

# JOEL CARREIRO: SEEING THINGS

by Elinor Richter

---

*Ultimately seeing alters the thing that is seen and transforms the seer.  
Seeing is metamorphosis, not mechanism.'*

- James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back*

*When we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object. Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines!'*

- Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*

Joel Carreiro's favorite writer is Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977). Several of his works refer directly to the Russian-American author's output: *Pninian* (2007), *Zemlan* (2008), *Harlequin* (2009), *Atalanta* (2010) and *Icebergs in Paradise* (2008).<sup>3</sup> In a recent article in the *New York Review of Books*, John Banville partially explains the appeal of Nabokov, this most elegant of stylists:

He does tell a wonderful story, he does teach us many subtle and intricate things, he does ultimately enchant. Yet when we press past the surface dazzle of his work—no small feat—we find ourselves in a world as strange and yet strangely familiar as the one into which Alice stepped through the looking glass.'

Carreiro is similarly an enchanter by "the bringing back in changed form of things already known; as the defamiliarization of the familiar." Nabokov, Carreiro, and ultimately Banville himself transport their viewers into a realm that is at once familiar and yet somehow different.

Nabokov is best known as an author for his complex plots and clever wordplays as well as for the incredible diversity of his interests which ranged from Pushkin, to chess, to tennis, to entomology, especially the study of Lepidoptera.<sup>6</sup> Carreiro's search for imagery has led him to such varied sources as old master paintings, Meissen figurines based on *commedia dell'arte* characters, medieval manuscripts, Mughal miniatures, and early zoological illustrations.' Carreiro "cannibalizes" the entire spectrum of art history. "I like to explore an area (such as Renaissance painting) and investigate it until it is finally exhausted." Although no area of art history is sacrosanct, he prefers European painting from the fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries, where he engages in an "ersatz collaboration with painters long dead." His collaborators include Duccio, Giotto, Botticelli, Michelangelo, Titian, Memling, and Bosch.

Carreiro's method of collaboration involves collage, which he has been working with for over twenty years. Up until 1995 even his frames were collaged. His earliest collaged pieces involved sculpture that consisted of fragmented Greco-Roman figures. Carreiro has been a professor at Hunter College, CUNY, since 1986 and one of the central lessons he imparts to his MFA students is the need to create a specific methodology•

The methodology you invent is the single most important, central and personal thing that you can do as an artist. An optimal methodology exploits your strengths and turns shortcomings into assets.<sup>10</sup>

Carreiro searches through numerous art books and magazines looking for intriguing illustrations; the initial attraction to a particular image is always immediate and visceral, his poaching visual rather than theoretical. After photocopying and enlarging, he cuts the image up into a series of smaller, same-sized squares, called "tiles" by the artist, which he then looks to combine with portions of other paintings much as a Byzantine mosaicist would approach a series of brightly colored tesserae. In this manner, the artist is able to create a grid which provides the underlying geometric structure to play off against the organic shapes that he prefers. The images are copied onto transfer paper to which heat is then applied, usually with a simple travel iron. Through the heating process, the polyester wax coating is released and the image is absorbed into the porous panel support made of birch plywood. Often a close-up examination of the finished work reveals something that approximates *craquelure*, lending to Carreiro's paintings an antiqued effect. A fourteenth century fresco or tempera panel is thus transformed using twenty-first century technology.

It is certainly no coincidence that his favorite choice for support is indeed birch panel. Tempera went hand in hand with panel painting in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries in Italy, although poplar was the wood most frequently used. Carreiro selects birch because of its blond glow, which he feels complements Renaissance imagery well. The grain of the wood becomes an effective element in many of his paintings, witness *The Age of Myth* (2005), a composite of drawings by Leonardo (identifiable are fragments of the *Star of Bethlehem--Windsor Castle Collection--and grotesque heads*), alongside similar "doodles" by Stefano della Bella, Annibale Carracci, and Albrecht Durer, all in the sanguine tones favored by the old masters. Paper was rare and expensive in the Renaissance, giving rise to the proliferation of multiple images on a single sheet, a practice that is very much compatible with Carreiro's modern approach. In this work, the artist lets the wood grain suggest the rapid strokes of a pen.

As Carreiro began to expand his imagery beyond the Renaissance to include porcelain-inspired pieces (*Harlequin, Eno, Emo*), he started to use milk paint as a primer or ground for his heat-transfer imagery after experimenting with various other media. Milk paint, used historically to paint Windsor chairs, is durable and will not peel off during the intense heat

of the transfer process. In addition, milk paint allows for the matte finish and jewel-like colors that one associates with tempera, a technique favored in the Early Renaissance, one of the artist's prime reserves for poaching imagery. Carreiro uses a white primer since the yellow "glow" of the birch proves to be counterproductive to the newer imagery.

Confronting the past involves a certain amount of risk. As Mark Rothko states in John Logan's compelling drama *Red* "Courage in painting isn't facing the blank canvas, it's facing Manet; it's facing Velazquez. "" Carreiro believes in taking risks, not the least of which is asking a specialist in the art of the Italian Renaissance to provide the text for his midcareer retrospective. We both share a love for similar source material, although Carreiro is more open to the entire spectrum of world art, and both of us like to analyze form and color to ultimately decipher every aspect of a piece. Carreiro, however, does not like to use the word deconstruct; he prefers the term "dismantle." Nor does he relate to the term appropriation as applied to the art of the 1980s. Instead, he refers to himself as a *bricoleur*. The term *bricoleur* was first used in conjunction with artists by Levi-Strauss in 1966.<sup>12</sup> It is a French term that refers to a handyman who cobbles together whatever he needs from the bits and pieces he finds conveniently lying around. Jackson Barry defines the *artist-bricoleur* as the "independent, free-spirit agent of signification."<sup>13</sup> Barry goes on to state that "the most technically difficult appropriation from older paintings, as [seen in the] work of Joel Carreiro. provide[s] a textural effect in what appears to be a nonobjective work.""

Carreiro's paintings often resemble complex spiraling artistic timelines. Like the Surrealists, too, he takes pleasure in the fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on the dissection table." His work often exhibits the same irreverent sense of humor as found in many of the Surrealist artists. "A spiral can consist of Christ's arm, a horse's tail and the Madonna's veil. There is always the potential of things to form in unexpected ways."<sup>16</sup> Carreiro tends to gravitate towards religious imagery, which he attributes to his Catholic upbringing. However, it is almost impossible to isolate any specific overt Christian symbol. Detached from their original source, the images become open to a more fluid interpretation. Such is the case with *Fate and Luck* (1990) a collage of elements from a single source, in this case Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* (Rome, Sistine Chapel). Carreiro has transformed the giant fresco into something totally different. He has coaxed out an entirely new essence where the final image no longer retains a sense of its original narrative context, but still conveys its uplifting, floating quality. The luminous waterfall reds of *Echolalia* (2001) suggest "blood, life, and religion;" the very same might be said of a painting by Mark Rothko.

Typically, however, Carreiro selects multiple artists from different periods to combine and blend. He likes the term "transformation" when describing his creative process; his source imagery is still recognizable, but it is now small enough to be given new life. He always leaves

enough of the original image to retain its associations; otherwise it would just be a chunk of color. The viewer, however, should not expect to identify the source, as "assembled parts from highly representative source paintings become abstractions at a distance."<sup>18</sup> Carreiro can never leave a work of art alone; he wants to see where it can go. He cuts and reassembles to create a new language. As the artist states:

Images reach across to find each other to form unlikely alliances. One image group grows into another to suggest new shapes. Things say yes or no to each other; they are sympathetic or antagonistic to each other. My approach involves both arrogance and homage. Art objects presume a privileged position in that they reflect society at a high level, but they are also malleable and available for transformation."

Carreiro's transformative process finds a parallel in nature. "Science reveals only a sliver of the world. The universe is driven by dynamics that are beyond our comprehension; it is radically unstable and noncontinuous. It is characterized by change, transformation and the unknown."<sup>20</sup>

Carreiro has an intuitive regard for what to put together, but ultimately he always allows the images themselves to dictate the direction of the painting. For example, Mughal imagery, stiff and formal, results in an absence of curves and swirls. "The image itself suggests what it can do over time and how it will eventually evolve. Imagery that is designed by someone else requires you to be inventive, flexible, and responsive. It is like surfing; you have to adapt all decision-making to a powerful external force, the wave. Your ego has to make room for something else."<sup>21</sup> Carreiro prefers images that have completely defined identities and contours because they can be restructured. He once experimented with Impressionist imagery but found it to be too "fuzzy." Something as loose as Impressionism does not provide enough resistance; the imagery does not fight being taken apart.

His most recent exhibition from 2009 focused on medieval manuscript illumination. Carreiro is attracted to these manuscripts because they are themselves "collages" that combine high and low culture, the sacred and the profane, the minuscule and the monumental, the ridiculous and the deadly serious. Their borders, composed of myriad drolleries, must have completely amazed and bewildered the delighted fourteenth century viewer as Carreiro's work similarly dazzles the contemporary spectator. Carreiro's works often resemble the carpet pages of medieval breviaries and psalters. The possibilities for inventing combinations of motifs, visual riddles, and magical knots are literally limitless. Carreiro admires the medieval organization of space—a veritable *horror vacui*—where little of the whiteness of the vellum is left unadorned and the decoration often undermines the seriousness of the text. "[Medieval] marginalia represents one of the earliest sources of autonomous artistic self-consciousness."<sup>22</sup> *Portal* (2009) mimics medieval illuminated

initials, the denseness of the central motif serving seemingly as a window to the past. *Metaphysica* (2008) consists of a series of snail-like spirals offering humorously jarring juxtapositions of medieval life that recall the famous "lovers in a bubble" from Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (Madrid, Prado, ca. 1515). The gigantic but friendly biomorphic blue behemoth, which lends its name to *Leviathan* (2009), is juxtaposed to the delicacy of its intricate, pixilated-like environment. The overall effect is decorative, a word that does not offend Carreiro. The same term has been used to describe many of his sources, including Islamic and Mughal miniatures, Far Eastern art and even Matisse. To seek out the decorative, along with his indifference to academic theory as validation, is a radical position for artists to take these days, however. But then Carreiro has never been known to shy away from risks. Several of the paintings from this exhibition are relatively small in size, as is appropriate to their original source material, but many of Carreiro's paintings are large; *Time Being* (2007), for instance, measures 94 x 188 in.

*Time Being* occupies a unique position in Carreiro's art. It is the only time he has made a work in homage to another artist's oeuvre. *Time Being* not only conforms to the measurements and composition of Barnett Newman's *Vir Heroicus Sublimis*<sup>23</sup> (New York, MoMA, 1950-51), it also features five "zips," the zip being the hallmark of Newman's work. Carreiro's zips, however, are made from the very same imagery that appears in the shape-clusters that complicate the field, whereas Newman's are defined against the ground solely by color and tone. The comparison may seem somewhat perverse at first glance when viewing the two works together. Newman painted his ground a magisterial cadmium red, whereas Carreiro's background is luminous black. In addition, Newman's canvas is spare and reductive while *Time Being* is quite complex and inclusive. For both artists, however, the capacious rectangular format, so typical of the New York School, proves expansive and liberating. Carreiro, like Newman, has always been interested in figure-ground relationships, although in Carreiro's work these relationships are constantly in flux. In terms of philosophical approach, Newman felt isolated, whereas Carreiro reaches out towards his surroundings; his clusters floating against the dark ground seem to approximate the onset of the Big Bang. As usual, we return to Nabokov "The puddles looked like dark holes in the sand, apertures onto some other heavens that were gliding past underground." This sense of a world existing just behind surface reality influenced Carreiro's use of shapes suggesting portals or apertures in *Time Being*. Both painters see the nature of art as being heroic.

Carreiro's approach is partially the result of his own experience as an MFA student at Hunter. His own mentors have since become colleagues and friends. He cites Sanford Wurmfeld, Robert Swain, Vincent Longo, and the late Doug Ohlson as particularly influential. Ohlson is described as an "American Zen teacher, a Midwestern Swede who was generous and noncondescending. Even when addressing students, Ohlson always spoke to

you as one artist to another."<sup>25</sup> From Ohlson he learned to start with a simple and modest project, never to assume the grandiose. He quotes Ohlson's familiar refrain: "Till your own ground," meaning to focus on developing your own vision. Longo's paintings often involve squares that interact complicatedly with one another. He suggested that Carreiro examine the "shape-clusters" of Tiepolo, which had an impact on works such as *Fate and Luck* and *Time Being*. Wurmfeld and Swain are both influential Color Field painters who use the grid. Carreiro himself continues the long tradition of mentoring as director of Hunter's impressive MFA program and at gallery exhibitions in conjunction with colleagues and former students.<sup>26</sup>

*Joel Carreiro: Seeing Things* reconciles the past with the future in a manner which represents the most positive aspects of both. The creative process is cyclical, with art visualized as an ongoing discourse between generations. "In the tradition of the *bricoleur*, I create an image/language/world from bits and pieces that may in themselves seem slight, outdated or opaque, but contain unexpected potential in a juxtaposed and reconfigured state."<sup>27</sup> Good art, after all, should never be predictable.

#### ENDNOTES

1. James Elkins, *The Object Stares Back* (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1996), 11-12. My thanks to John O'Toole for editorial suggestions.
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 1.
3. All the works cited are in the collection of the artist unless otherwise indicated. Zembla served as one of the fictional settings for Nabokov's masterpiece *Pale Fire*, a combination of prose, verse and poem in four cantos. The source for *Icebergs in the Snow* is *Lolita*. Thomas Frosch refers to Nabokov's heroes (Pnin, Humbert, Kinbote) as "rare birds." See Thomas R. Frosch, "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*," in *Nabokov's Fifth Arc*, ed. J.E. Rivers and Charles Nicol (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), 176.
4. John Banville, review of Michael Maar, *Speak Nabokov*, *New York Review of Books*, **LVII**, 12 (July 15, 2010), 46. Banville is not the first to determine that enchantment is part of the novelist's appeal. See Thomas R. Frosch, "Parody and Authenticity in *Lolita*," 184. Frosch states: "Nabokov's fascinations are romantic ones; he writes about passion, Arcadia, individualism, the ephemeral, the enchanted, imagination and the power of art." Carreiro has just completed a painting entitled *Enchant*.
5. John Banville, *New York Review of Books*, 46.
6. Nabokov was also a well-respected taxonomist and collector who mounted his own butterflies. Nabokov's interest led him to do serious work in discovering and distinguishing new species of butterflies. A genus of butterfly, *Nabokovia*, was later named in his honor.
7. *Good Sinner* (2008) features images of entwined serpents.
8. Conversation with the artist, October 23, 2009.
9. Richard Waller, "The Abducted Image," in *Repicturing Abstraction*, ed. Steven S. High, George Cruger, and Rande Humfrey (Richmond, VA: Marsh Gallery of Art and Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University 1999), 16.
10. Conversation with the artist, June, 17 2010.
11. John Logan, *Red* (London; Oberon Books: 2009), 19. Logan's play, first performed at the Donmar Warehouse in London, fictionalizes an important episode in Rothko's career—a commission to design a

- series of murals for the restaurant in the newly built Seagram's Building in New York City.
12. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966), 16-33.
  13. Jackson Barry, *Art, Culture and the Semiotics of Meaning*, 21.
  14. *Ibid.*, 117
  15. This widely quoted metaphor is the work of Isidore Ducasse (1846-70), who wrote under the pen name of Comte de Lautreamont. The quote comes from Lautreamont's *Les Chants du Maldoror* (1869). See Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Surrealism* (London, Phaidon, 2004), 28. My thanks to Emily Braun for identifying Ducasse as the author.
  16. Conversation with the artist, September 29, 2009.
  - 17 Tracy L. Adler, "Seeing Red: the Project," *Red*, ed. Michael Fehr and Sanford Wurmfeld (Cologne: Salon Verlag, 2004), 13.
  18. Joel Carreiro, Artist's Statement, *Joe/ Carreiro: Spellbound*, Osilas Gallery, 2007
  19. Conversation with the artist, June 17 2010.
  20. *Ibid.*
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. Carreiro, cited by Paul Bochner, *Marginal Illumination* (New York: Garage Editions) 2009. Carreiro's appreciation of medieval imagery was enhanced by a reading of Michael Camille, *Images on the Edge. • The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1992).
  23. The title, *Vir Heroicus Sublimis* was inspired by a radio announcement that President Truman had relieved General MacArthur of his command in Korea, an action much applauded by the artist. See Daniel Wheeler, *Art Since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (New York: Vendome Press, 1991), 53.
  24. Vladimir Nabokov, "Sounds" in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 15.
  25. Conversation with the artist, June 17 2010.
  26. See Dominick Lombardi's art review "Artists Under the Influence: The Mentor Show," *New York Times*, March 28, 2004. Lombardi reviews a gallery show featuring five successful relationships between professional artists and their students. He particularly cites the powerful relationship between Carreiro and Hunter alumna Allyson Spellacy.
  - 27 Carreiro, as quoted in *Marginal Illumination*, artist's statement at the end of the catalog