

Abstract Art in Colombia
(on the Twofoldness of Modern Art History and Theory)

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To live in painting is still to breathe the air of this world
—above all for the man who sees in the world something to paint.

—Maurice Merleau-Ponty

“Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, 1952.

Through a careful observation of paintings by Marco Ospina (1912-1983), Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar (1923-2004), Guillermo Wiedemann (1905-1969), Judith Márquez (1925-1994), Cecilia Porras (1920-1971), Carlos Rojas (1933-1997) or Álvaro Herrán (1937-) among other artists, and knowing about their travels and displacements and the geographical references that may have been used in their works, it is feasible to understand the abstract *artistic* production in Colombia during the mid-twentieth century as the expression of an experienced territory: the type of nature that inhabits there, its topographies and topologies, its dimensions and proportions, the happening of time phenomena, the qualities of its light and its atmosphere, the moods they inspire and the stories they speak for.

For the normative narration of Colombian art history, works *by* these artists are often categorized and comprehended as corresponding to the notion of purism that *argues* for the autonomy of the work of art from the physical world; an *idea inherited* from Willhelm Worringer, André Malraux or Clive Bell, *and* supported

by Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried following the North American abstract expressionist *movement* and other paradigms of non-figurative art. Such understanding is divulged through the main bibliography about Latin American art, the academic programs of universities, and the information given by art galleries and museums, which are discursive means structured *around an opposition between* a radical modernism or a random post modern postcolonial theory that gratuitously challenges whatever appears as modernist.

Researching artistic practices in Colombia, we find ourselves upon preconceptions and expectations that follow a set of discursively legitimate values suggested by the dominant tendency of contemporary academics inclined to confront some past, confining, values. Seemingly, the interpretation and narration of history has merely tried to follow such conflictive outlooks *from* a specific moment towards its immediate past, by imposing new categories through textual elaborations. A traditional recount of Colombian art history, since the mid-nineteenth century to our days, is commonly rooted on a model of ruptures. Each chapter of this history, usually *bracketed* in periods of twenty years, appears to be understood as a dissension against its past. Compromised in this form of narration *are* a set of irreconcilable oppositions *such as*: universal/local, purism/*commitment*, modern/postmodern. For someone who may be inquisitive *about* this history, *these* dualistic schemes *suggest siding* with any of the implicated forms of assuming or defining the artistic practice. But, *sometimes*, being inclined with one or the other trend just *echoes* reductionist categories, without fully grasping that *which supports* visual images *and* enables them to communicate information and sustain significance.

This text features a geometrical abstract painting by Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar as a case study that allows *the tracing of* the ideological schemes under which abstract art in Colombia is commonly understood. It will convey *the* various intellectual possibilities that would adjust a feasible association between abstract painting in Colombia and those sensations and perceptions of an experienced territory. Firstly, it will attempt to map the existing paths of thought through which Colombian *artistic* production has been assimilated by scholars, *ideas which* have defined local and international perspectives. Additionally, it

will set forth alternative theoretical frameworks that allow conceiving artistic creation as an assessment of bodily experiences in a given territory.

I. A CASE STUDY

In a rapid account, we can say that the historical context of the mid-twentieth century in Colombia was characterised by the interdependence and dialogue among young artists experimenting with foreign avant-garde and local visual references; the establishment of specialized critics that suggested definitions for this production; the emergence of individual and institutional projects *aimed at* discussion and diffusion of art and the economic support of the private sector. This moment is known as a historical *hinge* called “modernity” — the consolidation of a collective endeavour to produce and make known new forms of visual languages, where abstract art was its outstanding paradigm.

From 1946 to 1958, the confrontation between members of the liberal and the conservative parties in rural areas brought up nearly 200.000 victims. Some examples demonstrate that, during these years, artists responded to the political situation through the invention of symbolic iconographies that alluded to the tragedy of war without anecdotic references. According to what some contemporary art historians in Colombia have deduced, what is definitively distinctive from these responses is the independence of the visual field from the *interference* of literary narratives implicated in the production and understanding of the works of art¹.

In the evening of June 11 of 1958, the opening of the exhibition ‘Abstract Painting in Colombia’ took place in a large room in the Luis Ángel Arango Library (Central Bank of Colombia) in Bogotá —a cold and rainy capital city with an average population of 1’400,000 *at that time*—. According to a press *excerpt*

¹ Based on the notion of *autonomy* of disciplinary fields suggested by Pierre Bourdieu, scholars such as Carmen María Jaramillo, Ruth Acuña or William Lopez have got on with this idea regarding the emergence of modern art in Colombia.

“the most outstanding national cultivators of this style participate in the show; a style that each day encounters less resistance, particularly from those circles *prone* to the admiration and promotion of the new”².

Abstract art events had been active for years, *and intended* to gather and make known this form of expression adopted by young artists in Colombia who were consolidating their professional trajectories³. In response to the show ‘Abstract Painting in Colombia’ the writer Clemente Airó (1918-1975) observed: “Although we are pleased to verify the imposition and acceptance of abstract art in Colombia, we have seen that the routes of geometry, of depuration through form intellectualism and tonal equilibrium, —out of any other sensible influence, of communication or of thematic— seem to dominate in a certain way”⁴. These opinions are in accordance with those of the Argentinean art critic Marta Traba (1923-1983) *as expressed in* her introduction for the exhibition catalogue. The text manifests her defence of abstract production of young artists, claiming both the necessary transformation of the public’s value judgments and the diversification of the artists’ involvement with this means of expression. She explains that spectators *were* used to *expect* to find referents *to* reality *in artworks*. Thus, she suggests that they should understand pictorial laws as independent from the real. For her, the style of the painter Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar “has, in a way, imposed the idea that abstract art is its clean, mathematical and aseptic solution of articulated planes.”⁵

For the time of the exhibition, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar was a renowned artist with growing local and international recognition, who later became an

² Noticiero Cultural, *El Tiempo*. Bogotá: June 11, 1958. P. 5.

³ The following are of note: ‘1st Collective Exhibition of Abstract Painting’ at the National Library in Bogotá, 1955 and the ‘Abstract Art Salon’ at El Callejón Gallery in Bogotá, 1956, where works of Colombian artists were shown along with screen printings by Klee, Kandinsky, Mondrian and Arp.

⁴ Clemente Airó. “Abstract Painting in Colombia” (“Pintura abstracta en Colombia”), *Espiral*, number 73. Bogotá: June, 1958. Clemente Airó was a Spanish writer and journalist who matured his literary and critical career in Colombia as director of the cultural journal *Espiral* (1944-1975) and author of several novels related to the conflictive political situation in Colombia.

⁵ Marta Traba. *Abstract Painting in Colombia* (Pintura Abstracta en Colombia), exhibition catalogue. Bogotá: Luis Ángel Arango Library, June, 1958.

influential *reference* for young artists approaching abstract art. He studied architecture in the early 1940s and soon dedicated himself solely to painting. In a trip to Paris between 1950 and 1952, he became aware of a consolidated abstract movement, being influenced by the journal *Cercle et Carré*, the Russian constructivism and the works by British artists such as Victor Pasmore and Ben Nicholson. In December of 1952, after *returning* from Paris, he showed a series of abstract paintings at the National Library in Bogotá —“an exhibition that states a new artistic stage in the country, for abstract art was introduced for the very first time”, according to the art critic Walter Engel (1908-2005)⁶. Later, in 1956, when he was living in New York, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar *had* his first solo exhibition at the Panamerican Union in Washington. Soon afterwards, the curator of the Museum of Modern Art of New York acquired one of his paintings for the museum’s collection. Also, by the time the exhibition ‘Abstract Painting in Colombia’, *which* took place in the Luis Angel Arango Library in 1958, Ramírez Villamizar received the Guggenheim Award offered by the Guggenheim Foundation in New York. Through these successful years, he *developed* a pictorial project of formal experimentation with calculated distributions of plain coloured geometrical elements⁷.

Among the works that he produced during this year, we can find the oil on canvas entitled *Green-Blue Horizon*. Green, ultramarine and black polygons unfold, spread, and are distributed around a small yellow circle placed in the centre of a rectangular format. An enlarged ringlet is created through the organization of coloured forms: heavy dark structures among large bright green planes surround a deep blue area that encloses a warm gray trapezoid containing the yellow circle.

⁶ Walter Engel. “An Extraordinary Exhibition” (“Una exposición extraordinaria”), *Espiral*, number 44. Bogotá: December, 1952. P. 15. Walter Engel was an Austrian historian and art critic who established in Colombia in 1938 as refugee from the WWII. Since 1941, he wrote regularly in journals and newspapers about exhibitions held at galleries in Bogotá. His contributions for the art journal *Plástica* (1956-1960) are significant, as early intents to make historical recounts of Colombian art.

⁷ In 1959, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar began to make relieves from white painted planks, and from 1967 onwards, he was identified as a sculptor, due to his widely renowned rusty iron assemblages.



***Green-Blue Horizon.* Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, 1958. (Luis Ángel Arango Library)**

Rectangles and trapeziums are fixed and precisely ordered as they horizontally invade the uncovered canvas. It is a wide horizontal oval movement, as in a spiral, *which concludes with* the circular midpoint. Fixed coloured equilibrated geometrical forms seem to be located on distinct depths within the virtual space of the painting, thus accomplishing a sensation of perspective that is projected from or towards the central vanishing point. The blue band that extends horizontally appears to be the line of the horizon, a breaking line that divides the space in two halves and supports the vanishing point around which orthogonal forms circulate and meet to our gaze.

The planar distribution of depths and the setting of a horizon line are means for creating a virtual space onto a flat surface. This is a typical resource for pictorial representations of immanent spaces that open upon our gaze, namely the landscape. Accordingly, in the same year of production of this work, a journalist assured that the artist “tests the formal possibilities of three-dimensional space concepts of perspective that are then applied on the two-dimensional surface. [...] The reality of this dimensional game is grasped [...] as objective form of the space itself and of its components.”⁸

⁸ Alicia Salgar Pérez. “Abstract Painting and the Academics” (“La pintura abstracta y los academicistas”), *La República*. Bogotá: June, 1958. P. 4.

The painting *Green-Blue Horizon* exemplifies the possible *link* between the idioms of abstract painting and the allusion of an experienced landscape. Its inner construction, upon a vanishing point contained onto a line of horizon extending through a panoramic view, its insinuation of relative distance of planes, and a literal reading of the colours —green and blue as land and sky—, may well allude to the observation of a landscape and its structural appearance, the architecture of the world before which we stand. Why not, a sunset or, again, a dawn, with the sun resting upon the horizon, with its glow shaped as a warm pallid trapezium. Could it be somewhere in the artist's natal village, Pamplona, to the north of Colombia, surrounded by the green, majestic western branch of Los Andes?

Marta Traba excluded this *interpretation*. Taking a look back on the artist's work, Marta Traba *affirmed* that his painting

lacks geographical nationality: it can't be supported by revealing data of national spirit. For its own benefit, it has an irretrievable artistic affiliation: it belongs to the good painting that, on one hand, triumphantly accepts and resists any analysis, and on the other hand, moves us to a purely aesthetical field where the notions of beauty, creation, force, logic and harmony set the pathway for the interest and the emotion of the public⁹.

II. BACKGROUNDS

The quoted words on the work of Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar exemplify Traba's intellectual standpoint throughout the decades of 1950s and 1960s (in the 1970s, her thoughts will shift towards *different* theoretical frameworks). Marta Traba arrived in Colombia in 1954 after having studied art history with René Huyghe and Pierre Francastel in Paris and Giulio Carlo Argan in Rome. Upon her arrival, she immediately joined a prestigious social circle in Bogotá of which the progressive intellectuality took part. At once, she published regularly in the most important *newspapers* of the country as well as in journals *dedicated* to

⁹ Marta Traba. "Retrospective Exhibition of Ramírez V." ("Exposición Retrospectiva de Ramírez V."), *El Tiempo*. Bogotá: August 3, 1958.

the arts. She also hosted radio broadcastings and TV series about art history and criticism of the latest artistic production¹⁰. She had a prolific interpretative work and developed visionary pedagogical strategies and editorial and institutional projects for the analysis and diffusion of the visual arts throughout thirty years, *until* her death in 1984¹¹. Certainly, her critical perspectives were influential for the evaluation of the artistic production, for both the artists and the public. Besides her profuse labour, her arguments were rigorous and severe, *and favoured* the notion of purism —*which* claims the autonomy of the work of art from the physical world— from which the local production would be apprehended and evaluated. During the decades of 1950s and 1960s, Marta Traba defended a definition of *artistic* practice as a purely individual activity that should resort to merely formal elements, *in order to* transcend the local anecdote and *become* universal. Under this *conceptual umbrella*, Traba *problematised* nationalistic *realist* aesthetics —inherited from Mexican Muralism—, and gave shelter to the production of young artists *who had* arrived from Europe and the United States with a range of expressive tools taken from their contact with the avant-gardes. Later, her influence allowed the reception of Latin American artists in the international market and the successful recognition of certain individualities (e.g. Fernando Botero from Colombia, Jose Luis Cuevas from Mexico, Fernando de Syszlo from Perú, Wifredo Lam from Cuba, among others), the main *reason* for the *omission* of an assemblage of political events, geographical transformations and generalized creative motivations and affects that were generating a collective shift of sensibility.

Marta Traba became the most enthusiastic advocate of abstract art as an expressive mean that engaged with the assessment and appraisal of forms,

¹⁰ See: Nicolás Gómez. *En blanco y negro: Marta Traba en la television colombiana, 1954-1958*. Bogotá: Los Andes University, 2008.

¹¹ Her legacy includes 7 fiction novels, 1 book of poetry, 2 books of short stories, 22 books of art history and theory and more than 1200 articles that appeared in local and foreign magazines, journals and newspapers; also, 7 TV programs, 2 radio broadcastings and courses and conferences given in nearly 25 universities. Besides, she managed a gallery, a library, directed a journal and founded the Museum of Modern Art of Bogotá.

For a critical recount of her biography, see: Victoria Verlichak. *Marta Traba: una terquedad furibunda*. Buenos Aires: Ed Tres de Febrero University and Proa Foundation, 2001.

colours, pictorial effects and composition elements, without referring to the objective world. In the introduction for her first book *The Empty Museum* (1958), she *suggested* a profile or characterization of *the* category of the ‘modern man’, a being conditioned by his individuality as his *site for* production. The ‘modern man’ “inclined, once again in history, to the will of the abstract”¹² explains the world *through* the invention of new forms. The existence of art is explained *by* the expression of the artist’s own rules; his individuality *articulates* a notion of style, not as a variation of a given theme, but as the creation of an entirely new theme¹³.

These arguments have led to an *expansive* evaluation of abstract art in Colombia as a *something* that is distant from the semiotics of the real world. Artistic creation should be exempt from any allusion to the specificities of its place of production; its evaluation and enjoyment, based on its formal properties, should be possible within any context. Although Marta Traba contributed to a great extent to mobilize the emerging artistic production, her radical posture permitted a number of discursive polarizations implicated in the interpretation of a work of art. A clear example is her drastic rejection *of* nationalistic aesthetics on behalf of all the new proposals that were following the rudiments of European modern movements. She *believed* that, due to the adoption of the Americanist art consolidated by the Mexican Muralism, the expectatives that the world *had for* the Latin American artist was that they must respond and serve a political compromise *based* the myth of representation, leaving aside their freedom to *participate in* art through formal languages.

¹² Marta Traba. *El museo vacío*. Bogotá: ed. Mito, 1958. p. 128.

¹³ A preliminary proposal of this theoretical stance was published two years before in a short press article entitled “The Anti-servile Genius” (“El genio anti-servil), where she puts forward a definition of the concept of the “anti-servile genius” of André Malraux. For her, the principal characteristic of the genius is the will to translate the known reality of the world to forms that comes within reach of a non-communicable mystery of that reality. Thus, establishes the importance of the genius as an independent and autonomous person, not servile to political, social or moral compromise or complacency. See: *Intermedio*. Bogotá: June 26, 1956. P. 5.

The previous arguments *sketch* a separation between *the universal* and *the local*, based on alignment *with, either*, formality or politics and abstraction or figuration. This is a decisive twofold condition that may determine the way we can see the works of art. If then, this stance was recognized by *a marking* of the processes of emergence and enhancements of modern art, today *it* defines a historical outlook to approach past *artistic* productions and, *furthermore*, to approach contemporary *practices* on the basis of the eternal *debate* between the aesthetic and the political commitment of art¹⁴.

Marta Traba denied the possibility of geographical references in the paintings of Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar and *any* interpretation of his composed geometrical figures as being *related to* the appearance of a natural landscape. This is due to a set of arguments that *refuse a link* between abstract art and the lived context. Not only Marta Traba's texts, or other essential bibliography *for* academic studies on the subject, but foreign examinations on Latin American Art also follow this outlook. *Due to* the impact of postmodernist postulates on contemporary academic research, abstract *artistic* production now is seen with suspicion because it supposedly responds to a feared modernist paradigm of art's self-referentiality.

A *clear* example is the book *Drawing the Line*, written by Valerie Fraser and Oriana Baddeley, *which* intends to contribute to the short inventory of Latin American art literature that circulates in the UK. Its first chapter deals with landscape as an important reference for modern and contemporary Latin American artists. The authors express:

¹⁴ Jacques Ranciere's arguments in his book *Aesthetics and its Discontents* are useful to revise discursive binaries through which certain disciplines have defined distinctions between aesthetics and politics, that is, the autonomy of the artistic practices as opposed to actions that may represent social conformations or communities. Ranciere defends a paradoxical status of art as an activity that suppresses its singularity by dint of its autonomy, but at the same time is able to configure communities identified with emerging sensibilities. See: Jacques Ranciere. *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.

The specificity of much Latin American painting in this field is not a manifestation of limited or provincial vision, but of an insistent reality. Any serious consideration of either the physical geography of Latin America or its ethnic and cultural diversity almost inevitably leads to a consideration of political, economical or social issues, as well as the historical origins of the persistent tensions and conflicts within these areas.¹⁵

Contrary to the possible interaction between landscape representation and abstraction, Fraser and Baddeley reject Latin American abstract *artistic* production because it refers to notions of art's autonomy, and is not concerned with definitions of identity or specific conditions of life in the continent. Their words reveal the setting *for* the categorical oppositions *of* formal-politic and abstract-figurative, on behalf of a supposed Latin American identity characterized by conflictive contexts:

Because our interests are concentrated around the Latin American features of Latin American art, or the essentially Latin American issues which it raises, we have tended to exclude works which, for example, take the processes of composition and construction as their only subject matter. Since such purely reflexive abstract art deliberately avoids specificity, it cannot be illuminated by being considered within a Latin American context. This is not to say that such art may not embody certain values, but these tend to be the values of the schools of New York and Paris, and of international capitalism.

[...]

Artists seem not, on the whole, to have been bewitched by the desire to capture in paint the transient effects of light and shadow on this stunningly beautiful and varied continent. The reasons for this are not of course that Latin American artists are insensitive to their landscape but

¹⁵ Oriana Baddeley and Valerie Fraser. *Drawing the line: art and cultural identity in contemporary Latin America*. London: Verso, 1989. P. 9.

that, as in other areas of contemporary Latin American art, the *l'art pour l'art* ethos of the impressionists and subsequent European movements is inappropriate, often unimaginable within the Latin American context. To think of the landscape of Latin America purely in terms of the visual effects of light, shade and colour is to ignore the greater part of it: any consideration of the land is charged above all with questions of occupation, ownership and use, of appropriation, expropriation, exploitation and control.¹⁶

Fraser and Baddeley's book follows the traditional comprehension of abstract art as purely reflexive, and does not consider the association between this *type of production* as one that is also concerned with natural phenomena in the landscape and *that* responds to *the* specific particularities of the context *and that* are always defining *the* perceptions and intentions of the artists. The Cuban art critic Gerardo Mosquera refers to the driving forces behind these contemporary theoretical and historical approaches:

They constitute a distinctive corpus of writing, a revision of the prevailing paradigms from the early 1960's when Marta Traba published the first book to approach Latin American art in a global manner [...] they reposition [this process] in accordance with the demands of a new period and within the framework of a critique of modernity and of the end of a tragic utopia. [...] While it may be simplistic to label this new moment as postmodern, there can be no doubt that it is conditioned by poststructuralist, cultural studies, and by what we tend to call a postmodern awareness.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid. P. 3.

¹⁷ Mosquera, Gerardo (ed.). *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*. London: INIVA, 1995.

III. FOREGROUNDS

Contemporary approaches to Latin American art seem to be, ironically, convinced of the radical modernist arguments, and struggle to challenge them *fulfilling the expectations* regarding its political commitment and its correspondence with *the* supposed identities of the Latin American *subject*¹⁸. These positions are commonly grounded on a belief of what is *meaningful* and what *it shall be done*, on the basis that the art produced in a Latin American country *should* document given complicated social, material and institutional conditions.

Alternative *frames* of thought, such as that by the philosopher Paul Crowther, consider such postures as a result of *reductionist* theories inherited from poststructuralist thinkers that have contributed with a rhetoric that interprets the visual images “as meaningful only in terms of its informational or persuasive functions in the site of class, race, and gender struggles”¹⁹. Consequently, *artistic* creation seems to involve *the* “ ‘production’ or ‘construction’ of ‘meaning’ or ‘identity’ ”²⁰ as a function of a given context. *According to this account*, Crowther argues that reductionism “adopts the glossy jargon of political

¹⁸ The artistic production in different countries grouped under a concept of *Latin American* art, has been identified according to a plan of definition of a *collective soul culture* that Félix Guattari distinguishes out from other semantic uses of the word ‘culture’, all responding to systems of modelization by general markets of power. For Guattari, the *collective soul culture* strives for a claim of an *a priori* democratic identity:

it attempted to abandon ethnocentrism, abandon a general reference to white, western, male culture, [but] what it really established was a kind of cultural polycentrism, a multiplication of ethnocentrism.

Guattari encourages dumping such definitions of culture that isolate semiotic activities from their reality. He suggests to engage within processes “that work through an aesthetic sensibility, by changing life on a more everyday level [...]”. See: Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik. *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e) Foreign Agents Series, 2008.

¹⁹ Paul Crowther. “Against Reductionism”, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (Even the Frame)*. Stanford: University Press, 2009. P. 14. Paul Crowther is professor of Philosophy at the National University of Ireland

²⁰ Ibid.

activism”²¹ making a caricature of the concern on the images’ intrinsic significance “as no more than ‘Modernist protocols.’”²² Crowther’s arguments are useful to consider the frame of oppositional perspectives that I have been enunciating, especially with regard to the pose of contemporary theories towards past *artistic* productions and certain art works that do not explicitly evince reality as a field of social and political struggle. *It is* as if categories created to classify components of reality were insufficient to describe experiences embedded in sensuous relations between individuals and their space.

For this reason, a revision of the theoretical perspectives on abstractionism will certainly have to *do away with* stable meanings from the history of art in order to recognize the assemblage of *affects* towards artistic procedures and experiences of *the* surrounding world. Moreover, *it* requires an understanding of artistic practice as one that exceeds the categorical dualisms, mainly those linked either to the autonomy of aesthetics or those concerning a political compromise. *In this respect*, an important fact *to consider* is that Colombian artists did not elaborate, or were involved in, fundamentalist plans of action to define their practice, as through manifestos or specific ideological agendas. In this sense, a term such as “abstraction” was not collectively associated with any specific ideological distinctness, whereas it was commonly associated with experimental means or processes of refinement *for the creation of* images. What should be considered then, is not a discursive historical model inherited from the Avant-gardes, but a perceptive model for interpreting the aspects of their own environment.

Correspondingly, the set of articles published in the book *Discrepant Abstraction*²³ offer readings of abstract works *from* different geographical contexts, confronting the historical perspective that tags abstract art as a response to a unique Eurocentric modernist programme based on *desires for purity*. In the introductory text, Kobena Mercer stresses the need for

²¹ Ibid. P. 15.

²² Ibid. P. 33.

²³ Kobena Mercer (ed.). *Discrepant Abstraction*. London: INIVA, 2006.

undermining the concept of 'purity' as an ideological *structure* that *emphasises* the self-referentiality of art, as Clement Greenberg *argued* when he stated that:

The task of self-criticism became to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art. Thus would each art be rendered 'pure', and in its 'purity' finds the guarantee of its standards of quality as well as of its independence.²⁴

According to Mercer, Greenberg's notion of art —*which* was of significant institutional authority during the mid-twentieth century— as self-critical and self-limited, centred *around* medium-specificity, determined the western consensus on the understanding of abstract art. The author explains that Greenberg's historical influence has been *imbricated* within a widespread contemporary discussion about the agency of the work of art as representation, "referring to both cultural acts of depiction and political acts of delegation."²⁵ Thus, except for isolated examples, "abstract art seldom features in studies of visual culture, and where 'other' stories of abstraction remain invisible on account of the attention given to representational traditions [...] the ideological building blocks of the formalist 'grand narrative' of western art are mostly unexamined when post-colonial theories privilege the literary over the visual"²⁶.

The purpose of the author is to conceive abstraction and modernity "acknowledging the impure, imperfect and necessarily incomplete agency of an elusive phenomenon whose very openness resists the narrative impulse towards closure."²⁷ Thus, he calls for perspectives that *permit* thinking abstraction as a reflection of *situated* experiences. He supports the use of the term 'abstract' in its verbal sense "to take out of", rather than as a noun "which

²⁴ Clement Greenberg. "Modernist Painting" (1961), in: Francis Francina and Jonathan Harris (ed.), *Art in Modern Culture: An Anthology of Critical Texts*. London: Open University and Phaidon, 1992. p. 309.

²⁵ Kobena Mercer (ed.). *Discrepant Abstraction*. London: INIVA, 2006. P. 19.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* P. 10

implies a finished thing"²⁸. This variation considers the openness and heterogeneity of 'abstraction' as referring to "a range of artistic procedures whose outcomes is to lay bare the basic signifying elements of form, line, and colour, on which all art is based as a medium of visual communication"²⁹.

Hence, 'abstraction' is considered as a *mechanism* used to express lived experiences; a process that *permits* the manifestation of a visual repertoire that reframes the forms of experience, as it *distances itself* from the established visual norms of representation. 'Abstraction' sets the possibility for the expressive action of codes that allude to the sensory experience of the physical world. The concept 'abstraction' or 'abstract art' comprises its verbal use —to abstract— as "a process of formation whereby aspects of the physical visual world are made into a distinctive kind of meaning on the basis of rules of making and codes of interpretation"³⁰, and through which historically specific practices are embodied. *Reminiscent* of the argument that is supported in this research, Paul Crowther argues that abstract art "can [...] be taken as a return to something more simple and primordial than that rhetoric of painterliness and self-affirmation which sometimes dominates some eras of western art."³¹

In Colombia, artists such as Marco Ospina, Eduardo Ramírez Villamizar, Judith Márquez, Guillermo Wiedemann, Álvaro Herrán, Carlos Rojas, among others, developed pictorial means that *bound* their work to the category of abstract art according to critical perspectives along time. Their vocabularies are varied and range from ordered distributions of plain coloured geometrical structures to controlled zones of colour made through layers of transparencies or undetermined *sreadings* of pigment freely expanding over flat surfaces. On account of the artists' individual concerns, it is common to find works that, in *lesser* or greater degree, are just experimental studies of colour and composition. Nevertheless, these also may well be impressions taken from real contingent references. The resulting image is the appropriation of foreign artistic

²⁸ Kobena Mercer (ed). Op. Cit. P. 19.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Paul Crowther. Op. Cit. P. 105.

³¹ Paul Crowther. *The Transhistorical Image, Philosophizing Art and its History*. Op. Cit. P. 145.

solutions that brought immense possibilities for creation, and through which it was feasible to generate echoes of the surrounding world without involving literal narrations of facts and features. Thus, the assimilation of pictorial idioms was brought through processes of elimination of literary signs or free transformations of the *appearance of their* surroundings. In some cases, the abstract elaborations, when allied to the surrounding world, were *the* result of studies of daily life objects, animal and vegetable morphology, pre-columbine design, catholic imagery or architectonic spaces from the growing cities or ancient ruins. The existing association between ‘abstraction’ and ‘landscape’ bears manifest, as both terms imply, bodily relations with the world and the expression of sensorial experiences through creative means. This alliance entails that abstract art, in the case of Colombia, could be seen, understood and divulged, not as signifier of *the pursuit of artistic purity*, but rather as the result of the artist’s *encounters* with impressions or memories of specific contexts.

Suitably, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed a set of approaches to phenomena, as revealed upon the bodily experience of a world that precedes human knowledge. His thoughts offer a valuable theoretical background for setting artistic practices as a creative processes involving sensory knowledge of the surrounding world. Introducing the book *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty confronts scientific premises and ideological categories in order to vindicate viable understandings of the world through *sensory* awareness. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the potentiality of art as an instrument of knowledge of the world, as it summons the expression of the artist’ perception of reality through “a deliberate taking up of a position”³². He posits art as an activity that, as philosophy may be, brings “truth into being” as it is the “reflection of a pre-existing truth” —that is, the world—³³. For Merleau-Ponty, modern painting renders a genuine perceptual experience of space, for our relationship to it “is not that of a pure disembodied subject to a

³² Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967. [First edition: 1945] *ibid.* P. xi

³³ *Ibíd.* P. xix

distant object but rather that of a being which dwells in space relating to its natural habitat.”³⁴

Merleau-Ponty’s arguments contradict Malraux’s considerations of modern art as the expression of *an* individuality detached from the world. Merleau-Ponty believes that precisely that ‘another world’, in which Malraux believes as the subjective creation of modern painters, is not a metaphysical entity, but “the same world that the painter sees and that speaks his own language”³⁵. This ‘another world’ is given by the set of appearances that the artist finds in the world, through which he will define himself in the experience of others.

Merleau-Ponty offers operational *mechanisms* that are useful to consolidate an analytic perspective from which cultural products and their link to a bodily experience of the physical world can be revised. Attempting to grasp those qualities inherent to Colombian landscapes that are expressed through pictorial means is a work that solicits a method to seize visual information. This aspiration demands a theoretical approach that permits a philosophical understanding of artistic practice as attached to the experience of the surrounding world, and an interpretative methodology to review a survey of visual and formal elements in a set of works of art. Merleau-Ponty affirmed: “Painting thrusts us once again into the presence of the world of lived experience”³⁶. Apart from his suitable argumentative construction sustaining the inseparable link of artistic creation and the experienced world, he also suggests pragmatic modes for engaging in historical and interpretative studies on the works of art and the processes that gave rise to them:

in the presence of a painting, it is not a question of my making ever more references to the subject, to the historical event (If there is one) which

³⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” in: Galen Johnson. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetic Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Illinois: Northwestern University, 1993. P. 88-89. P. 42

³⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” in: Galen Johnson. *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetic Reader: Philosophy and Painting*. Illinois: Northwestern University, 1993. P. 88-89. P. 93.

³⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The World of Perception*. Op. Cit. P. 69

gave rise to the painting. Rather, as in the perception of things themselves, it is a matter of contemplating, of perceiving the painting by way of the silent signals which come at me from its every part, which emanate from the traces of paint set down on the canvas, until such time as all, in the absence of reason and discourse, come to form a tightly structured arrangement in which one has the distinct feeling that nothing is arbitrary, even if one is unable to give a rational explanation of this.³⁷

IV. HORIZON

The horizon leans forward...

—Maya Angelou, 1993

The theoretical paths through which Latin American art has been comprehended were briefly addressed in this text: from Marta Traba's modernist frame structured upon notions of purism and Eurocentrism, to contemporary international responses to these ideas aiming for an art production that reflects particularities of Latin America concerned with identity features and conflictive contexts. This effort has tried to demonstrate the divergence between ideological positions regarding this or that path of thought: one that rejects interpretation linked to aspects that may be external to the visual properties of the work of art, and another that rejects the significance of the purely visual character of works of art for its creation as *well as for* its interpretation.

By *tracing* those intellectual possibilities, I wish to have mapped the theoretical conditions in the local and the international fields that *should be confronted when engaging a historical research of Colombian art*. I proposed to pursue an alternative theoretical *scheme* based on various concepts from *aesthetic studies*, which will allow *for the conception of* artistic creation as an appraisal of bodily *sensory* experiences of, both, the artist and the observer —works of art as transactions with reality.

³⁷ *Idid*. P. 73.

Rather than stating definitions of terms to be applied to certain works of art, I desire to weave contexts and productions among an interpretative scheme that is concerned with the *engagement* of the artists, the works of art and the spectators with the world in which they operate as receivers or emitters of sensory experiences that once gathered artists within an impulse to convey light, darkness, humidity, dryness, distance, exuberance, spaciousness, density, altitude, horizon, contrast, heat, coldness, intimacy, belonging, freshness, immensity, intensity, memory or nostalgia. This effort *tries* to challenge discursive distinctions of abstraction/figuration, purism/compromise, universal/local, modern/postmodern, willing to settle on a historical moment in which determined artists produced a collective *deviation* through new forms engaging reality, which contemporary artists and contemporary spectators can also participate *in*.