

Macchi's Planes

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I first came into contact with Jorge Macchi's work in late 2002, at the Fortaleza Biennial, where he was presenting the installation *Fuegos de artificio* [Fireworks] (2002).¹ In order to fully experience the work, the viewer had to walk into a dark room—the only sources of light were the bulbs in small desk lamps that formed part of the work itself. The lamps were fixed to the floor, their beams aimed upwards against the walls. Each lamp lit up a three-dimensional drawing made from nails placed a certain distance apart, the shadow projected by each nail making its way up the walls. The installation's title made reference to the form created by that ascending pattern. Most critical readings of that work² address crucial aspects of Jorge Macchi's thinking, such as his ability to create poetic-visual constructs in different media, languages, and supports that challenge the viewer's perception in a sort of combination of enigma and anecdote. He makes use of refined visual codes while also appealing to viewers' experience of the world and of everyday life. An important key to the interpretation of his work lies in that back and forth between the apparent, intentioned, and immediate meaning, on the one hand, and the different layers of a posteriori meaning, on the other, a key that privileges the paradox at play in a set of fireworks that are permanent rather than fleeting. This *mise en scène* of ordinary objects laid out to produce a precise effect, a *sine qua non*, is another line of reading and source of fascination for viewers. There is, as the artist points out, another paradox as well: "Various paradoxes are intertwined here, but the one that interests me now is the question: do the light bulbs illuminate the nails, or are the nails a direct consequence of the lighting?"³ As that remark stubbornly reminds us, we are about to get burned by the fireworks.

There is something that, in my view, is more elemental to this construction—and I will use it as the basis for a reflection on Macchi's work in general: the way it is inserted in the exhibition venue, how it seizes the white cube as work surface. Certain

¹ This same title was used for a work by Macchi from 2003, a wall painting that shows a footprint walking up a wall, and for an exhibition held in Buenos Aires at Galería Ruth Benzacar in May 2002.

² *Fuegos de artificio* [Fireworks] became part of the Inhotim Collection in 2007. A twin work, *Horizonte* [Horizon] (2002), whose title precludes further description, makes similar use of light, nails, shadow, and distance. That second work is in the Pat and Juan Vergez Collection, Buenos Aires. Insofar as the first constitutes a space and the second cuts a line in the wall, the two are complementary opposites of a sort.

³ Macchi, Jorge, "Luz" in Moura, Rodrigo (org.), *Do objeto para o mundo – Coleção Inhotim*, Brumadinho, Instituto Inhotim, 2015.

specific principles help us understand this idea, principles like the inviolability of space, ironically and feebly threatened by the nails that perforate the walls from the inside out; its ontologically capsular nature—an isolated room that could exist anywhere; and the delicate articulation of the planes (the floor that floods the walls with light and the walls that then envelop viewers, provoking their gaze and body). In one of the versions of this work whose installation I accompanied, a fifth element was added to the four original elements that produced that sense of encapsulation: the fusion of two patterns of nails in one of the corners of the gallery, which heightened a tension that shed light (an inevitable pun) on the structuring nature of that articulation of the planes of the floor and the wall.

The relationships between space and its constituting planes are essential to Macchi's installations and, one way or another, their destruction is always on the horizon, often by subtly undermining an orthogonal geometry. In *Container* (2013), an eponymous object larger than the space containing it was dubiously installed, its eight corners touching the gallery's walls, floor, and ceiling, disrupting our perception of the parallelepiped. The only way one volume can be contained by the other is by twisting the first, giving that object a menacing presence that makes us mistrust the space's ability to house the container (Richard Serra and Quino come to mind).⁴ In *Still Song* (2005), a disco ball was the source of a light that scrutinized the space. What we see on the walls, though, are not the glimmers of the mirror's reflections but holes, as if a machine gun had shot out from the center into the surrounding space, creating a gallery that resembles both a brutalist discotheque and an exaggerated spatialization of a painting by Lucio Fontana. Everything about this work is disturbing, beginning with its title, whatever a "still song" might mean. Even in works like *Vanishing Point* (2005) and *Hotel* (2007), that seem, at first, barely—if at all—sculptural, planes are summoned to the space, whether in terms of a perspective that is strained as the pattern of the wallpaper nears the corner of the room or in terms of a pattern that fades the further it gets from a (false) light source. In that second case, it could be said—somewhat heavy-handedly, but largely indisputably—that the white of the wall is the same as the endlessness of the universe.

⁴ When, after seeing Macchi's first solo show at Alexander and Bonin Gallery (*Loop*, May 4 to June 22, 2013), I wrote the artist an e-mail to this effect, he wrote me back immediately: "I love both those artists, so I am proud you have compared me to them."

The obstacles imposed by the space, the limits of architecture and of geometry, are visibly challenged in other works as well. Consider, for instance, the very disconcerting *Fan* (2013), a ceiling fan “erroneously” installed in the corner of a room, perpetually spinning and cutting pieces of the space, leaving its traces on the floor. Or *10:51*, where a clock—the movement of its needles blocked by the ceiling—makes time space’s prisoner. Space gets nervous when objects are jammed inside it with utter disregard. The concern with space in this work is clear from the artist’s instructions for its installation:

The video *10:51* plays with the projection of a clock and the architectural limits of the room where it is projected. *10:51* is in fact the time when the two needles of the clock reach the horizontal level that corresponds to the limit between wall and ceiling. The projection must be in a separate room, to avoid any interference from other works. It is better not to project the circle of the clock in the center of the wall.⁵

That same eagerness to articulate planes in the exhibition space seems at play in Macchi’s use of cinematic space, and in its decomposition, fragmentation, and wear. One of Macchi’s first videos⁶ is nothing other than a Zeno’s paradox applied to the countdown at the beginning of a film that, of course, never begins. The screen starts showing the number 10 and counts down until it reaches the number 1. From that moment on, the next number is always half of the one that preceded it until the number reached is too small to be represented in digits of the same size, so the print gets smaller and smaller until we can no longer read it. The sole content of the work *Fin de film* [End of Film] (2007) is the final credits, which, unfortunately, are out of focus and hence illegible. The graphic material, which cannot be deciphered as text, forms the basis for the score of a composition written for the piece by Edgardo Rudnitzky, a regular collaborator with Macchi. As the words head up the screen, the music takes shape. Once again, a paradox.

The potential transformation of the space by means of its planes and a cold yet humorous criticism of space based always on an unspoken alliance with the viewer are constants in works initially three dimensional that then encompass other spaces and supports. The orchestration of different media evidences the importance of transit through different surfaces: drawing, watercolor, text, installation, sculpture, object,

⁵ Correspondence with the author, May 2010.

⁶ Jorge Macchi and David Oubiña, *La flecha de Zenón* [Zeno’s Arrow] (1992), VHS, PAL-N, animation, 1 minute, 20 seconds. In this paradox, the pre-Socratic philosopher Zeno of Elea argues for the subdivisibility of time and space, that is, against the idea that they are indivisible.

music, video, photography, collage, light works, cutouts, artist's books, prints, architecture, landscaping and—last but not least—painting.⁷ Recently, in a gesture that strikes me as exceedingly coherent, Macchi has undertaken a series of exercises in painting—large oil paintings on stretched canvas that summon the overcoded objectuality of large-scale painting. The first exhibition of those paintings was held in his gallery in Brazil in August 2011 (seven paintings were featured).⁸ Those works condense some of the artist's interests in relation to space while also leading us to a sort of sitting room of pictorial language.

Almost all of the paintings made use of graphic elements found in Macchi's earlier works (a map, a calendar, a comic strip, a sign, a puzzle piece). The work that most clearly defies that rule, however, is the one that best serves to begin a reading of the group of works. In *Confesión* [Confession] (2010), with its ultra-harmonious 3:4 proportion and confessional title (is the return to painting something to be confessed?), a perforated white board covers the entire surface of the piece. Through a pattern of small squares, straight lines, and crosses, we see a landscape—the only part of the work that is actually painted: the perforated board, a confessional screen, is, in fact, the unprimed raw canvas. In a muddling of planes, the painting represents an ambiguous relationship between figure and background. If, since the Renaissance, painting has been a window onto the world, this particular window is shut, covered by an obstacle that won't let us make out the world. And that barrier is precisely what forces us to have a physical relationship with the piece and makes us take distance from it, in a gesture that is not fully compensated. The relationship of painting to a supposed referent—the landscape behind that we can barely see—is replaced, in these paintings, by a sort of maladjustment. There are more connections and extensions than ruptures between these paintings and the objects that clumsily populate Macchi's installations, as if in the paintings the viewer assumed the role of the objects that inhabit the real space.

The relationship to vision in the work *Catedral* [Cathedral] (2010), featured in the aforementioned show, is similarly explicit. The work shows the image of an eye chart that vanishes as we read it. As I wrote about this painting at the time:

⁷ While it could not be said that painting is his primary discipline, it does run through all of Macchi's art. There is also a distinct tendency in his work to explore something unique to each of those other disciplines: his themes do not appear to be artificially adapted to new supports, but rather to bring out their specificity.

⁸ Galeria Luisa Strina, August 10 to September 8, 2011. The exhibition was accompanied by a graphic piece created by the author in dialogue with the artist, specifically a poster on whose front was a reproduction of the painting *American Dream* (2011) and on whose back were seven texts, one for each of the works in the show, laid out in text boxes with the same proportions as the paintings they discussed.

In a dialogue between reading and vision, readers and observers are blinded by the retinal experience itself. ... This painting by Macchi speaks to us of an absent presence, a value-subtracted where more material results in less image. We are confronted with the limits of our vision, insofar as we see transparence and glazing, whose result is obliteration. We are reminded of Jorge Luis Borges (“*El mundo del ciego no es la noche que la gente supone*,” that is, “The blind man’s world is not the night that people imagine”), who said that black was precisely the color he missed in his blindness.⁹

The more recent paintings I saw during a visit to the artist’s studio in May 2015 are as masterful as the earlier ones, if perhaps less closely bound to his installations. Their themes, like the image of a broken glass, are now even more tied to the experience of embodying vision.

Many of Macchi’s recent paintings are direct heirs to an extensive body of watercolors that the artist has been working on since the mid-nineties. In those works as well there is a deep tie between materiality and meaning—consider, for instance, the many works where water is both medium and message. Watercolor is drawing and painting, material and water. The genealogy of *Piscina* [Pool], which since 2009 has been on permanent display at Inhotim, lies in the watercolors that make use of water and its effects.¹⁰ In *La espera* [The Wait] (2007), we see a figure sitting on an address book, its side a bench, taking the notebook to an architectural scale. In *El nadador* [The Swimmer] (2007), a few strokes of blue paint make way for the figure of a swimmer that seems to emerge from the page to create a liquid zone in the watercolor. In two drawings from 2007 entitled *Piscina*, the same perspective is used to represent the object that, years later, would be constructed in stone and lime. In one of them, we see the pool, empty, with pairs of letters in orange vanishing as they advance like steps into the deep water. In the other, the same effect is veiled by a large blue area. Here, the pool is full and can be used.¹¹ Fully functioning and widely used by the public to recreational ends, the pool resides on the border between interactive sculpture and functional architecture. *Piscina*, then, is another leap from one plane to another, from the plane of

⁹ Cf. Supra note. Translated into English by John Norman. For the Borges quote, see the lecture at Teatro Coliseo in Buenos Aires delivered on August 3, 1977.

¹⁰ For a vision of Macchi’s watercolors as a whole, see *Block, Dibujos 1996-2008*, Buenos Aires, Ambasciata d’Italia - Fundación PROA, 2008.

¹¹ Macchi’s proximity to Brazilian art, the deep and reciprocal admiration between them, makes it tempting to cite Hélio Oiticica’s *Bólide Caixa 22, Apropriação. Mergulho do corpo, Poema Caixa 4* (1967) as a precedent of *Piscina* [Pool].

art to the plane of the real—and, in that leap, Jorge Macchi once again reembarks on his planes.