

Introduction (Catalogue)
Santiago Rueda Fajardo
2017

Jorge Riveros is one of the most important abstract geometric living artists from Colombia. Always following the golden mean or golden ratio as a mathematical and aesthetic principle, he has devoted his life to painting as a spiritual practice, as a way to elevate life and dignify reality, and as a meditative and discreet way of living.

Riveros is an intergenerational artist, difficult to classify, who does not entirely fit within the existing genealogies that describe Colombian art. Riveros belongs to a culture characterized for being singular in its conditions and diverse in its geography; rooted to its history and traditions, contradictory in its actions; dated while at the same time innovative in its methods.

To understand a painter like Riveros in this context, and to understand this part of Colombian art history, it is essential to remember that abstraction came late to the country. It arrived in the mid-1940s and thanks to the painter Marco Ospina, who would perform his work alone, facing the incomprehension, intolerance, and indifference of an excessively conservative tradition that lasted until the following decade when Edgar Negret and Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar appeared.

The general rejection of abstraction and forms of artistic innovation and experimentation would only come to an end in the hands of Marta Traba, the Argentinian art critic, writer, and polemicist of great importance for the history of art in Colombia. As is well known, Traba dedicated her efforts to the understanding of a modern artistic language in Colombia. Though in her efforts she left behind many important artists, she transformed the local art scene forever. Three abstract artists—Negret, Ramírez Villamizar, and the Colombia-based German painter Guillermo Wiedemann—would be called upon to further develop the dialogue she initiated.

Riveros, of a later generation, started as a figurative painter. His progressive transformation as an abstract artist came to completion while living and working in Germany, just at the moment when avant-garde art was literally erupting in Colombia. It was there where he transformed into the painter we know today.

The paintings preceding his trip to Europe, reveal an artist debating between abstraction and a realism with an expressionist tendency. We could not think that Riveros finds a less urgent climate in Europe than the one he left in Colombia. Germany, divided in two, lived the tensions of the Cold War, under the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. It is important to recognize these facts because Riveros's paintings can neither be removed from the European rationalism, nor from the unknowns and existential questions about our civilization and the future of humanity, where abstraction became a tool for looking at the human condition in depth rather than a shelter.

At the same time, not many countries enjoyed such an intense and provocative art scene as Germany. Fluxus, Joseph Beuys, Gerhard Richter, and Sigmar Polke were active and staged a

revolution in the comprehension and practice of art. There was also room for artists such as Riveros to launch investigations parallel to those made by artists on the other side of the Atlantic, like Ellsworth Kelly, Frank Stella, and Ad Reinhardt.

In Germany, Riveros had the opportunity to get to know the work of the Bauhaus-affiliated painters Josef Albers, Vasily Kandinsky, and Paul Klee, among others, from whom he extracted valuable lessons. At the same time, as mentioned by Leonel Góngora, Riveros “closes the circle”—he recognizes within European geometric abstraction a similarity to the superb and sophisticated indigenous legacy of the South American continent, and he dedicates himself to synthesizing the elements of this cultural legacy with the rational grammar of geometric abstraction. His search for indigenous elements was made in relative solitude, as German cities did not house a group of Colombian or Latin American artists as big as those in Paris or Madrid. For an entire decade in Germany (1965-1975), Riveros exhibited with artists such as Horst Rave, Alf Bayrle, and Walfried Pohl. He was part of the group Semikolon, the Rheinland and Westfalen Art Association in Düsseldorf, and he was invited to join Konstruktives Gestalten [Gestalt Constructivists], based in the city of Bonn, where he exhibited on several occasions.

When he returned to Colombia in 1975, he encountered a very different country to the one he had left, a country that faced progress and at the same time the great crisis of the '70s. These political realities were reflected in a volatile art scene where the most varied types of realism - academic, expressionist, photographic, socialist- coexisted with conceptualism, as well as gestural and geometric abstraction. The latter was practiced by a younger generation influenced by North American painting: Álvaro Marín, Hernando del Villar, Edgar Silva, Fanny Sanín, and Manolo Vellojín. Riveros connected with a new generation of artists younger than him and with whom he coincided in his experimentations. He also finds a positive dialogue with the works of Negret, Ramírez Villamizar, Carlos Rojas, and Antonio Grass, who had progressively begun to consider the links between the geometric abstraction and pre-hispanic legacy.¹

At the same time, Riveros became a professor at the prestigious School of Fine Arts at the Universidad Nacional, where he started teaching portrait and drawing classes; his generosity and dedication stood out. In the 1980s and 1990s, his work underwent new changes as it approached a lyrical abstraction, where the brushstrokes, a wide range of dark colors, archetypal elements, and architectural and ornamental forms, become more evident. His production of the period is extensive and shows an artist venturing into improvisation, spontaneity, and expression.

In an unexpected shift, Riveros has returned to his sketches made in Germany four decades ago—many of them drawn with pencil on small pieces of paper and cardboard—to continue exploring the essence of painting. From these sketches he continues to work incessantly with, in

¹ The standing of these artists didn't mean that geometric abstraction was predominant. Its effect and importance could not compare to the reception it got in neighboring countries such as Brazil and Venezuela. In the 1970s it was still an experimental language, and although it was Colombia's primary contribution to international competitions such as the Sao Paulo Biennial, it remained only moderately accepted in Colombia.

his own words, “ruler and compass,” to return to a pure and concrete abstraction that looks fresher than ever today. Riveros “reappears” at a time when the historical revision of Latin American art, and its diffusion through exhibitions and publications, is increasingly present in the United States and Europe. We then find an artist that has been, and is, in a sustained and active dialogue with abstraction understood as an international language. In the case of Riveros, he is linked to European predecessors—Albers, Klee, Kandinsky, El Lissitzky—and influenced by his South American roots as well as the members of his generation—Rojas, Sszlo, Ramírez Villamizar.

The artist affinity with today’s aesthetic sensibilities, the current interests and tastes, is recognizable, because through direct and simple statements, and at his 84 years, he has always practice the art of painting as a defense of reason, a meditative tool, a platform for spiritual elevation. and a defense against the weaknesses of the human being.