

Figure and Material - on the Corporeality in the Work of Eduardo Roca "Choco"

Dolores Denaro

Author and Curator

Viewed from the front, the penetrating gaze of the figure depicted in *Face* from 2004 (image, p. 32) directly meets ours. The viewer has no other choice; the immediate visual contact with the subject directly confronts him. It is the bust of a female person, judging from the implied naked breast and one ear. The figure, sketched in black, stands out clearly on a gray background.

The skin color, mainly dark, is covered in some places with yellow and red, and is mostly streaked with bright lines. Thus, the person's origin cannot be unambiguously identified. The artist, himself an Afro-Cuban, points out that he does not think of Whites, Blacks, Chinese or other persons when working on a piece.¹ The subjects have, primarily, a body, a soul, and a heart.

In addition to the indefinite skin color, the physiognomy of the face does not clearly identify her background. The wide nose and thick lips, such as the ones he represents in many of his works, as well as in the hummingbird profile (image p. 19) seem to be African, while the narrow eyes are rather Asian. The figures in his paintings show the cultural mixture of the Cuban population as well as the daily life and "Cubanness" of the Caribbean island state.

Afro-Cuban Roots

The artist's Afro-Cuban roots are particularly conveyed in the fact that the faces, due to the look and stylization of nose and mouth, recall African masks; objects once called "primitive art."

Eduardo Roca acknowledged in an interview that he has been inspired by the shapes and colors of African art. The lack of proportion between the oversized head and the trunk is an indication that it might be a mask. His works reflect the magic world of the Afro-Cuban religion with its mixture of African rites and Christian elements.

The origins of this religion are to be found in the time of slavery, when Africans were forbidden to practice their religion. In those days the slaves devoted themselves to their African beliefs under cover of Christian rituals and symbols. Both the brown and blue versions of *Luz*, a collagraph by Choco from 2013, resemble a feminine figure slightly dressed in ritual clothing, with a simple grass skirt.

The naked woman, standing motionless on both legs, awaits her initiation. Her skirt from the waist down is only implied with simple strokes. The observer can easily imagine that she will soon dance to the music. Many of Choco's other figures in profile strongly recall the ethnic groups of the African continent because of the form of their heads and lines of the faces.

His background and experiences as son of a common worker appear in his paintings. The themes of his works always deal with the Cuban people, with the typical and bright daylight with strong colors, and with the Afro-Cuban religion.

¹ Two Roles, One Point of View – Interview with Choco by Cuban art critic David Mateo, 10/2010.

Physicality through Materiality

A central visual characteristic of the face in the painting is the physicality that defines the image, supported by structures and materiality. In addition, the white border and the red surface on the left side of the painting give the piece additional spatiality.

The artistic techniques chosen by Choco – as the artist has been known since his youth – are determinant for the character of his style. On one hand, the paintings are very personal, and on the other, he found in collagraphy a printing technique that suits him; particularly because it enables to obtain a variety of shades and structures. Collagraphy allows very luxurious and detailed prints with complex motifs.

Choco works on the printing plate surface with a large selection of materials that give the works their naturalness and structures. He employs, among other things, hardened tempera, sand, plaster, textiles, cardboard, paper, or thin wooden plates, to create pieces. Finally, he colors the plates and prints the motifs on paper using pressure.

The outcome is “a magical structured sensation” that fits the coarse or “primitive” style of Choco’s works [see, for example, *El Malabarista* (The Juggler) from 2012, image on p. 18], and is also expressed in his three-dimensional wooden sculptures. He is also acknowledged in general in his country as a master of collagraphy for his printing technique, in which he has developed into a virtuoso.

It is an important acknowledgment for this young man from the simplest background, who – in his own words – was “saved” by the Revolution and its appreciation for the significance of artistic expression.

The central characteristic of the figurative style of Choco’s works is clearly the strong physicality expressed in the chosen technique as well as in the subjects and themes.

The Relegation of Physicality in Europe

On the contrary, spirituality and corporeality are scarcely found in the art of the last twenty-five years in Switzerland. While in the 1980s the painting here was bursting with corporeality – think, for example, of the expressive paintings by Martin Disler or in the works of the so-called new savages – today they have completely remained in the background.

Sometimes even the symbols related to the body and a mere hint of spirituality are completely rejected. Those who dared in spite of everything, like Ursula Fehr or Maria Dundakova, were cast aside. The mainstream here is to take a distance from physicality, particularly the feminine. In accord with this, the “acceptable” symbols are not personal; for instance, mountains, forests, etc.

Or those who dared paint faces, like Alex Katz or Till Freiwald, chose the impersonal path. As a rule, the subjects do not show distinctive features of any kind; they are graphically flat or vague stereotypes, presented in pastel shades. The great exception here is Pipilotti Rist. In his videos, feminine corporeality is a central element that cannot be ignored.

Undoubtedly, the relegation of the body in the art here has to do with the rapid expansion of HIV at the time. That provoked a strong ambivalence with relation to human bodies, which caused the distancing.

A glance at the art fairs shows that there still has not been a return to the material or corporeal in western art. Intangible techniques such as photography and video are still predominant here. Therefore, we also turn aside from the body and the corporeal at this level. Natural corporeality is almost taboo and totally commercialized due to the almost sickening cult of beauty. The question is posed: is the return to corporeality (as in, for instance, the “Black Continent”) something that has to be overcome, as Sigmund Freud once wrote about feminine sexuality?

Choco, Builder of Bridges

Returning to corporeality, which seems impossible among us until now, is only natural in Choco’s works. Due to his double background and traditions, his relation to the body, to human beings per se and to the individual is relaxed and natural. Precisely in this lies the possibility that his art will receive due attention and recognition in Europe as well. Because in principle we can enjoy his works, an artist such as Cuban painter Choco has the potential to lead us to a new and free relationship with our bodies, and consequently with corporeality in art. The rejection of physicality and spirituality here in the country in recent years does not mean that, in spite of everything, a longing for the sensual and corporeal mixed with the material, is not expressed. Choco would become a bridge builder; he would reconcile us with the recognition and acceptance of the corporeal, which is of constant importance in the art of all South America linked to universal forces.

The vital expression of the body would again become at the same time expression of life in and with the body. Precisely because Choco presents an antipode to what are acknowledged here as artistically valid forms with his artistic creation, he might possibly return to us what is lost; and his works may serve as bridges in that direction.