

Irma Arestizábal

DESPUÉS Y ANTES

Each and every one of us would swear by the Lord that we see in the iris or the rainbow a multiplicity of colors although reality teaches us that there are no colors in said rainbow but only light and water.

Antonio Vieira, *Sermon of the Most Holy Sacrament*, 1645

When we look at things, we assume that the reality we see is familiar and instead we discover another that is foreign to us. And we build a bridge between what we know and what astonishes us. Perception often deceives. Seeing based on habit blocks our vision and clouds the ability to discover other points of

view which also exist in reality but escape us – until our attention is explicitly drawn to them. As in real life, the work of Nils Nova poses the conundrum of not being able to distinguish between what we see and what appears in our mind's eye. What we see and what we imagine become a tangle of confusing realities and the appearance of the world can no longer be objectified.¹ Nils Nova engages metaphysical opposites: presence and absence, being and not being, darkness and light. He delights in leading viewers astray with false perspectives, false mirrors and doubles that do not exist except as his creations.

He is well-versed in a variety of media: painting, installations, photography and video, which he combines and superimposes with great precision, producing a complex system of relations that subverts our sense of space and time. He does more than investigate the distinction between reality and fiction; he expands our visual experience of the real world by revealing some of reality's multiple orders, for instance, when he enlists the device of duplication. In the video *2 Elvis 4 You* (2006), the artist himself interprets the pop icon's songs, appearing as a multiplied Elvis double, inspired by Andy Warhol's multiple screenprints. And in *M&N* (2007), a photograph that slips around the two sides of a corner, the viewer sees Peter Lorre, the murderer in Fritz Lang's 1931 classic *M*, looking in a mirror at the M on his back and the artist on the other side of the corner, looking at an N on his back.

This heir of the great masters of illusionist scenarios like Andrea Pozzo and Baciccio with their gigantic picture machines in the churches of S. Ignazio and Il Gesù in Rome – accomplices of Borromini's intoxicating visions in the Palazzo Spada and of Bernini's exploration of the ambiguities of architecture – also incorporates architectural elements in his installation to generate a fictional

space of perception. By changing the perception of the actual dimensions of the space of encounter between viewer and work, Nova does not just reconstruct and expand space; he actually calls its material existence into question through the use of trompe l'oeil. And all of this is achieved by simply mounting a photograph directly on the wall.

In *Después y antes* (2009) the artist flies in the face of classical perspective; he has effectively nullified our expectations of the proportions of the Latin American Pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale at the Arsenale by projecting a sense of infinity. One could say that his contribution is about simultaneously conjuring the finite and the infinite, the contact between inside and outside, between earth and heaven, the relationship between active and passive and between concept and reality, leading to a renewal of cognitive experience and a revival of curiosity.

Nova places a number of mirrors in these rooms, a device that has already delighted artists and writers from Van Eyck and Velázquez to Magritte and Luis Felipe Noé, from Góngora to Quevedo and Borges. Mirrors make us wonder, like Alice, or fear, like Borges, that the reflected image will not match our expectations. Mirrors duplicate and multiply and twist space, opening up infinite vistas for the interpretation of reality; they are a reflection of a room and its objects and they break down the distinction between the space of the viewer and the space of art. Space is projected behind the appearance of reality and its details penetrate the viewer's space. Nova creates spatial illusions that undermine conventions and are of enduring impact. If viewers accept the invitation to enter into a strange experiment in this play of illusions, inversions and reflections, they will experience their own presence and disappearance, they will see through the fascination of optical phenomena and reach into the depths of a psychological reality.

First, there's the room you can see through the glass – that's just the same as our drawing room, only the things go the other way. I can see all of it when I get up on a chair – all but the bit just behind the fireplace. Oh, I do so wish I could see that bit!

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, chapter 1, 1872.

[1] Cf. Max Wechsler in Nils Nova, *Memory Confronted*, Lucerne / Poschiavo (Edizioni Periferia) 2007, n. p.