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The Divine Geometry of Chocolate: Artist's Essay

Mariángeles Soto-Díaz

Abstract

The artist discusses her series of paintings, *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate*, using a reappraised notion of the universal in the context of contemporary Latin American abstraction.

Key Words

art, chocolate, contemporary abstraction, formal, universal, Latin American, Other, painting

1. Universal Layers

This series of paintings, *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate*, treats chocolate and abstraction as signs of pleasure. I pursue this act of sublimation as a formal exchange with the notion of universality, imagined as fields of melting points.

I begin by invoking a notion of the universal that exists with the sense of promise, ideas and aspirations of the European and Latin American avant-garde, in which the modern imaginary used abstraction to articulate a Utopia. European and Latin American versions of the universal reflect how specific modernities came into being in particular historical contexts, political junctures and, not least, power differentials. Therefore their universal geometry is rendered contingent by specific points of coincidence and departure. In this geometry I imagine the Bauhaus adjacent to the Grupo Ruptura and Joaquín Torres-García's Universal Constructivism, to Neo-Concretismo, Madí, Los Disidentes and other avant-garde groups. [1]

Many questions arise for *any* notion of the universal: What constitutes its imaginative realm of operations? What are its hues, edges, categories? What is the shape of its abstract totality, the texture of its hypothetical unity?

For some critics, such as Ariel Jiménez, Latin American artists have always tried to insert themselves into a universal history, a move he characterizes as a "necessary utopia." [2] No doubt, it requires utopian thinking to formulate one's place within a legacy of erasure. Hegel's account of universal history eliminates Latin America, relegating it to a state of "immaturity." Unfortunately Hegel was not alone when he claimed that "as a land of the future Latin America has no interest for us, because the philosopher does not make prophecies." [3] One of the ironies in the asymmetrical territory of universal history is that, as Jiménez suggests, while Latin American artists tried to insert themselves into this territory to little or no avail, many European and North American modernist counterparts nourished their work with aspects of "primitive," "underdeveloped" art and culture, and with great success. [4]

From the periphery, one of the many tactical strategies used by artists has been to evoke precisely that "land of the future" by articulating the terms of such utopian imaginary. For Mari Carmen Ramírez, this "utopian imaginary" not only countered the prevalent mischaracterization of Latin America as an "exotic

no-place of the European imagination" but was *art itself*, an embodied form of participation for the masses, and enjoyment, pleasure. [5]

One can imagine, then, that the universal may not always spring from Hegel's corner or from the regulating forces of power differentials. Latin American artists during the 1950s articulated a different kind of universal. As Carlos Basualdo wrote,

Deprived of power from the start, generations of South American intellectuals have been insistently imagining a "universal" that does not reproduce the dominant discourses in the political and economic centers of power, imagining, that is, a sort of "universal of pure thinking" that would encompass all cultures and emanate from no particular place. [6]

While acknowledging that the promise of universal aesthetic truths has collapsed on multiple fronts -- not least by implying a subject that would not, did not, and could not speak for the Other -- Basualdo resists the impulse to fully reject the notion of the universal. Reexamining the idea that there are no universal aesthetic absolutes and that *any* notion of the universal is inherently flawed, Basualdo provides his "universal" as an alternative to the culturally coded universal that privileged particular frames of reference while excluding others. Distinct from the kind of modern "universal" deemed problematic in the postmodern paradigm shift, [7] Basualdo's "universal" thrives not through absolutism but through the power of *imagining*. Basualdo's "universal," therefore, is all-encompassing and generative: a space for intellectual and creative work. Having grown up inspired precisely by the promise of such space, both in its virtual and factual manifestations, within the cityscape of the Latin American "universal" modernism in architecture and art rendered possible by the Venezuelan oil boom, I can attest to the lure of such imagining.

However tempting it may be to adopt Basualdo's notion of the "universal," the question of whether his re-articulated "universal" amounts to more than a nominal difference generates many unsettling questions. Is his "universal" of "pure thinking" and "no place" dangerously close to previous incarnations tangled with a transcendental ideal? Does it obscure other questions needing attention? How did Latin American artists dealing with abstraction really conceive the freedom of their Utopian spaces? What is the relationship of abstraction -- and of the position of Latin American abstractionists -- to politics? Lastly, we must ask whether the intellectual and creative "universal of pure thinking" can indeed transcend place, history and difference.

2. Universal Sense

Essential to my work on *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate* is another dimension of this "universal," one that arises through materiality and the senses. The process of collecting a range of flavors, identifying tones within chocolate's hue, the texture, sheen, percentage and type of cacao, the undertones and aromas: for me, all this found a place between research and abstraction. The liberal use of browns and excessive use of

impasto variations invite the viewer to feel the paintings in not just visual terms. As the eyes follow the topography of marks carrying excess oil paint, the dense movement of the palette knife activates the *sensation* of chocolate regardless of the viewer's formal training in "modern" abstract art. I am interested in eliciting visual perceptions that slowly shift into tactile ones.

Experiencing the paintings through what Fred Orton calls the double play of surface matter and subject matter can be useful as a way to explore this kind of universality in *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate*. [8] The appearance of surface matter, its texture, embodies on a basic level the materiality of its substance, the brown oil paint sitting matter-of-factly, unapologetically, on the surface of the canvas, the index and record of the artist's movements. On this level, asserting and denying the flatness of the picture plane while allowing the viewer to focus on the subject matter (including the painting's excess beyond impasto, the pleasure it yields), which drives the abstraction to concrete form, is part of the mechanism by which a denser reading is suggested.

I am not interested in mimesis, that is, in *representing* chocolate. What matters is the maker's and the viewer's *sensation* of it, hypothetically, the anticipation of pleasure, its melting point, in more than one sense. *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate* underscores the parallel states of matter in paint and chocolate as unique substances: their liquid form (hot chocolate); their overflow, excess, melted drip, solid repetition (bonbons, grids); their decadence and excess (frosting, expressionist mark).

By inhabiting a rational space between subjectivity (as possessing awareness of the subject's sense of the world) and embodiment (as mediating the world through the body and through the physicality of the series), I seek to render matter and material into idea. Through a decidedly feminist gesture, I also revisit pleasure as a critical overlap in the substances at play (painting and chocolate).

Pleasure, I propose, must be considered beyond the Freudian "pleasure principle." Not pleasure subsumed by desire, but pleasure as mediated (and meditated) through the conceptual realm. For this to occur, the cold chocolate grinder in Duchamp's *The Large Glass* must be moved out before the bachelors. Though this enigmatic piece has been interpreted as a "critique of ordinary logic," [9] it is through *The Large Glass* that Duchamp arrives at the decisive and unambiguous thought that he "could avoid all contact with painting." [10] This severance from painting is not complete: the "chocolate grinder" in *The Large Glass* is a leftover image from Duchamp's painting past. Duchamp's problematic relationship to painting's materiality and pleasure is also suggested through the gendered nature of his notes, as he describes how the "Bachelor grinds his own chocolate" (erotic solipsism) and how the "...Bride's domain is strictly separated from that of the Bachelors by a 'cooler.' Above the earthbound, 'fat and lubricious' Bachelors hangs the Bride, 'an apotheosis of virginity,' who has reached the 'goal of her desire' (the exhaustion of painting) and emits a cinematic blossoming...the sum total of her splendid vibrations...the orgasm which may (might) bring about her fall." [11] The

tragic fall of the Bride (the body, painting) is dramatic, its symbolism arguably unwarranted. The appearance of the vestigial chocolate grinder in *The Large Glass*, and the former's relationship with pleasure are ultimately doomed. In *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate* I recover a critical engagement with the rich traditions of painting while reifying the affirmative corporeality of pleasure.

Chocolate has a long, complex past, filled with as much pain as pleasure. Its tones and promises were already known by the Olmec, Mayan and Aztec peoples. From its early usage as currency, as medicine, as a liquid offering (xocoatl, Mayan), to its seduction of seventeenth-century Europe while sugar and the sweat of slaves were added to the mix, cacao has always had a semi-bitter history. [12]

3. Antropofagic Practice

Cacao's contingent history might also conjure other places in which the "universal" moves to a differential plane, as might be the case with cacao production. The *Theobroma Cacao* plant ("nourishment of the gods" in Greek) only grows 20 degrees north and south of the equator. The unique origin of Venezuelan cacao, with its evocative designations as *Criollo* (native) or *Forastero* (foreign), inspire *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate* on a connotative level, though such distinctions soften at the level of process. It is peculiar that the cocoa tree variety *Forastero*, accounting for nearly 90% of the world's production of cacao, is the most resilient plant, while the largely Latin American *Criollo*, the most susceptible variety, yields the least quantity but the most prized cacao beans, characterized by their delicacy and aroma. [13]

Differences cast aside, cacao's alchemy of polyphenols, magnesium, theobromine and serotonin conjures a divine geometry at the encounter of foreign and native, old and new worlds, where, incidentally, the distance between modernity and postmodernity can melt, be devoured (and savored), not unlike chocolate. As the encounter of old and new worlds generates plenty of material, I am imagining it as a productive "universal" point, one that engenders chocolate and contemporary abstraction as I know them. The "universal" here is reconfigured as vast, topical, and tropical, decoded through Brazilian poet and philosopher Oswald de Andrade's evocative term, *antropofagia*. [14]

Andrade's "*antropofagia*" does not (literally) mean cannibalism, as the word's etymology would suggest: i.e., antropos: human/man; fagia: eating voraciously. Rather, the term calls for unrestrained cultural consumption in a reversal of the mythical power structures in the colonial encounter. It renders the reception of the dominant modern discourse of the First World not as passive, as would be expected of the "noble savage," but as an act marked with creative intellectual agency, a conscious "rite that attempts to express a mode of thinking, a vision of the world." [15] Andrade encouraged Brazilian artists to "strangle dominant culture," specifically foreign art forms and theories, to dissect these and extract from their interstices the "palpant matter" which should be

...devoured, critically digested, to create something new...The metaphysical operation that is evident in

the rite of antropofagia is the transformation of a taboo (the Freudian notion of taboo -- what is untouchable, the limits) into a totem...Carnal turns into volatile matter and creates friendship. Affective, love. Speculative, science. Life is the act of devouring... [16]

Though not entirely guided by Andrade's metaphysical views, I assume *antropofagia* with its mighty provocations. Looking back and through colonial encounters while projecting itself forward with a creative impetus, *antropofagia's* insatiable appetite endures, far from exhausted.

Despite criticisms that have been raised for the movement of *antropofagia*, [17] I regard the practice as fertile territory, not just for Brazilian but for Latin American artists, more generally. Andrade's *antropofagia* refuses to dwell in irony and yet it is far from innocent, defying what Richard Dyer describes as the "seemingly neutral, universal position supported by Enlightenment thinking...the logic supported by racially and sexually specific understandings of a mind/body dualism that links mind to a white, male, inherently rational European model..." [18] Connecting geometric planes on the peripheries in which modernism is befriended by postmodernism, *antropofagia* opens up the territory through its inclusive principle.

The question emerges here of whether such *antropofagic* spaces could serve as corrective proxies to the modern "universal." For it is through *antropofagia* that I can imagine a "universal" that privileges pleasure over cultural domination, ludic contradictions over absolute truths. In my own *antropofagic* rite, abstraction is not reduced to a Greenbergian conglomeration of formal elements whose pictorial limits outline the entrenchment of a discipline. Rather, it is *poesis* intertwined with "speculative science." Most importantly, if abstraction still operates as a "taboo," I transform it into a secular totem. If abstraction is off-limits, I redraw its boundaries. The *antropofagic* rite retools encounters while suggesting possibilities. Through its practice, noun and adjective turn verb (i.e., *antropofagia* + *antropofago* = *antropofageando*), unsettling the eternal recurrence and logic of "universality," turning the "...carnal into volatile matter and creating friendship." Empathy allows me to engage modern dreams of universality and the "sensible universal" [19] while deconstructing them, a process which exposes both the liminality and the generative potential of cultural production itself. I close by relocating Ad Reinhardt's *25 Lines of Words on Art* [20] into the tropical realm of cacao, in light of the above:

4. Chocolate for Ad (After Ad Reinhardt's 25 Lines of Words on Art)

1. ART IS CHOCOLATE. EVERYTHING ELSE IS EVERYTHING ELSE.
2. ART-AS-CHOCOLATE. CHOCOLATE FOR ART. CHOCOLATE BEYOND ART. CHOCOLATELESS ARTIFICE.
3. ARTISTS' CHOCOLATE. CHOCOLATE ARTISTS. CHOCOLATE'S CHOCOLATE.
4. CHOCOLATE THAT "CANNOT BE TAKEN HOLD OF, " THAT

"CANNOT BE SAVORED, " THAT "CANNOT MELT."

5. CHOCOLATE ABOUT WHICH NO ORIGIN CAN BE NAMED.

6. CHOCOLATE AS NOT AS A LIKENESS OF ANYTHING IN THE KITCHEN.

7. CHOCOLATE AS EXPERIENCE AS MATTER AS IDEA AS TASTE AS PLANE AS DELIGHT.

8. CHOCOLATE AS DEVICE, DIAGRAM, EMBLEM, FRAME, GAME, SIGN, SPECTACLE, ETC.

9. CHOCOLATE AS EMPTY. GEOMETRY AS INEXHAUSTIBLE. EMBLEM AS OLMEC ARCHETYPE. FRAME AS (OF) MIND. SIGN AS FOREPLAY. SPECTACLE AS PALPABLE.

10. CHOCOLATE AS ABSOLUTE AND PURE PLEASURE, INDULGENCE, URGENCY.

11. CHOCOLATE AS A REGULAR, REPETITIVE, TEXTUAL, EVERLASTING NOTION.

12. PREFORMULATION, POSTFORMALIZATION, FACTORY, FINE CHOCOLATE.

13. FORMS INTO UNIFORM INTO CACAOFORM. STYLE AS THEOBROMIC RECURRENCE.

14. DARK AS IRRESISTIBLE. COLOR AS BROWN, ALL COLORS, FULLNESS.

15. SPACE AS CHOCOLATE PIECES, BARS, BONBONS, CAKE, FROSTING, FIELDS.

16. CHOCOLATE ROOM FOR PSEUDO-EUCLIDEAN GEOMETRY, FLATNESS, TEXTURE, MATERIALITY. PLEASURE IN CONTRADICTION.

17. MONOCHROME AS VASTNESS, DEGUSTATION, ANTICIPATION.

18. CAKE TOOLS THAT CAKE OUT CHOCOLATEWORK.

19. MATTER ONLY TO THE TASTE.

20. THE SIMPLEST RECIPE FOR ARTISTIC EXCESS.

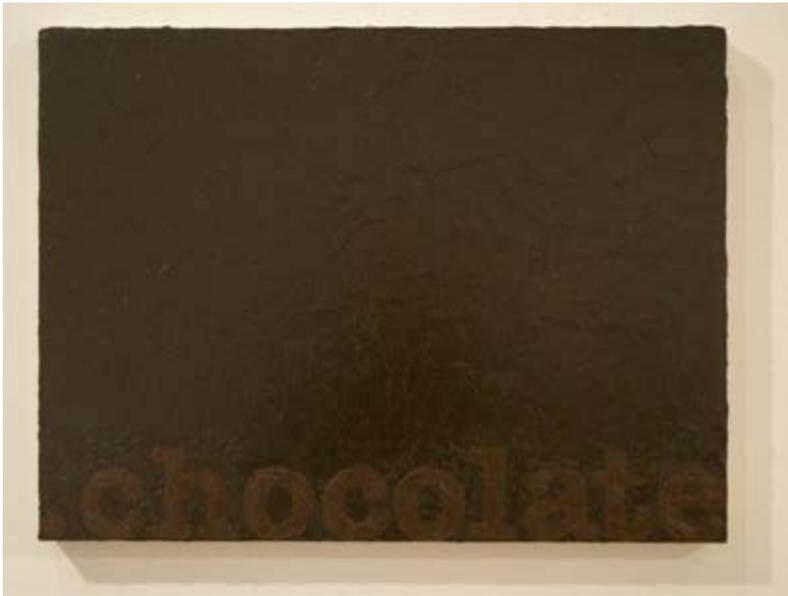
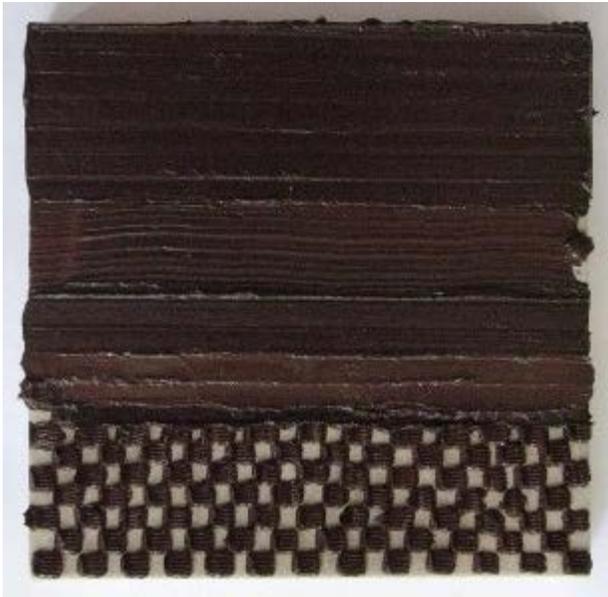
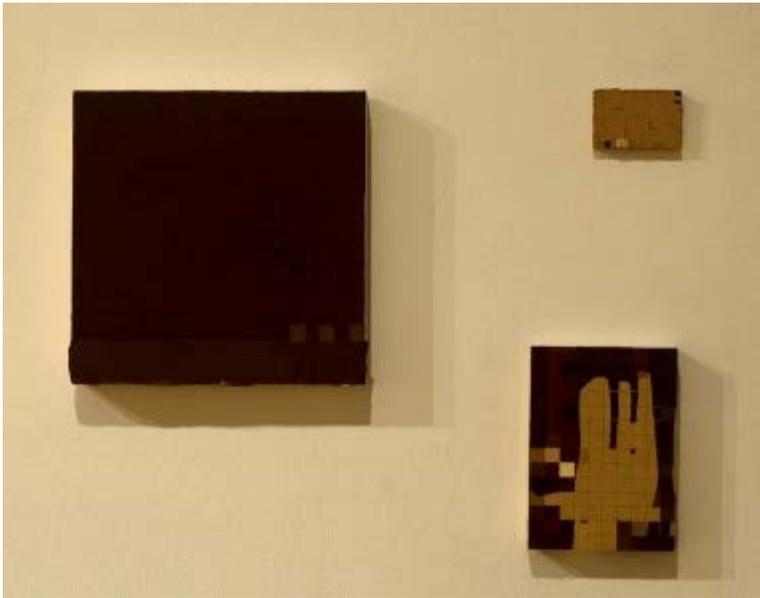
21. THE MOST DECADENT ROUTINE TOWARDS OVERINDULGENCE.

22. THE MOST COMMON MEAN TO THE MOST UNCOMMON EXTRAVAGANCE.

23. THE DIVINE METHOD OF TRULY UNIQUE ORIGIN.

24. THE COMPLETEST FULFILLMENT FOR THE PUREST DESIRE.

25. THE MOST TROPICAL UNIVERSAL PATH TO THE MOST UNIQUE TOPICAL CHOCOLATE AND VICE-VERSA.





All images are from *The Divine Geometry of Chocolate*, 2006-2007. Oil on canvas.

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Endnotes

[1] This geometry includes also philosophical vertices that emerge from categories that organize experience and from judgments that unify representations. See Dorothea Olkowski, *The Universal (In the Realm of the Sensible): Beyond Continental Philosophy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p. 62.

[2] Ariel Jiménez, "Neither Here nor There" in *Inverted Utopias*, eds., Mari Carmen Ramírez et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 247.

[3] G. W. F. Hegel, quoted in Enrique Dussel, "Eurocentrism and Modernity," in *The Postmodernism Debate in Latin America*, John Beverley, Michael Aronna, José Oviedo, eds., (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 70.

[4] Stephen Polcari, *Abstract Expressionism and the Modern Experience* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[5] Mari Carmen Ramírez, "A Highly Topical Utopia: The Avant-Garde in Latin America" in *Inverted Utopias*, ed. Mari Carmen Ramírez et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 3.

[6] Carlos Basualdo, "Raw Meal", *Artforum*, Vol XXXIV, No.8, April 1996; p. 35.

[7] For an excellent, exhaustive analysis of the "universal" as it pertains gender in contemporary art, see Penny Florence's book, *Sexed Universals* (New York: Allworth Press, 2004).

[8] Fred Orton, quoted in Alison Rowley and Griselda Pollock, "Painting in a Hybrid Moment," in *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting*, ed. Jonathan Harris (Liverpool:

Liverpool University Press), p. 44.

[9] Juan Antonio Ramírez and Alexander Tulloch, *Duchamp* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998), p. 146.

[10] Dalia Judovitz, *Unpacking Duchamp: Art in Transit* (California: University of California Press, 1998), p. 66.

[11] Richard Hamilton, quoted in Louise Bourgeois and Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005) p. 96.

[12] Michael and Sophie Coe, *The True History of Chocolate* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007).

[13] See the International Cocoa Organization, www.icco.org.

[14] Oswald de Andrade, quoted in Andrea Giunta, "Strategies of Modernity in Latin America," in *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera. (London: International Visual Arts, 1995), p. 58.

[15] "Oswald de Andrade's Manifesto," in Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 313.

[16] *Ibid.*

[17] These include Roberto Schwarz's mischaracterization of antropofagia as naïve in *Modernism and its Margins*, Anthony Geist and José Monleón, eds., (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1999), p. 206.

[18] Richard Dyer, quoted in Dorothea Olkowski, *Feminist Interpretations of Maurice Merleau-Ponty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 75.

[19] Dorothea Olkowski, *The Universal (In the Realm of the Sensible)*, p. 2.

[20] Ad Reinhardt, "25 lines of Words on Art: Statement (1958)" in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art*, Kristine Stiles and Peter Howard Selz, eds. (California: University of California Press, 1996), p. 90. A selection of the original lines reads as follows:

4. PAINTING THAT "CANNOT BE TAKEN HOLD OF," THAT "CANNOT BE USED," THAT "CANNOT BE SOLD."

5. PAINTING "ABOUT WHICH NO QUESTIONS CAN BE ASKED."

10. PAINTING AS ABSOLUTE SYMMETRY, PURE REASON, RIGHTNESS.

11. PAINTING AS CENTRAL, FRONTAL, REGULAR, REPETITIVE.

13. FORMS INTO UNIFORM INTO FORMLESSNESS. STYLE AS RECURRENCE. STASIS.

17. OUTLINES, MONOTONES, BLANKNESS, QUIESCENCE, PREMEDITATION.

19. MATTER ONLY TO THE MIND.

25. THE MOST UNIVERSAL PATH TO THE MOST UNIQUE AND VICE-VERSA