

Text by Michele Faguet
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Francisco Valdés: Manual
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But despite the presumption of veracity that gives all photographs authority, interest, seductiveness, the work that photographers do is no generic exception to the usually shady commerce between art and truth.

–Susan Sontag, 2001

As an art student in Chile in the late 1980s and early '90s, Francisco Valdés drew seemingly unlikely inspiration from Sigmar Polke, a painter who came of age in the “cultural wasteland,” according to Benjamin Buchloh, of West Germany in the early 1960s. Like other pop artists of that decade, Polke experimented with the ubiquitous Ben-Day or halftone dots of cheap mass media printing, simultaneously mimicking and disavowing the mechanical nature of this process by meticulously but fallibly painting each dot by hand, using only a humble pencil eraser. The resulting images—based on found photographs and other artefacts of popular culture—are messy and playful and deeply rooted in the collective traumas and tumults of postwar Germany.

Similarly, the country of Valdés's formative years as an artist was still reeling from almost two decades of authoritarianism, its repression and censorship sending overtly politically dissident artists into exile. Those who stayed behind developed a highly coded, hermetic conceptual language to escape detection—a legacy that remained even after the return to democracy—its preferred media, photography and video, embraced by the regime as an aesthetic consistent with its neoliberalist program. To paint, then, necessitated an engagement with both the photographic images that dominated local art production at that moment and the print reproductions of historical and contemporary works found in the pages of textbooks and imported museum catalogues and art magazines, which formed the crux of a young artist's education in a context where geographical remoteness had been exacerbated by political isolation.

“The historical practice of transferring a physical work of art to a printed copy of one has been extremely relevant in the work of Valdés,” Soledad García has noted; however, the artist enacts the exact inverse operation by departing from found photographs—often ones that are banal (even boring) or flawed—to make paintings that are at once figurative and abstract, depending on the viewer's physical rather than mental perspective. That is, when seen from afar, Valdés's paintings are

strikingly realistic renditions of photographic documents, their imperfections mimicking the low resolution of a bad print or a faulty photocopier. Fittingly, a self-referential work from 2014 entitled *Fotocopiadora (robo de material escolar)* features stacks of photocopies and crumpled pages torn from an elementary school notebook alongside a portrait of the machine itself painted directly onto a large piece of plaster installed on the floor. Up close, however, the integrity of these painted images dissolves and is displaced by their basic compositional units: linear grids reminiscent of the sluggish and noisy obsolescence of dot matrix printing technology—except that here the lines are unexpectedly thick and irregular and are more suggestive of gestural, expressive abstraction than they are of controlled and repetitive mechanical reproduction. Meant to be seen in real life, Valdés’s paintings anticipate the very materiality of viewers’ bodies as they move through space, their perception varying accordingly—“a fully embodied observer” as Jonathan Crary has written in relation to the nineteenth-century shift from the classical notion of perception as objective, passive, and unmediated to a “subjective vision,” physiologically contingent and thus potentially “faulty, unreliable and, even ... arbitrary.”

The artist’s most recent paintings are based on a selection of pages extracted from a photography manual published sometime in the 1950s, when 35-mm cameras were becoming objects of mass consumption. In *391 The Technique of Picture Making, 2023*, a well-dressed man smoking a pipe engages in a leisurely game of table tennis, his gaze fixed on a ball hovering in midair, the scene frozen by the effect of an electronic flash used to capture and document that millisecond invisible to the naked eye and accompanied by a verbal description and illustrative diagram of this mechanical sleight of hand. Valdés’s painterly rendition, performed on raw linen to achieve a kraft paper effect, intervenes in the original’s black-and-white palette with a smattering of orange and green along with white metallic stains that allude to the kinds of darkroom errors—“edge fog,” “water splashes,” “dirty dish markings”—detailed elsewhere in the manual. *598 Faults in Negatives and Prints, 2023*, for example, describes and illustrates a few more instances from the myriad other human errors responsible for defective images that have failed to faithfully reproduce the object before the camera. Here again, the flaws are appropriated and exaggerated in a gestural manner that underlines a desire to dispense with any pretense that the painting represent anything other than its own production. In *Subbuteo, 2023*, Valdés mischievously substitutes one of the images from a photographic reproduction of a miniature football game manual, meant to illustrate the exact positioning of the player’s fingers, with his own imprecise and degraded rendition—“a conceptual approach that postulates painting as a photocopying act,” as Francesco Manacorda has observed about the artist’s practice.

A burst of light—of a copy machine or a camera flash—is a motif that runs throughout Valdés’s work. Light produces images and alters our perception of them, but it can also temporarily blind us, disrupting a sensorial hierarchy in which the reign of the ocular underestimates the tactile potential of visual experience. “Saunderson’s sight was in his eyes,” Denis Diderot wrote in *Letter on the Blind* (1749) in response to the blind mathematician Nicholas Saunderson’s ability to perceive subtle changes in light. In his 2022 *Cascade* series, Valdés depicts waterfalls as luminous slivers of white that could also be experienced synesthetically:

the sound of water as it crashes onto the rocks below or the clammy sensation of mist hanging in the air. Adjacent experiments have included cascades painted onto water-soluble materials like soap or caramel and then held under a faucet or left out in the rain in a gesture that is simultaneously self-referential and self-destructive: the work becomes the thing it represents, thus bringing about its own demise. Inhabiting the opposite side of the pendulum to the cascades, according to the artist, is the 2023 series *Firefighter Helmets*. These glazed stoneware sculptures are the product of serendipity: lured by the beauty of a ceramic studio that opened near his home, Valdés spent many weekends there, fashioning diverse objects, both artistic and domestic, from clay. Thematically linked to an early video animation about the death of a volunteer firefighter in a small Chilean town, the helmets obliquely refer back to the waterfalls if we consider the etymology of the Spanish word for firefighter, *bombero*, literally, one who pumps (water to extinguish the flames). The words “figurative forgetting”—yet another disavowal of art’s “shady” claim to truth—are metaphorically strapped onto the most painterly of the two exhibited sculptures, a thin curl of smoke ascending from a hole on one side and permeating the air with a mossy citric aroma suggestive not of a burning landscape but the fresh green growth that always comes after.