take anyone else on, it would be Goya or Velazquez.

The complete, absolute magic of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* and some of his religious paintings – the Christ, the bird with a piece of bread in his mouth... this man has made unbelievable paintings. I come to Spain about five times per year, and it never gets old.

Certain works of art have got a phenomenal power to them – like portals into another reality. Michaelangelo's *Pietà* is maybe one. It's like a portal to another side. *Las Meninas* is a painting of self- and extra-worldly redemption. At this point, I'm too old to have faith in politics, but I do have faith in art. And I have faith in other things. The only way I can address the humanity of man is not through politics, it's through art... maybe.



SAINT CLAIRE II
pintura - oleo (Óleo sobre lino) 134,02 cm

You were raised near the Texas-Mexico border before moving to México for over two decades. How did this influence your cultural identity? Do you consider yourself American or Mexican?

I've always had two names – Mexican and American. The day after I was born in the US, my father went across the border and paid someone and got me a second birth certificate in Mexico. My birth certificate in US says Ray Smith, and on the Mexican one, Raymundo Smithe Iturria. I lived in México for 25 years, until 1985 when an earthquake damaged our house. My wife is Mexican and we still have a house in Cuernavaca.

From the beginning, I kind of invented an idea of 'Ray Smith' who was going to be this border rat who could speak in Spanish and English. I don't know where I'm an expatriate. Am I one in New York or in Mexico? It's schizophrenic. Where am I a foreigner? I'm not solidly American. I'd be considered an expat in the States, even though I live in Brooklyn. It's all a bit lost in translation. I'm kind of a gypsy. I just don't like staying in one spot for very long.

Were you inspired by Mexican artists as well?

All of the muralists inspired me. I studied muralism in Mexico when I was growing up. I worked with another expat who came to Mexico after WWII who had been an apprentice to the muralists. He knew all of the materials: Orozco, Rivera, Kahlo.

What was the best part about being an expatriate?

As a kid, when I thought life was going pretty good, I would realise that I wasn't the same person that I was before. I had [grown] or changed in some way. I still think about it the same way. By not always being in the same place, it lets me be able to feel that something new has happened. Time passes slowly to me. If you want time to slow down, move around a lot.

What was the most challenging part about being an expatriate?

Growing up in a border town, there not much adjusting to Mexican culture, but I was never considered entirely Mexican. Even though I had grown up there! I think it still happens now; it's a nationalist thing that I don't understand. You're never going to be *from* there. In terms of politics and things like that, you're not Mexican till you're three or four generations into it. So that was odd, and still is.



TRANCHE II
pintura - oleo (Óleo sobre madera) 91,44 x 242,57 cm
2009

I taught at Yale, and in [one of the courses], we discussed identifying 'the other' in a culture. There are 6 billion people in the world, and for all practical purposes, most cultures can understand each other in a better way than Americans can. The dominant white male doesn't exist anymore. Mixed race is no longer a minority. If you want to know who 'the other' is – you're the other.

Carlos Fuentes once said the US was the best country at understanding itself and the worst country at understanding others. I just know that I'm not a gringo.

Kristen Bernardi / Expatica

Ray Smith's exhibition at Álvaro Alcázar Gallery in Madrid ends today. He has exhibited his works around the world, including shows elsewhere in Spain in Tenerife, Extremadura and Granada, as well as in Oporto, Tokyo, Mexico, New York, and more. See Ray Smith's latest work and take a 360° tour of his Brooklyn studios at: www.raysmithnewstudio.com