

Mario Trejo: Love is a Battlefield / A Battlefield is Love

Though small in scale, the works in Mario Trejo's exhibition, *Idiosyncratic Tantrums*, boast grandiose titles: *The Accumulation of Thousands of Ideas, Fears, and Triumphs into the Grand Edifice II*; *A Balance Amidst Chaos and Horror*; *Illuminated Idiosyncratic Manifestations IV*; *Purpose*; *The Majesty of Cruelty*; and *No Answers*. The titles imply that the struggles of artist-hood, both internal and external, are ever-present, ancient, and epic. To that secret society of fellow artists (the knighthood, the cadre, the corps of soldiers devoted to the project of ART) Trejo's titles seem to whisper, "This is the life we've chosen. It's difficult, yes. Though we may be destined to lose, it's our duty and our privilege to fight this battle." To non-artists, or to those with cynical dispositions, the grandiosity might appear to be manufactured, imagined, or overstated. To which, I'd argue: in this historical moment, creating art with a sense of import, purpose, life-or-death high stakes and, indeed, the very conditions of physical and psychic *survival* is a radical act. One intuits that Trejo lives and works within the framework of archetypal mythology. Indeed, as a former boxer and an avid student of military history, the artist is well aware of and informed by the dynamics of force, aggression, and domination. Their gentler counterparts—grace, precision, and strategic retreat—are in play, as well, in delicate balance. Together, they are an homage to heroism.

What does it mean, then, to create works of art when one is of an embattled mindset? Trejo begins with discipline. His approach involves methodical mark-making in varied configurations. Oftentimes, this involves counting the marks as they accrue into a dense field. Other artists, such as the painter Robert Sagerman, similarly account for each mark. But, while Sagerman's counting is a meditative, devotional act, Trejo seems more intent upon asserting his presence, creating order within chaos, and facing the infinite void. Each composition is a compact crucible for an entire roiling universe. There is a palpable angst in works such as *Purpose* which is, in effect, a grid that is simultaneously contained/orderly and expansive/explosive. It succinctly communicates the paradox of the proverbial caged bird; captive, but ever ready for flight of body and spirit.

Contained Space XI and its companions, *Compound Catalyst* and *A Balance Amidst Chaos and Horror*, digress from Trejo's more familiar compositions in that they comprise a multitude of orderly horizontal lines, resulting in Op-influenced, stratified fields that bend space and time as they continue around the sides of their panels. They provide an uneasy respite from the more aggressively energetic works, such as *Two Spirits* and *Empirical*, which employ arrays of incised marks over mysterious, amorphous fields, creating volatile atmospheres akin to portentous, intergalactic collisions.

More than anything, Trejo's works (and words) throw down the gauntlet. They defy cynicism, trendiness, dilettantism, and a host of equally prevalent realities of today's art world, opting instead for questions, ideals, processes, and concepts that are at once more urgent and more ageless. In his work, Trejo ponders his (and our) place in the universe; he considers a myriad of energetic forces, the truth of numbers, oppositional dynamics, and the micro/macro dichotomies of space and time. Equally, his efforts wrangle with the futility of art itself, and the difficulty of devoting one's life to an endeavor that may, quite possibly, be fruitless. As ever, these are the real issues. Mario Trejo makes a tentative peace with them; he grapples, struggles, investigates, and scrapes and scratches his way toward embracing their unwieldy complexity.

—Amy Ellingson