

Villa Unfolding

My work in cabinets open a flood of innuendo.

—Carlos Villa, 2005

Carlos Villa's art has long been engaged with inscribing what might be called a predisposition for the real right thing. He has passed through Action Painting, minimalism of the heretical dynamic Park Place variety, ceremonial performance art and installations, having given to each a distinct perspective and élan. Toward the end of the 1960s, integral to his ritual enactments, he turned to making elaborate paint-plus-feather-and-mirror-glass cloaks, shoes and other assemblage-type constructions. Villa's penchant for choosing the appropriate materials for each turn in his work is legendary: the cloaks found extra room for sachets of blood, sperm, cowrie shells, hair, teeth, taffeta and spit; in other phases, beside paint and canvas, he has used aluminum, cast paper, wood, plexiglas, steel, Formica and cast bronzes and bronze plaques. However slowly, the many strands of thought, memory, materials and technique have come together. As the century turned, it looked as though Villa's work could move at will through any dimension familiar to it, and then some. The work of the past few years gathers known impulses never put aside; there is synthesis together with the feeling of new, momentous release.

Modern art, especially in its American versions, has been populated largely by artists whose root meanings and stylistic impulses can take years to find and accommodate one another. The singular intense vision, local or imported, often grounded in circumstances at once fond and disastrous, seems mightily resistant to whatever mediating conventions exist, and vice versa. A wholesale personal invention, starting from scratch in every respect formally, can be gloriously expedient but limited in terms of putting the artist's baseline subject matter across. Pursuit of style solves anything, but without style, perhaps the more composite the better, exotic gists tend to founder unredeemed in their own specificity.

*Her stories and the embroidery on her apron got confused in my mind....All my life
her stories and her embroidery keep unraveling pictures in my memory.*

—Arshile Gorky about *How My Mother's Embroidered
Apron Unfolds in My Life*, 1944

In many respects, Villa's personal art history begins with Abstract Expressionism, that quasi-movement, the collective attributes of which, as Harold Rosenberg remarked, were best defined by what its individual members did separately. Less remarked has been the fact that all the main, first-generation exemplars might be said to have been, in one way or another, displaced—as immigrants, women, Jews, Great-Depression rejects, or simply “bohemian types,” aesthetes, artists as such. (Not to mention, so far as European modernism was concerned, as Americans plain and simple, whereby, as Villa's own, long-term “rehistorizing” researches have shown, sizeable numbers of adventurous American artists of color were doubly cursed.) In the 1930s and 40s, when the abstract-expressionist rudiments were coming together, to be an artist at all was to make a social statement, and advancing the especially suspect *cause célèbre* of modern art was like joining a club, proclaiming one's wayward status as a Modern Person. Anne Wagner tells how for the young Lee Krasner “being a modernist was not....a matter of style in any superficial sense,” but of “allegiance” and “transcendence of circumstance.” In this context, Arshile Gorky's *How My Mother's Embroidered Apron Unfolds in My Life* is an exemplary case of hard-won truing up. That redemptive improvisational spillway of playfully jostling planes and other, more loosely interlocking impulses—an aerating frontal assault on Cubist design (or, more specifically, on what Stuart Davis called “Colonial Cubism”)—gave the stray bits and haunts that Gorky carried of his lost Armenian heritage their true place in the realm of his acculturated aspirations.

In Villa's recent work, integration and transcendence—that feeling for coming close to full circle—has been similarly unpredictable, while just as instinctive as Gorky's, and as seemingly fated. In the recent *All Tony at the Bon Ton*, for instance, the

finesse with which Villa wields his carpenter's awl is salutary. Villa imagines his force-line scrape as the awl worker's equivalent of the dragged-brush groove or action drip. Recalling those gestural forebears with their house-painter brushes, the excavating stroke sweeps from the shoulder, ripping "pinstripe" lines (think outside the eponymous hot spot a moonlit 1950s styled-up jacket and pants legs) across two well-hinged inner cabinet panels' deeply insouciant blue fields. The antithesis: the outside box face bears a surefooted 60s minimalist's flat-out center swatch of the same "midnight" hue that sends out its bulletin like from a muted horn, inviting. The exactitudes of angle and interval in such pictures having been determined pragmatically by rule of sight, where straight lines meet an animation occurs, a tiny blip or bop, and in the dis-applied pigment, a pronounced, cuneiform-like wedge intones its rugged grace note. Within "a range of different pressures," there is the urge "to connect angles to areas." Some angles take on birdlike postures, or a geometric pattern will echo a fabric weave brought to mind, as if in a hope chest, from northern Luzon.

The appropriately scaled open box may function as entry—or, as Villa prefers, "passage"—to parts of a world hitherto either culturally misremembered or altogether ignored (because fearfully, mindlessly blocked from view). Open or shut, the box as a whole stands as surrogate for Villa himself as custodian of such tales, that in the recounting would (and now in fact *do*) define the legible dimensions of his variegated world. What Willem deKooning said of Gorky, that he had "a fantastic instinct, a gift of seeing it the right way" applies to Villa, too, in his seeing through to completion what might otherwise have remained scattered. His work in its new carpentry mode appears at home in its pointedness and largesse, a panoply of phenomenal invention and constant revelation.

Bill Berkson

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