

## Exhibiting the Decolonial Option: Museum Interventions by Pedro Lasch and Demián Flores

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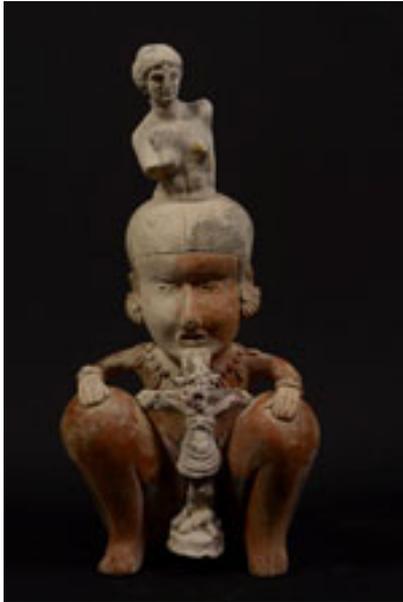
Pedro Lasch, *Liquid Abstraction/Abstracción Líquida* From *Black Mirror-Espejo Negro: The Photographic Suites*



Installation Shot from Demián's Flores *De/construcción de una nación*.  
Photo: Jennifer Reynolds-Kaye



Pedro Lasch, *Human Landscape & the Picturesque / El Paisaje Humano y lo Pintoresco* From *Black Mirror-Espejo Negro: The Photographic Suites* (2007-2008)



Demián Flores, *Santa Sangre* 2012, Ceramic.

One basic concern for visual practitioners and scholars working within the decolonial option is how to look decolonially. Can you put on a pair of decolonial glasses through which you begin to see the world differently? What would those glasses reveal about the structure of the image-world around us, from an individual art piece to an entire field of vision? How can we even begin to develop a vocabulary around decolonial seeing, and what are the stakes of looking through a decolonial lens?

An obvious place to begin might be museums, as they are sites that privilege the act of seeing and encourage sustained viewing. Museums are also institutions rife for decolonial interventions given that they have been imbricated within both historical colonialism as storehouses for expropriated objects and coloniality, and barometers of beauty and good taste. Since the rise of Institutional Critique in the 1970s, particularly after Fred Wilson's landmark *Mining the Museum* (1992-1993), museums have gone on the offensive and commissioned artists to act as curators in performing an institutional self-critique. Two recent exhibitions resulted from such artist-cum-curator collaborations with museums: Pedro Lasch's *Black Mirror (Espejo Negro)* and Demián Flores's *De/construcción de una nación*. In each of these exhibitions, the artist juxtaposes pre-Columbian sculpture with European-style oil painting. In *Espejo Negro*, on display at Duke University's Nasher Gallery of Art from May 22, 2008 until January 18, 2009, Lasch positioned authentic artifacts from Nasher's permanent collection facing towards reproductions of Spanish Renaissance masterpieces underneath a

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sheet of black glass. Several of the original paintings displayed on the walls were featured in the same museum as part of the concurrent exhibition, *Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Phillip III*. On display at the Museo Nacional del Arte (MUNAL) in Mexico City from May 15, 2012 to February 12, 2013, *De/construcción de una nación* juxtaposed ceramic forgeries of West Mexican sculpture with original nineteenth-century oil paintings that permanently hang in galleries 20 and 21 as part of the *Construcción de una nación* exhibition.

In each case, the artist-curator initiated a visual exchange between the sculptures and the paintings to encourage the viewer to rethink the history of Spanish Conquest and colonialism, as well as its continued aftermath. I argue that each of these exhibits promotes an alternative *historiocularity*: a neologism that turns away from the logocentrism of *historiography*, or how history is written, to the study of how history is made visible. Though a clunky term, the basic premise of historiocularity is that visual and material culture shape our understanding of the past both by testifying to the very existence of destroyed civilizations and by imagining the aesthetic sensibility of these cultures. The main purveyors of historiocularity are the objects that have survived the bottleneck of colonialism and now exist primarily within institutions of colonality, namely the university gallery, national museum, or private collection. The pre-Columbian past is made visible through the public display of these objects and their pictorial circulation in exhibition catalogues and scholarly texts.

In *Black Mirror (Espejo Negro)*, Lasch engages in a prolonged visual meditation on the obsidian glass most commonly associated with the Aztec god Tezcatlipoca. The dark surface is a space for physical and mental reflection, and it acts as both barrier and site of engagement between the pre-Columbian sculpture and reproduction of the Spanish painting. The viewer is equally imbricated in this relationship between pre-Columbian and Spanish visual expression, and is physically aligned with the three-dimensional sculpture staring too into the dark abyss.

Whose history is being made visible, that of the painting or the sculpture? Take the third image of Suite 3, titled "Human Landscape and the Picturesque," for example. In the darkened void of the black mirror, the imagined "Gentle Indians" (Miguel Cabrera or Mexican School, from a series of "caste paintings," 1763) exchange glances with two ceramic sculptures, one a "Seated figure with helmet" (100 BCE - 300 CE) and the other a Moche "Warrior Figure Vase" (200-500 CE) from Peru. Here, two pictorial systems confront one another as the three-dimensional sculpted warriors appear abstract and highly stylized compared to the "realistic" rendering of kind natives. The militaristic confronts the peaceful as two world visions collide in the transparent glass surface. Perhaps the history that is made visible is this very battle between these visual systems and conceptions of the pre-Columbian past. The Jalisco and Moche warriors testify to a ballistic state, while the painting portrays a pacified native awaiting conquest. These competing visions of the past are the visual equivalent of similar battles waging on in written historical studies; however, here they are firmly anchored by the existence

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of the surviving object itself.

How is history made visible? In the exhibition *De/construcción de una nación*, Demián Flores posits that the version of history made visible in nineteenth-century academic history painting is a fictional construct. It is an idealized image of the pre-Columbian past based on interchangeable iconographic elements that are just as mediated as the three-dimensional sculptural assemblages that accompany them. The painter has artistically pieced together a random assortment of Aztec, Mixtec, and European imagery on the canvas rather than a factual depiction based on archaeological remnants from specific sites. A version of history is made visible and made legitimate through the continued display of these accoladed paintings since the late nineteenth century. By putting forgeries rather than the authentic West Mexican sculptures on pedestals in the museum, Flores exposes what I call the "origin(ality) myth," in which all pre-Columbian sculptures maintain an aura of "originality" from some ancient point of "origin." This lodging of all pre-Columbian visual and material culture in a hazy, temporally distant past reinforces the "denial of coevalness" and erases the fact that many European institutions, like Oxford University, were actually established before the creation of the "ancient" pre-Columbian objects within it.

This temporal designation of "ancient" combined with the indiscriminate lumping together of pre-Columbian civilizations results in a condition I call *Mesoamericanidad*. Both exhibits, while examining the historiocularity of pre-Columbian visual and material culture in museums and oil paintings, fall into this trap of *Mesoamericanidad*, where the pre-Columbian objects lose their geographic, temporal, and cultural specificity and serve as stand-ins for an *idea* of Mexican antiquity. Of course, no artist or curator can account for every nuance of every object in the museum, and certain institutional constraints may also prevent a full decolonial analysis of the provenance and provenience of each pre-Columbian object. Nor is it necessarily within the expertise or purview of the artist to know every fact about each object. Instead, I would contend that the limitations of the artist provide an opening for the art historian to exercise her training and knowledge.

Historiocularity, the study of how history is made visible, relies on an essentially art-historical methodology and can only work, as in the case of Lasch's and Flores's exhibitions, when the art historian has training in pre-Columbian sculpture, European painting from Renaissance to the nineteenth century, and contemporary art movements like institutional critique. The current disciplinary divide in art history along temporal and geographic boundaries discourages this type of expansive training; for this reason, I would suggest that we reevaluate the structure of the discipline to respond better to these kinds of artistic practices. Furthermore, the different approaches and methodologies are too constrained by their temporal designation. For example, contemporary art historians for the most part forgo the anthropological and archeological approaches that their colleagues in ancient art commonly employ. If *Espejo Negro* and *De/construcción de una nación* suggest ways of seeing through a decolonial lens, perhaps

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the exhibitions can also help us decolonize the discipline of art history by helping it shed its temporal and geographic biases.

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