



Photo: Xavier Toubes

XAVIER TOUBES

The Infinite in Finitude

Glen R. Brown

Traditional landscape painting – due to the physical boundaries of the canvas, panel, or wall on which it is rendered – always involves a certain negotiation between the infinite and the finite. The endless sky and the expansive horizon cannot be precisely mirrored in painting but, on the contrary, only incompletely represented through selection of a fragment to stand for infinitude. In this respect, traditional landscape painting is fundamentally rhetorical: the act of painting a landscape naturally involves recourse to a more complex level of representation than that of mere mimicry. Synecdoche, the rhetorical device through which the whole of a subject is implied by representation of only a part, is the landscape painter's standard means of depicting a subject. All two-dimensional renditions of landscape seem to hold this trait in common, since their imagery is nearly always contained by a finite surface. Sculpture, on the other hand, because it plays essentially on the relationship between finite physical form and infinite surrounding space, appears able to engage the landscape in more direct terms: so much so that the experiments of the earth, and site artists of the 1960s and 1970s now seem to us to have been very logical steps in the evolution of sculpture towards its fullest potential.

The ability of landscape sculpture to blend with the infinite is a moving visual trait, but it can be something of a liability in other respects. To the degree that sculpture participates in the literalness of the infinite its rhetorical capacity necessarily diminishes. In the case of ceramic sculpture, the literalness of landscape is perhaps even more naturally felt than in other sculptural media, since clay is physically of the ground. What, after all, is a ceramic sculpture but a mound of earth surrounded by an endless sky? For Spanish artist Xavier Toubes, however, this conclusion is evidently an irritant, the spur to a number of series of ceramic sculptures in which strategies have developed precisely to resist the literalness of the infinite. These strategies involve everything from bringing the practices of painting to bear upon the creation of sculpture to drawing attention to limits upon the actual space surrounding sculptures: in effect framing sculptures by displaying them in particular contexts.

Paradoxically, Toubes's motive in stressing the finite qualities of his works is not to banish



the infinite from them but, on the contrary, to invoke the infinite more persuasively, albeit in non-literal fashion. Much of his work relates thematically to incommensurable elements: the endless cycle of decay and regeneration; the simultaneous elusiveness and pervasiveness of dust; the minuteness yet absolute determinative power of DNA and other microscopic elements that are as yet unfathomable; the fickleness of desire and the indescribable exhilaration of risk. These intangibles can acquire the character of the sublime, but Toubes implicitly recognizes that the key to evoking the sublime is not the infinite in itself but rather the infinite in representation: the infinite as something awe-inspiring yet still partially graspable in human terms, rather than something that simply exceeds all comprehension. His works, therefore, can be viewed as attempts to bend the infinite towards language: to represent the infinite rather than merely manifest it.

With this as an implicit motive, Toubes's sculptures have long displayed two inter-related strategies. The first involves countering exteriority with the impression of an endless interiority; and the second, partly a consequence of the first, consists of stressing conceptual over physical infinitude. Perhaps the clearest examples of these practices can be found in a series of colossal heads that Toubes has produced periodically for more than twenty years. The latest additions to the series – a grouping that the artist, in a play on the title of a Wallace Stevens poem, has named Exquisite Nomads – are massive, closed forms. Eyes, noses and mouths are

reductive, seeming to engage exterior space only grudgingly, while the textured skin and billowing shape suggest a solitary cumulus cloud, soft but with definite contours that give it the character of a discrete shape. The effect, like that which the philosopher Hegel observed in the great pyramids of Egypt, is of prodigious forms that conceal within themselves a mysterious inner meaning. The tiny punctate eyes of the Exquisite Nomads are less mirrors of the soul than nostrils that seem to inhale the surrounding atmosphere, interiorising its infinitude. Like the event horizon of a black hole, the surfaces of these huge heads seem boundaries through which things can pass only inward in infinite accumulation.

This endless interiority, unlike external infinitude, is not a physical trait but rather a conceptual effect. Ceramic heads and real heads are both surrounded by a literally endless space, and sculpture is not compelled to reference a space of any other kind.

ILLUSTRATIONS -

- opposite page - "7 Cabezas" - 2008 - ceramic - plinths - wheels - approximately 107 x 57 x 47 cm each
 below left - "Polvo1" - 2002 - 26 x 29 x 85 1/2" - fired clay - maiolica - lustres
 centre top - "Lozas" - 1999 - 186 x 75 x 180 cm - fired clay - glazes
 center bottom - "Cheas" - 1996-7 - 130 x 105 x 117 cm - fired clay - maiolica - lustres
 below right - "Aguas largas" - 1992-3 - 150 x 60 x 175 cm - fired clay - glazes

Photo: Peer v. d. Kruis



In fact, the vast majority of representational sculpture is not. There are, after all, sufficient advantages to exploit in the consonance of the space of the sculpture and the space of the world, most importantly the fact that this consonance creates a sense of the object's immediacy, its unequivocal presence before the viewer. Toubes, however, takes the path of the sculptor Giacometti, and strives for an effect that is less of presence than of intangibility: a boundless nothingness that somehow inheres within form, detached from the purely objective relations of the exterior world to which that form must also, if only in more menial terms, succumb. Whether described as consciousness, spirit or something else along those lines, this intangible quality is intimated by form rather than manifested in a literal sense. It is figurative rather than figural.

This distinction between the figurative and the figural, the rhetorical and the mimetic, has been made explicit in a recent series titled *Boys*, the works of which are, among all of Toubes's sculptures, perhaps the most landscape-like in orientation. The artist's evocative description of them as "landscapes of question,"

The aspect of conflict in some of the *Boys* sculptures is manifested as a tension verging on outbreak in physical terms, a potential tangling of the opposing forms in a kind of combat. Other pieces, such as *Boy*, *Brain*, *Wave*, seem to relate to the aftermath of rather than prelude to violence. In this piece, a moulded figurine, reminiscent of an eighteenth-century Meissen porcelain hunter, tips his hat to a collapsed form, as leaden as the slab upon which both are situated. The evidence of the kill, with all its grotesque associations, is however rendered strangely graceful by the artful arrangement of the forms in opposition: on the one hand, the purity, almost transcendent quality, of the lustrous white hunter who assumes the verticality of the living and of the soul; on the other, the darkness of the fallen prey that yields to the horizontal, the weight of the body and death. While the series arose from Toubes's reflection that the destiny of boys today seems increasingly to involve aggression and violence, the works do not condemn in the particular but rather seem to observe, through a veil of pathos, the general. Like Goya's *Desastres de la Guerra*, Toubes's *Boys* react to immediate events but project



however, indicates the tentativeness, the irresolute nature of the terrain that they represent. Compositionally, they are consistent. Upon a horizontal plane two dissimilar forms confront one another, seeming to interact in some rudimentary fashion despite the pronounced differences between them. Some are representational, although these range from the gently stylized to the heavily abstract and vary from depictions of complete figures to slightly sinister suggestions of body parts: decapitated heads, or extracted hearts, brains, or lungs. Other forms are more arguably non-objective, despite retaining some traces of biomorphism that lend them an animal-like air of aggression. Often the paired objects generate something of the visceral conflict of energies, non-explicit but palpable, that is manifest in one of the earliest of modernist non-objective paintings, Franz Marc's *Fighting Forms*. Like Marc, Toubes requires nothing more than inchoate entities to suggest a collision of wills.

their musings onto the universal. The boys are a memento mori but also acknowledgements of the strange appropriateness of reminders of death within the history of art. "Beauty and death," Toubes observes, "touch each other sometimes. There is a sense of loss, destruction and purpose that all dance with each other, and beauty comes."

The idea of beauty arising from the relations among loss, destruction and purpose suggests a profundity in ephemerality: a theme taken up by the series *Polvo*, which Toubes began in 2002 during an artist residency at the European Ceramic Work Centre in 's-Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands (where, for most the 1990s, he had served as the first Artistic Director). *Polvo* is the Spanish word for dust, but in idiomatic expression it can refer to a brief sexual encounter: perhaps the ultimate coincidence of ephemerality and purpose. Consisting of vertical, sometimes vaguely erotic, ceramic forms nearly two metres in height, the sculptures assert a

ILLUSTRATIONS -

below, l. to r. - "DNA" - 2000 - 106 x 51 x 153 cm -
fired - clay - metal shelf

- "sistema + calivera" - 2008 - fired clay

- "SheGlobal" - 2004-05 - 41 x 53 x 38 cm
porcelain - stoneware - maiolica - lustres -

- "Descriptions without a place" - 2008 -
ceramics - maiolica - lustres - cloth - plinth -
82 H x 32 x 27"

presence that Toubes again likens to that of landscapes, albeit landscapes in the mind. Their forms hint at a certain ambiguity he has felt in producing them. Not only are the surfaces variegated and convolute, but some are also enhanced with lustres, the costly gold or silver overglazes that are ordinarily employed only sparingly to

Photo: Nathalie Sabato © Musées d'art et d'histoire Genève



Photo: Xavier Toubes

accent small ceramic objects such as teapots. The viewer may not make the immediate connection, but for Toubes the subtle suggestion that something diminutive has been rendered impossibly large entails distortion in perception. The implication that the sculptures have been greatly enlarged produces a conceptual discontinuity in the space surrounding them, as if envelopes of magnified air were invisibly insulating the sculptures from the real space of the world.

These implicit barriers, rifts between real and imaginary space, are key to establishing the figurative rather than figural nature of Toubes's sculptures. In order to render this distinction between mimetic and rhetorical representation more obvious to the viewer Toubes has recently experimented with alternative exhibition venues. In December of 2004 he made a point of showing his sculptures at The Track House, a domestic interior that is periodically used as a gallery by faculty and students of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where Toubes currently teaches. Unlike the

typical white-walled, cavernous space of a commercial gallery or museum, this alternative exhibition venue is obtrusive, interfering with the effect of infinitude that normally accompanies sculpture by materially contextualizing the work. Displayed on furniture tops within a living room – a room, that as Toubes observes, is both a space for living and a living space – the sculptures were domesticated: rendered finite and manageable through their connection to a specific, delimited space. More consequential still was Toubes incorporation of photographs into the works, framed images that hung upon on the walls above his sculptures like ordinary adornments in a living room. These two-dimensional images have now become fundamental components of many of his sculptures (like for example in Boy, Brain, Wave).

Landscape images that were taken over thirty years ago, the photographs embody Toubes's recollections of the Spanish countryside and consequently his own past. Their purpose within his



Photo: Mark Ritchie



Photo: Xavier Toubes

ILLUSTRATIONS - from top to bottom

- "07-12" - 2007 - 80 x 130 cm - fired clay - photographs - bubble - wrap - tape - metal support

- Xavier Toubes in front of "Melodien" - 2004-07 - 260 elements (porcelain plates, lustres), 195 x 600 cm - Santiago de Compostela, 2007 Spain

works, however, is not simply to reference memory and the infinitude of time. As two-dimensional images, the photographs are restricted by obvious boundaries, literal frames, and their evocation of the infinite is therefore necessarily rhetorical: effected not through participation in real endless space – the literal infinitude of an actual landscape – but rather through the figurative strategy of representing infinity in finite terms. Like paintings, landscape photographs are synecdochic, and their integration into Toubes sculptures indicates the degree to which he aspires to treat the infinite in representation rather than fact. By consistently resisting the assimilation of his works into the realm of real spatial infinitude he frees himself to explore the figurative potential of the infinite and, more importantly, to invoke through this process a compelling sense of the sublime. Subjecting the infinite to language through the multiple strategies that characterize his sculptures, he raises it from the realm of raw and unexamined experience and assimilates it to human comprehension: wrests infinitude from the actual and immediate and, through strategic representation, procures it for philosophy.

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Xavier Toubes (Francisco Javier Toubes Vilariño) was born in La Coruña, Spain in 1947. He attended University of London Goldsmiths' College (1974-7). After graduating with the Master of Fine Arts from Alfred University, New York, he taught in the Art Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill until 1993. In 1989 he became involved in the creation of the European Ceramic Workcentre (EKWC) in 's-Hertogenbosch, the Netherlands, and was the Artistic Director from its opening in 1991 until the autumn of 1999 when he started teaching at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Exhibitions and work in public collections throughout USA, Spain, Switzerland, Portugal, Korea, Finland, China, Taiwan.

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