APOSEMATIC

Adj. Primordial mimesis, warning signals, the deliberate and semiotic coloration for the seduction of symbiotic relationships or defense from predators. Animals do it as do humans. Posers included.

Oscar Rene Cornejo’s new work emerges from an aposematic call: a wild instantiation of sumptuous markings and visceral semaphores alive in the natural fauna of the everyday. The sedimentation and social residues of the past nail down the raw materiality of that which must be erected in an idyllic future. Like environmental cues that incite transmutations on live bodies (think the chameleon) - this alchemic drive becomes the ordering logic of Cornejo’s aesthetic allegory.

Cornejo, compelled by this ethos, creates compositions of geometric constellations, charged and expressed by bold yellows, blues, and reds, which ‘call out’ charged signals. The content is as urgent as the form, and the through-line remains clear – a message must be read. His works are driven by a call for action, a relentless impulse to tell a story, at once personal and political, which ‘speaks truth to power.’ Nietzsche called this sensibility a will to power: “not a being, not a becoming, it is [first] a pathos.” Indeed, from this suffering the tragic hero purifies that which is polluted and filthy. For Cornejo, history is the tainted object that must be distilled and diffused; filtered through a suffering long buried in the recesses of repressed collective memory. Akin to encountering a contemporary cave (no longer ideologically centered in Lascaux either) the weathered markings of moments past underwrite the direct call for future action.

In this context emerges a visual lexicon that repeats as it declares, his paintings indexing a grammar of stencil and silk-screen, woodcut and lithograph. Cornejo’s practical and intellectual process is as conscious as his choice in mediums. A restricted palette wrestles modest material choices. A shift from his last series, these new works are less textual than before and neutralized by the slow, tempered introduction of pastels. We have lost the drama of the overt figura for figures built up by the imposition of borders that form subjects, as in Law 2012. In this piece, cement becomes the bull that charges forward. Imagine the visual heaviness and frontality of flags that territorialize negative spaces. Cornejo captures this implicit tension through stylized and metaphorical barricades, essentially pitting technology to man.

A bricolage of painter’s cloth, roof shingles and cutout felt, are framed by boldly carved impressions and built-up by spackled cement and long luminous brushstrokes. The temporality of printmaking is tested by the pace of the brush, playing with notions of time and transparency. The enamel sheen casts a glow onto ancient Spartan forms, creating a palimpsestic collage complicated by the use of signified materials and pictograph-like texts.

Colors become cartographies that warn and represent differing entities; borders formed by clean silkscreened lines pronounce the iron cage of institutions and apparatuses of the state. These zones of distinctions remind us of the potential and inherent violence of color, an ambiguous semiotic defined by anthropologist Michael Taussig as a “poly-morphous magical substance.” Rethinking man’s mimetic faculties, Taussig reminds us how color, too, is subject to colonial histories that speak to conquests over how to manage and control these forms of expression. A war between the chromophobes of the Occident and those said to be colorfully uncivilized, the chromophiliacs, still finds its way to contemporary beliefs about power, civilization and taste. For Cornejo, color is an autocthnous/indigenous/native means of communication; a demarcation found and practiced by local villages throughout all regions of the world. From nation-states to insurgent gangs, colors are complex codes which narrate often bloodied spaces.
A continued sincerity to process and content grant this new series by Cornejo an enduring affective presence. The shamanist urge, also seen in John Beuys intellectualized poaching of post primitivistic tropes, forces an immateriality onto the very realness and grit only material can capture. The pintura materia of the Catalan artist Antonio Tapies meets the rustic and material sensibility of arte povera. The compositional landscape will, no doubt, register to many viewers the complexity of a Rauschenberg, while the deployment of bright flaglike fabric takes us, most recently to a Blinky Palermo. The familiar red squares recall the heroes of Constructivist ideals, harkening a deliberate politics to his abstractions. It might be consciously art beyond its own sake, but these superimpositions also push the ideological limits of a pictorial and abstracted matrix. Cornejo’s reappropriations – whether deliberate or not – dig into collective archives of older signs, recharging nuanced meaning unto already mined images.

And yet, Cornejo’s aesthetic practice transcends the intertextuality of older aesthetic regimes. It is, instead, a sincere warning. A calling out of the root of the matter. It marks a sensual concern over man, violence and modes of production found in all spaces aposematic, the basis for natural and material transgression. As Marx said in his Critique of Hegel, a stab at the problem of history: “To be radical is to go to the root of the matter.” These visual speech acts, rooted in the material prima of the aposematic call for change and revolution, carry an emancipatory potential and, like Cornejo’s grassroots approach, activate in others a deep and authentic human connection.

Lucia Cantero
New York 2012
Origins Retreat: Appearance Prevails, 2011, 7”x45” plywood, woodblock on handmade paper, plastikap, leather Partido, 2011 7”x45”, woodblock on handmade paper, step shingle, silkscreen, lithography

Campana, 2011, 12”x32”, cement, cotton fabric, plywood, silkscreen, sumi, acrylic.
Campion, 2012, 20”x23”, cotton fabric, woodblock on handmade paper, acrylic, lithography, nail, cement, wood on stretched canvas
The Sacred, 2012, 23.5"x24", cotton fabric, nail, step shingle, woodblock on handmade paper, acrylic, cement on wooden panel
Untitled, 2012, 30”x50”, woodblock on handmade paper pasted on somerset
Campaign, 2012, 21”x20”, cotton fabric, woodblock on handmade paper, acrylic, painter's cloth, styrofoam
*Untitled*, 2012 17.5”x30”, woodblock and woodcut on handmade paper, carved plywood, dyed cotton fabric, acrylic
Law, 2012, 24"x48", cotton fabric, woodblock on handmade paper, acrylic, cement, and oil on wood

Display Triptych, 2010, 70 "x30", wood, sumi, dyed cloth, plasti-kap, woodblock on handmade paper
Seran Tanto, 2012, 18”x24”, acrylic, cement, handmade paper
Declared Victory, 2012, 18”x24”, oil on canvas, silkscreen on dyed cotton
Untitled, 2012, 30”x31”, acrylic, painter's cloth over stretcher, silkscreen, lithography on handmade paper
Untitled, 2012, 30”x31”, painter’s cloth over stretcher, woodblock on handmade paper
Marked Zone, 2012, 24” x30”, plasticap, cotton fabric, acrylic, woodblock on handmade paper, silkscreen
Top Top, 2012, 24”x30”, woodblock, lithography, and silkscreen on hand made paper, canvas, painter's cloth, cement, nail, and wood
Prosthetic Memory, 2012, 36”x48”, cement, silkscreen on handkerchief, plastic bag, step shingle, tar, copper nail, ink on plywood
Wall, 2011, 36"x48", woodblock on hand made paper, mechanic rag, sureline powder, acrylic, cement, spray paint on plywood
Barricades, 2012, 12”x16”, cement, acrylic, canvas, xerox, ash on plywood
Artist Bio

A first generation Salvadoran-American, Oscar Rene Cornejo’s work is concerned with the representation of traumatic events and its effects on collective historical memory as a way to reconcile historical conflict, with a particular emphasis on the civil war in El Salvador between 1980 to 1992. Cornejo received a BFA from The Cooper Union School of Art in 2005, and an MFA from Yale University School of Art in 2011. In 2004 he co-founded the Latin American Community Art Project (LA CAPacidad) which he directs to this day, and in 2007 he was awarded a Fulbright scholarship. He is currently a member of AGWF, a curatorial team. Cornejo lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.
Untitled, 2012, 32"x60" Brick, cotton fabric, nail, screws, and wood