

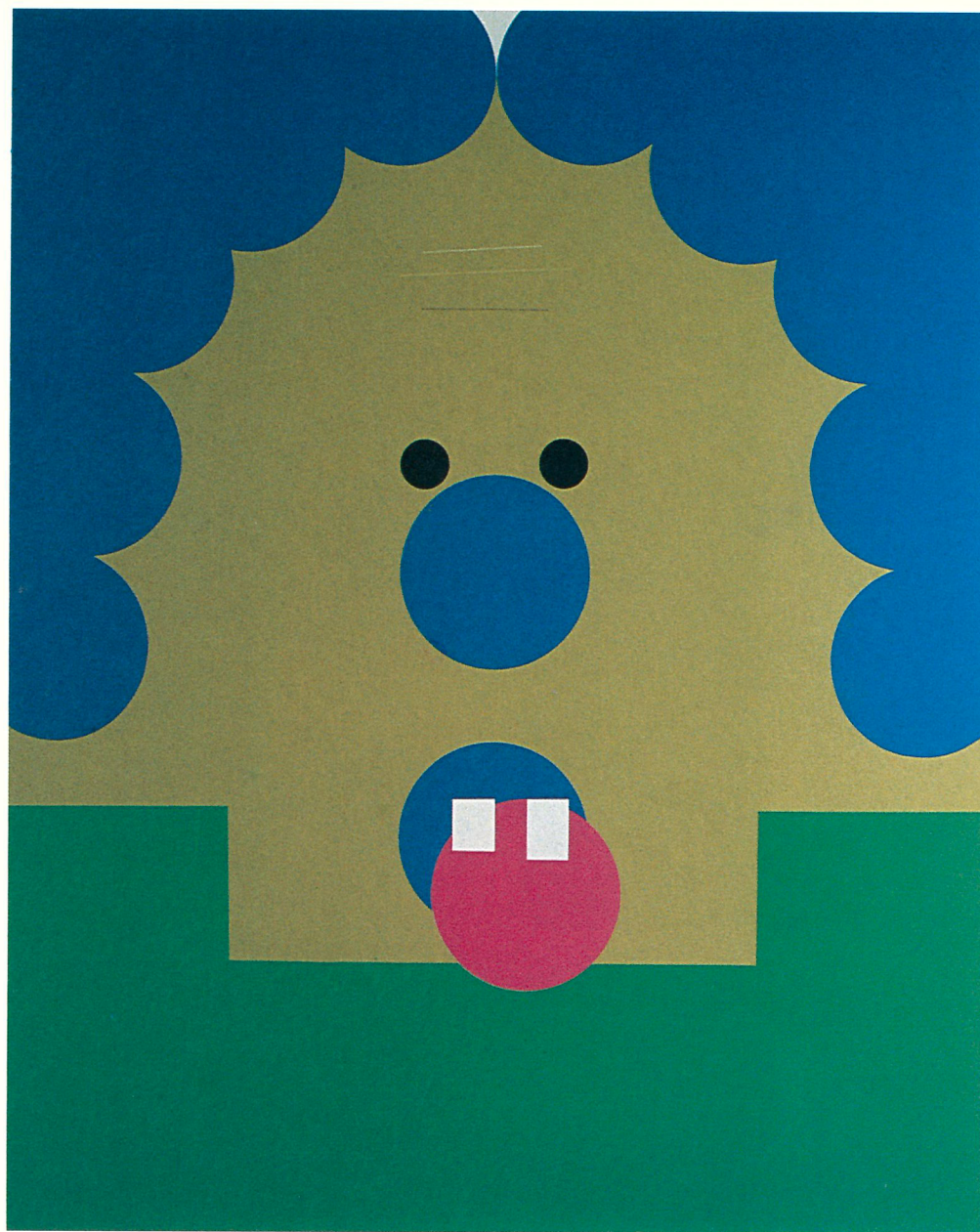
Juan Bolivar

Educated at Central St Martins College of Art and Design, London, and Goldsmiths College, London. Recent exhibitions include: *Reduced*, Century Gallery, London, 2003; *Godzilla*, (curator), Hertford Road, London, 2003; *Lexmark European Art Prize*, Eyestorm Gallery, London, 2003; New Graduates Room, *Royal Academy Summer Exhibition*, London, 2003; *Blondes Buy More Peroxide*, (curator), 1 000 000 mph, London, 2002; *Sunset Beach*, Mobile Home, London, 2000.

Hombre 2003

overleaf:
Bushman 2003

courtesy the artist
acrylic on canvas



THE QUESTION for painters working since the 1960s has remained the same. How does one move beyond the perception that all serious painting is merely a footnote to the endgame of abstraction? The narrow and exclusive narrative that 'high' Modernist ideology drew around the neck of painting may look absurd to contemporary eyes, and yet, it co-opted so much of the history of painting into its fiction that even fifty years after its apotheosis, it continues to be a force (or should that be a *farce*?) to be reckoned with. It has taken many years for painting to get over its personal relationship with a twisted and abusive cold war ideology. It still bears the scars of the marriage, and, emotionally bruised, it is unsure of its relationship with its own past. Which bits of a rich and complex history are still viable, still relevant, particularly now, as digital technologies increasingly articulate the architecture of the visual realm?

On first viewing, Juan Bolivar's paintings might appear to provide a typical answer to such questions. From the 1950s onwards, under the influence of Pop, artists have woven content from everyday culture into the texture of painting. The 'appropriational strategy' rewrote the terms of Greenbergian Modernism by building on its terms of defeat. Believing that popular culture could no longer be held at bay, the artist gave up any pretence to be a *generator* of images and became instead the critical *curator* of popular culture. Atypically however, Bolivar's images build not on that sense of defeat, but on the *open possibilities of engagement* with a variety of media. His images do not result from a digital *cut and paste*, but from a playful re-engagement with the graphics package and the painted surface.

In these paintings, there is an historical step back into the *practical* strategies of formalism. Bolivar generates the content for his paintings on a computer – the semblance of a face emerges as he plays with an alphabet of primary shapes and colours. Where once, the 'process' approach to the medium was presumed to lead inevitably towards an ever-narrowing range of expression, here it leads towards a form of figuration that toys wistfully with the heritage of abstractionism. The faces that emerge are not *portraits*, but what Bolivar terms "*facialities*". As titles such as *Hombre* suggest, Bolivar's faces gesture towards recognisable stereotypes. However, they are not hand-me-downs from popular culture re-contextualised into the space of painting, but are tied implicitly to a formal process of production that negotiates the hybrid border between the digital and the painted.

Once a '*faciality*' has asserted itself, Bolivar translates it to paint and canvas. Given that it is now relatively simple to produce large, high resolution digital outputs, presenting the image through the medium of painting invites an obvious question: why paint? The answer lies in the mangled threads that remain of painting. 'Output images' are spectres. They are without a material body of their own. The output image has only a *tenuous* relationship with the material that supports it in the world. One does not look at a television and wonder about the relationship between the screen and the image. One does not often look at a billboard and marvel at the relation between the image and the printing. One does not often look at one's holiday snaps and think long on the relationship between the figures on the beach and the paper on which that image sits. In contrast to *output culture*, painting has a tradition of viewing, a *space of attention* that is quite different. The dialectical relationship between the image and the facture of the paint that delivers it to the viewer, has always been central to the *space* that a painting generates about itself. When viewing any figurative painting, one's attention slips from the representation to the *means* of representation. At one moment, one experiences paint, at another, the thing depicted; never does one see both in the same gaze. There is always that little dance to be enacted before a painting. One moves close in and then retreats. You take in a piece of the work and then get back to look at the whole. Your eye scans across the surface; seeing paint close to, an image further off. You glance from the side, as you read the title, refocusing your perception and associative thoughts. You turn before leaving, seeing it all in one from a distance.

This ritual dance is the space that painting, and its history, generates around itself. Bolivar's *hybrids* work with this space. At the apex of the viewer's orbit around the painting, one sits in the space of the image. As one comes close to, one moves into the space of flat and meticulously handled *paint*. For a moment, one is in the world of 'hard-edge' abstraction – before being rudely ejected from it with a joke – a big, silly face, pulled at the funeral of painting.

Others have been somewhere like here before of course. A generation ago, Philip Guston divorced himself from deadly serious, and increasingly joyless, abstraction, to rip it up in an orgy of 'bad painting'. The humour in Bolivar's hybrid painting is similarly disarming. There is something not quite *proper* here, this is an in-between space: neither the correctness of the formal

painterly tradition, nor the correctness of the post-modern narrative. This is *incorrect* rather than 'bad' painting. It blows raspberries as it toys with the semblance of Pop and appropriation; it smiles wryly as it sidles up to the dialectical tradition of painting. Locating the line that divides simple *irreverence* from the strategic humour of *subversion* is always difficult. Bolivar keeps us guessing, and these works are stronger and more intriguing for that ambivalence.

Jaime Stapleton

