



Art in America

INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

ALVARO BARRIOS

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HENRIQUE FARIA

by charles marshall schultz

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Alvaro Barrios's recent exhibition, "Dreaming," was by turns silly and sober, inducing smirks as often as it motivated the chin to rest in rumination upon the fist. As is customary for the Columbian artist (b. 1945), the work on view mixed the refined esthetic sensibility common to conceptual posturing with an impish sense of the absurd. Fittingly, Marcel Duchamp was directly referenced in three of the exhibition's six works. Noticeably absent in this show, which spanned 30 years of the artist's career, were the cartoon appropriations that brought Barrios broad international attention. Their absence, however, left nothing wanting.

Barrios is known primarily as a printmaker, an impression buoyed by the work here, which consisted almost exclusively of screenprints and laser prints. His pieces were displayed in the most heterogeneous manner, alternately framed and unframed, tacked to the wall, hung from the ceiling and stacked up on plinths. Reproduction and repetition abound, and concepts of authorship and individuality are undermined, although the artist's hand is not completely abandoned. In "Sueños con Marcel Duchamp," a series Barrios undertook from 1980 to 2008, a silkscreened image of Duchamp's face in profile is set beside a succession of blank lines upon which Barrios wrote out (in neat cursive) dreams involving or inspired by Duchamp. In one particularly amusing episode (there are more than 30 on view) Duchamp declares the entire universe his artwork and puts it up for sale, enticing a collector from some other universe to visit Earth so as to make the biggest purchase in history.

While this series embodies the airy playfulness of Surrealism's games, it amasses a sense of seriousness and psychic gravity through the extended duration of its conscious execution. By contrast, gallery visitors were intended to write on the thin printed sheets stacked on a white plinth in *El Martirio de San Sebastián* (2011). Beneath blank lines on each page, a set of instructions encouraged visitors to describe "the abuse suffered by those who are currently persecuted because of their ideas. They too are St. Sebastian." The filled-out leaflets were stuck to the wall with pins, calling to mind the arrows that penetrated the young martyr. Reading the handwritten responses was chilling; it seems there are St. Sebastians everywhere from China to Libya to Cuba to the United States.

The most visually compelling piece was also the most conceptually dense. Sixty double-sided screenprints of cornflower blue squares were suspended from lengths of blue twine with wooden clothespins. Each square is labeled with a specific longitude and latitude that corresponds to portions of the Caribbean Sea between Cuba and the United States. First exhibited in 1971, *El Mar Caribe* charts a geographical space that continues to represent an unquantifiable cultural divide. Drooping just below the ceiling, the prints hung over one's head like so much historical baggage waiting to be unpacked. For his part, Barrios seems willing not only to do some unpacking, but to try on various historical guises to see what is worn out and what is still relevant today.

Photo: View of Álvaro Barrios's exhibition "Dreaming," 2011; at Henrique Faria.



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Butt Johnson, *Untitled Floral Pastiche II (Snapdragon)*, 2009

Butt Johnson's "Untitled Floral Pastiche" series consists of four drawings, each of which is organized around a different flower. Johnsons had long co

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