

Alejandro Corujeira

Interviewed by Michele Faguet, for the exhibition

*Alejandro Corujeira: La luz fugaz (Fleeting light)*

October, 2023

*Alejandro Corujeira's artistic trajectory over more than thirty years has demonstrated the lyrical potential of painterly abstraction. The artist has likened his practice to the writing of poetry, where meaning is arrived to in an often intuitive and spontaneous manner and "words have the possibility of not failing." With roots in the universal constructivism of Joaquín Torres-García, a pioneering Uruguayan artist who created an alternate narrative of modernist abstraction based on pre-Columbian idioms, Corujeira gradually moved away from the regionalist sensibility of his early works to embrace a fiercely autonomous practice inspired by an abundant array of eclectic and diverse references: the tapestries and prints of Anni Albers, influenced by Andean and Mesoamerican textiles; Brice Marden and Mark Tobey's painterly interpretations of Eastern calligraphy; the poet Paul Celan's interrogation of language and loss; the neumes of premodern musical notation, to name only a few. Indeed, musicians also figure large in the artist's repertoire of inspiration—not surprising given music's abstract purity as a medium not dependent on narrative or representation. Color, form, and light—their texture and rhythms—comprise a hermetic universe in Corujeira's work, to be experienced viscerally, like the very act of breathing itself, and with a sense of wonder and intellectual curiosity specific to uniquely aesthetic experiences. In the conversation that follows, the artist elaborates on this point as well as others in describing the recent evolution of his work.*

- Michele Faguet

*Over the years, your work has evolved quite a bit from abstraction rooted in geometric or linear forms to more organic, biomorphic ones. Likewise, in contrast to early canvases saturated with dark color, your recent pieces use color much more sparingly. The constellations of colorful circles and scribbles that populated the works of your last exhibition have now given way to very delicate and airy—sometimes barely visible—ethereal forms. Tell me about the new pieces in this exhibition.*

These last works that have absorbed me for more than a year are traversed by multiple issues, but perhaps a commitment to the barely visible is the quality that is most conspicuous, which is surprising even to me. It is never easy to know where one series ends and another begins, but in this case the appearance of this new body of work was unexpected. Normally my working process involves modifying and referencing previous series, until new paintings come into being, but this was not the case here: for the first time ever, the works erupted almost out of nowhere—without antecedents or roots. I arrived to the studio one day and began working on the first painting as if someone were instructing me what I had to do. During that time, there was a book lying on my drawing table that contained digital reproductions of Emily Dickinson's herbarium accompanied by a selection of her poems on botany. So perhaps this series also owes something to its presence. I began to develop several small works, and sometime later I became aware of certain things that were gestating in those paintings. My eyes began accommodating themselves to that invisibility little by little, and day by day I was able to maximize this relation. At first, it was just a form, but as I progressed, there was no form but rather a unique relationship between space and form. The light began to flood everything, hence the title of the exhibition: *La luz fugaz (Fleeting light)*.

The focus I enjoyed while working on these small paintings provided me with more keys to understanding, among them the concept of dissolution in relation to alchemy, where it symbolizes death and transformation: a disintegration of the limits of the self, an experience of surrender. In these works, there is an attempt to abandon the limits of form and surrender to space even as space penetrates form, ultimately constituting it. Light, however fleeting and ungraspable, invades everything; our eyes, in a certain sense, effortlessly absorb what is shown there. This is in keeping with my desire that these works function as objects of contemplation—that they hold our attention so that we ask ourselves, from a place outside of rational thought, “What is it that I am seeing here?” It is like a revelation to the senses where the very image or object intervenes and inspires—in the sense of breathing, of being out of breath—preceding intellectual astonishment. The color in these works I perceive and treat as tinted light; maybe that’s why color appears to be applied more sparingly than in previous series.

*I understand that you spent some time in a monastery before making them and this reminds me of something you said in a previous interview: “abstraction, at times, seems to be located between sleeping and waking.” Were you referring to the state of consciousness reached during meditation, and is meditation part of your artistic practice?*

Yes, these last works emerged after my recent stay in a monastery. I’ve commented in the past on how my work is situated between sleep and wakefulness, and in general this is something I observe in abstraction: I am trying to highlight the “without why” that intervenes in the origin of the images. Rather than a reflection of the inner emotional life of the artist, it is a letting go of inner thoughts so that the image can appear. In this sense, it is possible to relate this attitude to the practice of meditation that you mentioned. However, I would say that meditation is part of my daily life, not something I consciously attempt to transpose onto my artistic process.

*When speaking about your work, you’ve resisted providing too many references to your potential audience—your wish is that without preconceived ideas or expectations, the viewer can have a more immediate and contemplative (perhaps even visceral) experience of it. Yet you also hope that the viewer will give your pieces the time and attention they require as “demanding objects of contemplation,” in your words. It seems to me that this is a very ambitious project given our current reality of perpetual distraction and dangerously shortened attention spans. Has it become more difficult for your slow and meditative practice to compete with the visual noise of social media and smart phones or do you feel it merely reaffirms the necessity of working in the manner that you do?*

There are several verses by Angelus Silesius that clearly articulate the idea I mentioned above: “The rose is without ‘why’; it blooms simply because it blooms. It pays no attention to itself, nor does it ask whether anyone sees it.” It is also true that for the images to come alive, to awaken, they require an act of generosity: a viewer that surrenders to them, submitting their soul and emotions. Agnes Martin, in a similar vein, wrote, “When I think of art, I think of beauty. Beauty is the mystery of life. It is not in the eye, it is in the mind. [...] All human knowledge is useless in art work.” This is why I often say that I would like the person who approaches my work to do so with silent eyes, without too much prior information. I know how complicated it is to solicit this attitude from my viewers—to demand an attention that requires time or at least pausing in front of the work. You have raised the question of how the visual noise of our current accelerated reality could influence my work. At this moment, since it is still uncertain how artificial intelligence and its use will evolve, I have the feeling that what circulates at exaggerated velocities and in quantities that are difficult to integrate is information, and I believe that art transfers knowledge. There are forms of knowledge that are transferred only through art, so for the moment I do not feel that art is replaceable. For my work, even with its requirement of delay and contemplation, I don’t think that the use of social media has any impact—at least I don’t experience it as something that questions what I do.

*I'd like to take a small detour here and ask about your very interesting biography. Much of your adolescence and early adulthood coincided with the Argentinean dictatorship; the return to democracy (1983) occurred while you were pursuing your art studies. And yet the experience that seems to have been more decisive in determining your future artistic path—as an artist interested in abstract rather than representational forms—was the time you spent in the Andean region of northern Argentina, where you were exposed to pre-Columbian systems of knowledge and visual abstraction. Could you elaborate on this seminal chapter of your artistic formation? I'm particularly interested in a statement you made in a recent interview, where you spoke of your desire to represent through painting an Indigenous concept of identity as a fluid rather than permanent state.*

There are certainly places with a particular energy that one can connect with and that are conducive to creativity. Before initiating my studies in fine arts, I traveled several times to the Andean region of northern Argentina: there I found a different way of understanding the world. I was initially interested in the forms I saw in ceramics, textiles, and objects, but then I gradually tried to understand how these forms were generated and how they were related to the thought and way of life there. Later, as a student, I came across a book that helped me to better understand these trips: *América Profunda* (1964) by Rodolfo Kusch, an Argentinean philosopher and anthropologist who delved into that Andean world and was able to glimpse the difference between *ser* ("to be": *what* something is) and *estar* ("to be": *how* something is). He further developed this concept in a later book entitled *El pensamiento indígena y popular en América* (1977). This concept opened a new field of understanding for my subsequent travels to this area. Years later, I was able to visit the south of Mexico as well as Peru.

*Alongside the new paintings, you are also showing an older series of sculptural work from the 1990s: how do you think these two very different bodies of work interact with one another?*

The result of all those trips are the sculptural works presented in this exhibition, which were made in the early 1990s but never exhibited until now. Like the 1963 album by Bill Evans, *Conversations with Myself*, where the jazz pianist used the method of overdubbing to engage in conversation with himself, I see these sculptures interacting similarly with my most recent works. There is a light in the sculptures that converses very well with these new works, even though their forms are different and linked to certain symbolic spaces, such as the mask or the plaza, places of attraction and centrality. In a broad sense, these symbolic spaces allow me to feel the continuous presence of poetry, which I accompany as diverse voices. I have always had a special appreciation for this literary genre: my relationship to poetry is formed by the use of words that aspire to revelation and excess, something that I also strive for in painting.