



“...Cameras can unravel what was never seen before: the phenomenon of volume, of space and of volumes in movement and in space...”
 (“...las cámaras fotográfica y cinematográfica sirven para desentrañar, insuperablemente hasta ahora, los fenómenos del volumen, del espacio, del movimiento del volumen en el espacio...”)

No Hay Mas Ruta Que La Nuestra, by David Alfaro Siqueiros

Beyond Function and Form: The Art of Rendering the Invisible Visible

Rafael Vargas-Suarez (b. 1972, Mexico City), or Vargas-Suarez UNIVERSAL (VSU), was raised in the Houston suburb of Clear Lake City, adjacent to the NASA Johnson Space Center. From 1991 to 1996 he studied astronomy and art history at the University of Texas at Austin and moved to New York City in 1997 where he lives and works in Brooklyn.

As with Mexico City-born artists of his generation, including many Mexican-American artists born in the United States during the 1970s, VSU’s work is not informed by identity-based art making, which came to a screeching halt during the late 1990s. However, the politically and metaphorically charged *border* together with Mexican political inequities, its enduring legacy of class and race-based social structures, in addition to US immigration laws conjoined with narco-traffic wars, are very much a part of the artist’s bi-national understanding and practice. Further, VSU grew up in the US-Mexico border state of Texas where he received his education, and took family trips back and forth to Mexico City several times per year.



The artist’s familiarity with Mexico’s rich pre-Columbian, colonial and Modern art history, including its world renowned Muralists, have all shaped VSU’s work, especially with regard to his site-specific murals in Mexico, Europe, and the US. Last year the Museum of Contemporary Art in Santa Barbara, California, commissioned VSU to do a mural. This gave the artist the opportunity to visit David Alfaro Siqueiros’ mural *Portrait of Mexico* at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Painted during his political exile in 1932, it is the one other U.S. mural by Siqueiros that has survived, besides *America Tropical*, which has been restored and opened as a museum by Los Angeles’ Getty Conservation Center. Although they are generationally far removed from each other and have ideologically incompatible positions, VSU and Siqueiros are connected in their belief that a truly “revolutionary” art must incorporate the scientific and technological discoveries of its times. Prior to the Santa Barbara commission, VSU also visited the various Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros exhibitions in Mexico City, and his family there took him to see Siqueiros’ mural at the Nigromante Center, San Miguel de Allende.



Still, VSU’s work does not follow any of early 20th century Mexican modern art’s national rhetoric and canon. Instead, his work derives from having stumbled upon hundreds of coastal maps destined for the dumpster at UT Austin. He rescued maps that recorded landmass



erosions as observed from above and over many years. His work also derives from his Astronomy studies and Art History degree, combining both disciplines and producing work directly from his research of, among others, American and Russian manned and unmanned spaceflight programs, astronomy, and aerospace architecture.

VSU's rich palette and vocabulary resonates with architectural and landscape-based ideas; it is also the consequence of sourcing imagery from places such as the Arecibo Observatory, Puerto Rico; Cape Canaveral, Florida; Houston's NASA; and, Moscow's Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics. Now, in conjunction with the exhibition at MACLA in San José, CA, he has been in dialogue with scientists and engineers at the NASA Ames Research Center in Silicon Valley. This internationally renowned facility's technologies and research include planetary sciences, inventing safety entry systems for earth and other celestial bodies; supercomputing that enables NASA's advanced modeling and simulation; astrobiology; and the successful search for exo-planets.



In 1997 VSU and I began a conversation at the University of Texas, Austin. We had no idea that it would grow into more than a decade of a continuous dialogue, building a spiral of interconnected constellations and points of contacts. Although most of our discussions are in person, when we get stuck or there are loose ends, we continue virtually. Usually begun with this or that art history topic, we tend to sidetrack quickly into other, more

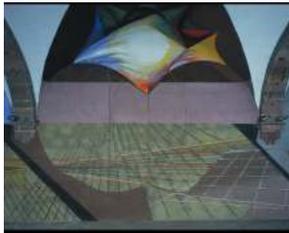
salient art world anecdotes or debates on texts we have read or the lectures and exhibitions we visited, including the increasingly prolific and interrelated art markets; in short, all the effects of current global economic political patterns and our list of topics is a veritable index of art *matters*! Just recently we ventured into Italo Calvino's *Cosmicomics*, a fabulist book with stories about continuous creation, the transformation of matter, and the expanding and contracting reaches of space and time that are populated with characters made of mathematical formulae and simple cellular structures. In fact, many of VSU's paintings seem to be picturing Calvino's words.

In this prolonged discussion, we often digress into VSU's stream of fascinating updates regarding scientific and technology-based discoveries, from the nearby or faraway. In VSU's hands, the faraway becomes an amalgam of beyond-earth occurrences that the instruments used in space missions and the ISS's video transmissions offer as conclusive visual data that can be translated into paintings, drawings, murals, sound, and video art pieces. VSU does not attempt to represent the universe in his visualizations of our multifarious outer space activities; instead, he abstracts the imagery of an uncanny infinite with its many secrets, those that are transmitted via complex technological and optical instruments back to our planet. There is no detail of the 'why' and 'what' in outer space that escapes his attention. Incidentally, this is also why he added 'Universal' to his birth-name: *universal* is his identity as an artist, rather than his passport or political beliefs and cultural background.

Recently I texted VSU a random idea: "...The space around things, between things, under things has always played an important role. Space is a breathing room but not empty,

since air space is invisibly full of atoms, water vapor, microbes, electric charge, photons, magnetism, radiation, sound...Even the perfect black vacuum of space between the stars, the largest feature of our existence, is not empty; it's teeming with waves emitted by all the things..." To which he replied, "what movie are you in now?" As we extrapolated from those ideas, we talked of other artists whose work focuses on science and technology. Trevor Paglen came up, and we discussed the similarities and differences between VSU's and his work, which mines telescopic and other optical scientific materials. However, Paglen's purpose in using scientific materials is to gather secret military and government activities, whereas VSU's focus is on scientific discoveries that lead to knowledge, which in turn may provide answers to the future of life on Earth and elsewhere.

This is not to say that VSU is not aware of contemporary surveillance practices and techniques that place people's privacy and civil liberties in jeopardy. However, his interest lies in scientific contributions rather than their destructive capacity. For example, VSU has drawn inspiration from and is influenced by the Hubble Telescope. Since its mission's inception in 1990, Hubble has taken pictures of literally everything as it whirls around the earth at 17,500 mph. In its more than 930,000 observations, Hubble has snapped more than 570,000 images of 30,000 celestial objects. It allows the artist to 'view' deeper and deeper into outer space and to acquire a constant and surprising wealth of useful data that is then transformed in his work.



VSU's other visual sources include spacewalk helmet cameras; astronauts' and cosmonauts' photography; satellite and telecast visualizations; and, live NASA TV and Roscosmos "space taxis" broadcast screen shots. Recent space walks and images transmitted to earth from the Mars Rover have also influenced the development of new content and formal inventions in VSU's recent work. Additionally and to a certain degree, the paintings owe their rigorously abstracted formal characteristics to engineering maps of American and Russian spacecraft design, as well as technical reports for launch preparations; manned spaceflight; space junk and other elements used in space shuttle repairs; and, vibration charts or musical scores. Often, in his automatic or linear drawings, the artist connects data using the simplest shape, a vector with which he can then reference all sorts of geometrical elements. Vector graphics are based on paths or strokes, which lead through locations or areas called "control points or nodes." Each has a definite position on the x and y axes of the surface planes and determines the direction of the path; further, each path may be assigned a stroke color, shape, thickness, and fill.

To call VSU an 'abstract' artist, although it is the best approximation to his work, would be reductive and essentialist especially when taking into account the rhetoric and tropes surrounding abstraction since the turn of the 20th century, which have turned it into a major pillar of modernity and modernism.¹ Hence, to situate his work in one of the many canons, definitions or specific moments of abstract art seems inadequate particularly when it comes

¹ From the Abstract *Critical Online Magazine Art as Language or Art as Trope*, by Robert Linsley, 2013



to the differing ideas and manifestations of abstraction, putting VSU's critics and writers within shouting distance of one another, trying to come to terms with his work.

In revisiting Euro-American art historical abstract movements such as De Stijl, Russian Constructivism or even Futurism, we begin with the critical studies of Kynaston McShine's 1965 groundbreaking exhibition *Primary Structures*; from this, it is clear that next to Pop Art, Minimalism has become the great patriarchal symbol, a concept from which much of today's art-making departs.² While VSU's works may occasionally nod to the current panoply of abstract tendencies such as post-minimalism, concrete, neo-concrete, geometric, systemic or concept-oriented art making, his work is uniquely positioned in a daring attempt to keep shape shifting and remain formally inventive in each and every work.

Besides other 'abstract' artists of VSU's generation, Kandinsky and his "point and line to plane" theory of the spiritual in art has played a role in his formation. I also suggest Ellsworth Kelly's post-Second World War emphasis on "shapes, form and color," which in turn influenced Minimalism, Hard Edge and Color Field, all the way to Mark Rothko's seductive 'Sfumatos'. There are also the ideas of abstraction and Minimalism from the far left field, including theorists like Yve-Alain Bois "who deliberately perverted the enterprise of formalism by tainting it with ideology."³

In one of our conversations on the multivalent approaches to abstraction, the artist Fabian Marcaccio vis-à-vis muralism came up, and in particular how he views the use of the moving image in his painting. Reading VSU's interview with the artist, it appears that despite his usage of monumental scale, Marcaccio doesn't consider his paintings 'murals,' but more like fragments of a 'painting in movement.' He is much more interested in dealing with time and space in relation to the viewer's mobility when transiting past the work while simultaneously looking at a work that is essentially static from multiple viewpoints. VSU reminds us that Marcaccio himself does not call them 'videos' but rather as 'animations,' which turn his paintings into forms and images that are made to move. In other words, while Marcaccio is not really filming anything, he creates moving images. These ideas have also played a role in VSU's mural-size works.



The viewer's experience in looking at a mural was explored by Siqueiros in the 1930s with the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein; in Marcaccio's case it is about diachronic and synchronic space, being able to see different dimensions simultaneously while exploring the different characteristics of pictorial space. Asked if he likened his work to Marcaccio by taking the Mars Rover images, VSU responded that the "amazing thing is the remote sensing that goes on in trying to understand a place that you and I or anyone on earth has never visited; yet our technology was sent there as our eyes and ears and hands and feet for us to get a good sense of a place. Now we understand Mars' rock formation, we

² *Power: Its Myths and Mores in American Art, 1961-1991*, pg 131; Edited by Holliday T. Day

³ *Whose Formalism?* by Yve-Alain Bois; European-American Graduate School; The Art Bulletin; March, 1996.



understand its water, its light and even the temperature, although remotely. From a pictorial perspective these data are super fertile as images to explore—images that come from a computer screen through digital files processed as radio transmissions that are then received on earth through antennae by which those transmissions are then converted into signals that in turn appear on our computer screens as pixels. I then can take those and turn them into a painting. I work with it as data that comes to us in a series of 0s and 1s and eventually I use this material in the form of pigment. Transforming data from very factual scientific imagery into something that is slightly more hand-rendered comes into being via the hand. Even though I really admire the amount of research, exploration, and work to get these images that you can do anything with, I can interpret them—reinterpret them and analyze them through my hands—like any handmade-work. Everything is done with one's hands. I don't use a whole lot of technology, I believe in the hand-made, the craft, and basically enjoy the actual physical feeling of pigment—I don't look for instant gratification...rather I like the meditative aspect of taking something very highly advanced like 'visualization technology' and bringing it down to a meditative process, to daily activity, to painting. Painting is for me a very meditative, relaxing stress-free activity.”

Reflecting on the artist's description of painting as a meditative daily exercise, Italo Calvino's "the traveler knows the little that is his, discovering the much he has not had and will not have" resonates, especially in the context of journeying here on Earth as well as in outer space.

Carla Stellweg
New York City, April 7, 2014

Images:

Page 1 (both images): David Alfaro Siqueiros, Monument to General Ignacio Allende, color photograph (1999). At the former Convento de la Concepción, Antigua Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes, currently the Centro Cultural El Nigromante. Image courtesy of the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2014.

Pages 2-4: Bob Schalkwijk color photograph of Monument to General Ignacio Allende, detail (1996). At the former Convento de la Concepción, Antigua Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes, currently the Centro Cultural El Nigromante. Image courtesy of the Sala de Arte Público Siqueiros, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, 2014.