

ARMANDO MARIÑO: ROMANTIC PESSIMIST

BY DONALD KUSPIT



Armando Mariño, *Revolution in the House of Colors*, 2011, oil on canvas 84" x 84". Private Collection. All images are courtesy of the artist and Thomas Haeckel Gallery, New York.



Armando Mariño, *The Waste Land*, 2012, oil on canvas, 72" x 82".



Armando Mariño, *Stoned Protester*, 2013, oil on canvas, 72" x 60".

Looking at Armando Mariño's ironically lovely painting *The Waste Land* (2012), I couldn't help thinking of the famous opening lines of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" (1922): "April is the cruellest month, breeding/Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/Memory and desire, stirring/Dull roots with spring rain." Lilacs don't breed in Mariño's waste land, although the yellow flowers at the bottom of the painting seem radiantly alive, as do the red leaves, however much their redness may be a sign of autumnal decay. Mariño's waste land is pitch black, suggesting that it is a land in which nothing can grow. The flowers may be mirages in a desert. They seem to float on water, but its blackness suggests that it is stagnant, however enlivened by the luminous flowers and flashes of light, one moving vertically, like a waterfall, another suggesting the big splash it makes. The blackness is unrelenting and abysmal, a vast and pestilential void, compared to the little flowers, momentarily flourishing—or is it festering?—in its bleakness. Mariño's waste land is implicitly Cuba, his homeland: it is a bitter paradox, seductively lush with tropical nature but a stagnant, sterile country. Cuba is morbidly beautiful to Mariño, a perverse mixture of life and death.

The paradox is embodied in Mariño's *Flowerman* (2012), implicitly a self-portrait: almost entirely covered with colorful flowers, he stares—or is it glares?—at us, a not very joyous person however much flowers signal joie de vivre. The *Flowerman* is a haunted figure, painted in blue, a portrait with a certain affinity to Rainer Fetting's *Self-Portrait as an Indian* (1982), for both figures are rebels and outcasts, and have an expressionistic urgency. Mariño is a desperate expressionist, using extreme contrasts of color and shape to make an emotional statement, even as they form an abstract drama. In *Flowerman*, the tension between the luminous red, yellow, and white flowers—with the shadowy blue of his skin they form a bouquet of

primary colors—and the blackness in which he stands (the fundament of the picture, like the blackness of *The Waste Land*), bespeaks the sense of inner conflict typical of German expressionist figures. The contradiction between the colors, with their inner light, and the opaque black—with its "inner sound of nothingness bereft of possibilities...an eternal silence without future, without hope," as Kandinsky wrote—seems absolute, suggesting that the figure is strained to its breaking point, as the feeling of impending doom that seems to inform it suggests. The *Flowerman* is wary and watchful, suggesting that he's fearful; the exciting flowers that cover him don't seem to give him any pleasure. He is in a waste land however much the flowers suggest that it is a garden of paradise—an absurd contradiction that makes Marino's mixed feelings about Cuba clear.

Mariño is a romantic painter—his nature has the seductive abundance often found in traditional romantic landscape painting, as *Tree of Life* (2012) makes clear—but he is an ironical romanticist, one might say a disappointed romanticist, as *The Revolutionary* (2013) strongly suggests. The gray, faded figure, with his back to us, waves a flag with a hole in it, a symbol of the failure of the Cuban Revolution. The figure is a ghost. The Cuban flowers below it are oddly distorted, their colors and shapes surreally strange, as though they are the spirits of the dead that have fallen in the revolution. The sky above it seems to be bleeding to death, losing its color as it does so. The figure, with his rifle on his back, is no longer the hero he once was, but a shadow of his former revolutionary self. *The Revolutionary* is a picture of futility, for he stands in a hell—a lurid waste land—of his own making.

As *Stoned Protestor* and *Run Protestor Run*, both 2013 show, Mariño identifies with the revolutionaries of today; the figures are in effect self-portraits. (Perhaps he is dealing with the so-called "Arab Spring," which has not yet flowered into summer.) All revo-

lutions begin as hopeful “romantic” protests against an oppressive “classical” order, and end with a reign of terror, as has been convincingly argued; Mariño’s youthful protestors are destructive terrorists from one point of view, social revolutionaries asserting their right to a future of their own making from another point of view. They are stoned on revolution, and may not know right from wrong, or show that they have been confused. It is their call to arms that fascinates Mariño as well as their call for justice. Like Cuba, they embody a tragic contradiction for Mariño. The isolated figure in *The Sky Is The Limit* (2013) is in the same position as the isolated figure in *The Revolutionary*. In the first picture the blue sky has begun to turn fiery red, suggesting that it is falling; in the second picture the sky is a burnt out shell of itself. In *A Lonely Girl* (2013) pitch black smoke rises to the sky; she stands on charred ruins—of nature as well as the world, as the oddly grotesque flowers, similar to those in *The Revolutionary* but fewer, suggest. The revolution leaves destruction in its wake, however necessary it may be. The figure in *The Sky Is The Limit* is half-ghostly—we see through his

torso to the blue sky—and the lonely girl glows like fiery ash, suggesting that she is burned out and has blood on her hands. She is victorious, as her elevated position shows, but it’s a Pyrrhic victory, for she stands on top of the black wreckage, precariously balanced, as her outstretched arms suggest.

The disastrous effect of violent revolution is powerfully conveyed in Mariño’s *Revolution in the House of Colors* (2011). Cuba is a House of Colors—thin planes of vital colors form a grid-like patchwork, suggesting a jerrybuilt structure—that has been blackened by the Revolution. The ground it stands on and the sky above it are also black with death. The House of Cuba is a burnt out ruin, a Potemkin’s village façade behind which there is nothing. The desolate house stands like an abandoned billboard in the blackness. Black bile is traditionally associated with deep melancholy; Mariño’s paintings are full of vehement black bile. An ambitious, pessimistic painter, his strong colors and bold brushwork compensate for his tragic sense of life, particularly life in tragic Cuba. His impassioned painterliness helps him endure the dismal world it depicts. ■



Armando Mariño, *The Revolutionary*, 2013, oil on canvas, 96" x 80". Private Collection.