

Sabrina Amrani is pleased to present *Visión de túnel*, the first solo exhibition by Dagoberto Rodríguez in the gallery.



Dagoberto Rodríguez first solo exhibition at Sabrina Amrani Gallery, *Visión de túnel* focuses on a new ongoing series of watercolors depicting simple futuristic architecture of a possible future, as variations around the image of the tunnel and the corridor. From these playful visions of a mechanical world built with Lego blocks emanates paradoxically a dystopic atmosphere without the slightest trace of humanity. These tunnels transport us into a space that is not real nor located. They increase the experience of gravity and spatiality, exerting a strong force of attraction towards the depths. For the Cuban artist, living between Havana and Madrid, these drawings constitute a strong working methodology. The use of watercolor is fundamental to his creative process, as a way of working, revising and archiving his ideas, which are often based on a fantasy of possibilities for any given situation. Drawing also plays an integral part, as a technical tool for artistic elaboration, like carpentry or architectural sketches. Aircraft turbines, aerospace nacelles, aeronautical structures, urban infrastructure have for many years colonized his imagination. "For Cubans, living on such an isolated island, a plane is like a bridge taking you into another dimension, like an escape window," he said about his fascination for utopia architecture and aeronautics. "However, my galaxy is right here on Earth. I want to reach a realm that's within our terrestrial parameters and social culture." Following this state of mind, *Visión de túnel* opens itself as a new chapter, since the end of his 27 years of collaboration with the historical Cuban collective Los Carpinteros in 2019, projecting the beginning of his solo career into a new episode.

The tunnel is in itself a polyphony of meanings, a polysemy which symbolizes all the dark, anxious, painful crossings or expectations that can lead to another life. Meticulously executed, the watercolors are of a monumental scale. This medium requires letting go while striking a balance between control and freedom of the gesture. Watercolour is the medium of choice for text illustration, from Egyptian or medieval manuscripts. Immersive, these drawings catch the eye, as if you could pass to the other side of the mirror or get sucked in. They only become even more credible thanks to tenfold illusionist effects that encourage this transition to another world. Dagoberto Rodríguez creates ultra-contemporary and urban narratives of a mechanical, cold and dehumanized world bathed into an electric light ... A kind of outside world, closed in itself, enigmatic, without landmarks and of which we do not know if it is dreamlike, dystopic or concrete.

Tunnels and corridors are covered and dark communication paths with no clear location, leading us through the darkness from one area of light to another. They convey the image of the irreversible, the trial or of the passage from one state to another. At the end of each tunnel, a door symbolizes its infinite nature. The tunnel is the illusion of perspective, its emblem, according to Alberti's definition of the painting as an open window to the world. Within the epic painting, the whole enigma of the world and the history of painting is at stake. It also alludes to today's racing games on our smartphones or to virtual reality, to all these windows and multiple screens that suck us into information tunnels.

In the heart of the corridor, we are between two indistinct spaces, as in transit, with no possibility to escape. While they may seem unlimited, these tunnels still hold us prisoners. Are those tunnels embodying the prison of our knowledge or of our certitudes? They have a false horizon. Wandering towards the light at the end of the tunnel as in Plato's cave, we do not know if we will come across the exit or if it is only the light towards the next corridor that guides us. It appears that those tunnels generate feelings of claustrophobia, stagnation, insecurity and perhaps also frustration. They represent the emblem of the contemporary world where all our dogmas have been overthrown and where we do not know where we are going. To quote Milan Kundera in *Identity*: "I would imagine life before me like a tree. I used to call it the tree of possibilities. We see life that way for only a brief time. Thereafter, it comes to looking like a track laid out once and for all, a tunnel one can never get out of." Foucault had already spoken in *Discipline and Punish* of "conceptual dungeons of incarceration". Those tunnels also refer to Cuba's endless history, whose future directions cannot be predicted. The son of a keen astronomer, Rodríguez grew up in Cuba in a socialist environment, a "communist science fiction", "a failed utopian state", to quote him. From Cuba's limited access to technology, he inherited a kind of "Robinson Crusoe syndrome". Having to do things by himself, step by step, through recycling and inventive resourcefulness has been his way to find a new language of expressive system. Maybe that's why all his architectural fantasies are built in Lego, a game with elementary principles and rules. Then, the Legos bricks could be disassembled, deconstructed or agglomerated to new blocks to expand at any time, like a huge construction site. This Lego world can also collapse at any moment as Cuba's communist utopia. It is also the image of the extreme fragility of today's world of images and information, where no construction is solid anymore.

Dagoberto Rodríguez's watercolors evoke simultaneously the visionary drawings of Yona Friedman's *Spatial City* (1959–60) or Constant Nieuwenhuys's *New Babylon* (1956–1974) as well as the sci-fi visions of Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) or George Lucas's *Star Wars IV Death Star* (1977). In response to the unbridled urbanization of post-war Europe, some architects began designing in the late 1950s megastructures as new models of urban planning, more mobile, more relational and in line with technological progress and new lifestyles. These futurological visions aimed to free the individual from formatting, by proposing mobility and the network as paths to emancipation. Therefore, Rodríguez's works recall the famous labyrinthine stairs of Escher from which we never know where they begin and where they end. They also remind the image of the wormhole, this shortcut through space-time, which would theoretically allow travel from one point to another, as science fiction predicted since the 1960s, being always ahead of science.

The tunnel is also a reference to all the invisible souls who worked in painful and dangerous conditions. These are spaces without air, without light, inhospitable, even inhuman. They are also sometimes death row. Thus, the railway line is also the image of the collective or social life and of the common destiny. But railway tunnels are also human prisons, where harmful and arduous human activities such as mining or tunneling occur. In this sense, the artist thinks of the drawings of the Mexican art brut artist Martín Ramírez (1895–1963). In the hope of finding a job that could feed his family, Martín Ramírez emigrated to a new El Dorado, the United States, at the age of thirty. In Northern California, he works in mining and railway construction. Subject to mental disorders, he was interned in 1931 at Stockton State Psychiatric Hospital, from where he escaped several times and returned each time of his own free will. Suffering from schizophrenia, he began drawing there in 1935 since when he became obsessed with railway tunnels. Moreover, as for the Mexican artist, the tunnels evoke the idea of an Eldorado for all migrants that risk their life by trying to take the Channel Tunnel between France and United Kingdom, even if it is dangerous. It symbolizes all the unbridled movement of populations in the hope of a better life.

When vision is impaired while driving an aircraft, a car or when the individual crosses a road or passes near bridges, tunnels or underground tracks, the loss of peripheral vision is called "vision tunnel". It is also a metaphor for the narrowness and the closure of an individual's mind. Maybe tunnels metaphorize the dogma of education, of the formatting of minds, which makes history repeating itself endlessly, generation after generation, instead of opening up to other visions and

perspectives. Today's world forces people to be on a railroad to be recognized and valued. We are caught in a unique tunnel, which will probably never cross a parallel vision. In fact, for Dagoberto Rodríguez "Millions of people cohabit in large cities, but never manage to integrate completely. Even though the world has generally become a much more comfortable place than say even 20 years ago in technological terms, thanks to cellphones, the internet and so forth, we haven't caught up socially or emotionally in terms of interaction" His tunnels, empty of all human presence are visions of a dehumanized world where social interaction is becoming increasingly rare.

In *Visión de túnel*, Dagoberto Rodríguez expresses himself through symbolic and philosophical narratives open to multiple interpretations: "My work is certainly metaphorical and symbolic, and metaphors often have profound conceptual value," he wrote. "The arsenal of objects that we interact with everyday holds huge symbolic potential for my narratives. [...] Architecture is also an object, capable of generating a language and expression"

To be continued...

Jérôme Sans

Dagoberto Rodríguez was born in 1969 in Caibarién (Cuba) and graduated from Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), La Habana (Cuba) in 1994. In 1992 he co-founded the collective Los Carpinteros. He currently works between Madrid and La Habana.

His works have been exhibited in museums and cultural institutions around the world and are part of prominent public collections such as MOMA, Whitney Museum of American Art, Guggenheim New York, Centre Georges Pompidou, Tate Modern and Museo Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, among many others.

Combining architecture, design and sculpture, his work employs humor and irony to comment on core topics in art, politics and society. Watercolor forms a very important part of his creative process, it is a way of registering and revising his ideas. Often these works reflect a fantasy of a possible conceptual situation.

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