

## César Paternosto

### Recent Work

Next to nothing. As we enter the Jorge Mara-La Ruche gallery, the white canvases, reinforced by the white walls of the very elegant and extended exhibition room, project an impression of emptiness.

The very austere work by César Paternosto questions our perception of the creative act. We wonder how the artist has been able to uphold such coherence in his work for the last thirty years. Not only does he work in a traditional technique, without having recurred to so many other technical and aesthetic options that have made the scene during this period of time, but also the different pieces that make up the bulk of his work tend to resemble one other. Is it an excess of candor or is it the utmost sophistication? What is the author telling us? Is it a mystic abstraction or a pragmatic story?

By Alina Tortosa



It is necessary to study his career from the start, ponder his work, read his writings and notes, to understand clearly that the Next to nothingi we are looking at is the outcome of the deep convictions that drove him to illustrate and explain the origins of conceptual and minimal Western art, as well as pre-Columbian designs. The title of some of the pieces exhibited, and previous ones, help us to grasp his motivations, conscious or subliminal.

César Paternosto was born in 1931 in the city of La Plata, in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. From 1965 to 2004 he lived in New York. In 2004 he moved to Segovia, Spain, where he lives and works now. Though he has kept his close affectionate and cultural ties with his country of origin, his work does not represent visually the art of the River Plate. His austere spirit and the way in which he achieves work of great quality with few elements do. In the mid 1960s the art scene in New York was open to work pared down to essentials, as Barbara Rose announced it in her influential article ABCArt, in the 1965 October issue of Art in America. César Paternosto caught the spirit of the time in his 1965 bright oil on canvas paintings, in which thick curved lines in contrasting tones cross the frontal space gracefully: Climax III, Merry go round, Untitled (orphic), Orange, Infinite and others. Then came his 1966 paintings/objects in strong monochromatic tones or in thick lines, also in contrasting tones, that he showed as wall installations: Vermilion; Orange, magenta and blue; Duino and Solitude. Alfred Barr bought Duino that same year for the MoMA collection. It was exhibited the following year as part of a collective show: The 60's Painting and Sculpture from the Museum Collection at the very MoMA. His work then forwarded some of the tendencies that would be later known as specific proposals by US artists.

In February 1969 Paternosto painted the edges of the canvas for the first time, keeping the front of the canvas white. He had started what he called The oblique vision. Though his previous work placed him at the very center of the then contemporary visual art scene, the author acknowledges this evolution as a breakthrough that redefined in depth the sense of his work. Francisco Calvo Serraller focuses on this development in his essay The edge of light, published originally in the 2004 catalogue for the exhibition held at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, in Segovia, and was published again in the catalogue for the current show.

This exercise of painting the edges of the canvases, putting emphasis on what is seen obliquely, avoiding a frontal vision of the work, reminds us of the discussion between Piet Mondrian and Van Doesburg, on whether the lines that divided the areas of a painting ought to be only vertical and horizontal or could cross de canvas in diagonals.

Except for a first period during which Paternosto drew indigenous symbols on dark backgrounds or, much later, after his research trips to the North of Argentina, to Bolivia and Peru in 1977, and to Perú again in 1979, when he restricted his palette to a monochromatic range of browns and grays, the gritty grays of the landscape, his paintings from 1969 to today are in lively shades with, most of the time, recurrent white spaces.

In 1993 he exhibited for the first time a series of abstract sculptures in pigmented cement: Porticos and Facades, in the Exit Art gallery in New York, in the show titled Abstraction as meaning. A name that describes well the brunt of his work. These pieces were inspired in ancient ruins, such as the Gate of the Moon in Tiwanaku in Bolivia, the Portico of Apollo, in the isle of Naxos in Greece, or in some of the Inca sculptures.

That Abstraction as meaning was the axis of his work implies, as Paternosto himself has said and written, a great stubbornness on his part. Music is a discipline that has always been close to the artist's heart. In musical terms, then, his work may be considered an ostinato sostenuto. The ongoing effort of this author to achieve the core of his expectations has taken him to do away with anything that did not signify, everything that did not bear a close relationship to his intense quest for meaning.

The great paradox of Paternosto's work is that after achieving significant work in the 1960s in what was then the navel of Western modern and contemporary art, it was in Peru, years later, where he found the aesthetic and conceptual support that corroborated fully his vocation to work on abstract art.

In César Paternosto / Obras recientes, the current show, the paintings are luminous. The white canvases, the edges of which are painted in different shades, could well refer to atonal music, in which the silence from a group of notes to the next takes place at different intervals in the musical phrases in the score. At the end of the exhibition room, a square space is devoted to delightful and refined series of gouaches on paper in three-dimensional folds. Smaller previous work to be found in the gallery library, water colour pencils on paper of the series called Paper threads, are also delightful.

I hope to have answered my own questions. The work discussed above is sophisticated and denotes superb talent, it tells us, sotto voce, a story rooted in the history of our continent. It is unyielding, the outcome of a genuine vocation, telling us elliptically the origins of visual systems previous to avant guard proposals by twenty-century European artists, without belittling their input as seminal figures. On the contrary. The redefinition of the origins of abstraction from pre-Colombian history links the artists of every generation to a legitimate ancestral history.

## Profile :

César Paternosto was born on November 29, 1931, in La Plata, province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. He is a painter, sculptor, writer and curator. He lived in New York from 1965 to 2004. In 2004 he moved to Segovia, Spain, where he lives and works now. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, 1972; a Pollok- Krasner Foundation Fellowship and an Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Fellowship in 1990, among others. He has shown his work in the Americas, in Europe and in Japan. His work has been acquired by public collections: the Museum of Modern Art and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York; the Alfred Knox Gallery, Buffalo, NY; the Menil Collection, Houston, Texas, among others. His book, *Piedra abstracta: La escultura inca: Una visión contemporánea*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1989, was translated into English (*The Stone and The Thread: Andean Roots of Abstract Art*). The *Amerindian Paradigm*, the exhibition of pre Columbian works and works by Latin American artists he curated, together with the catalogue/book featuring essays by the artist, Mary Frame, Lucy Lippard, Ferdinand Valentín and Cecilia de Torre is central to research and analysis on the subject.

