MOUSSE

DIRTY PAINTING

BY CATHERINE WOOD

animals die from eating too much! Yoga, 2011.
Courtesy: the artist, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

Opposite – Arepas Y Tamales, 2011.
Courtesy: the artist, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

The paintings of Oscar Murillo come from a long process of sedimentation, accumulating in a productive stasis that happens in the midst of the dust of the artist's studio. They are then developed and shown horizontally, or transformed into something like composite banners formed by different parts sewn together. Murillo tells Catherine Wood about the origins of his interest in places full of traces, and the importance of organizing social events for artistic and personal enrichment.

catherine wood: Your use of wallpaper paste, cement dye, dust, etc, suggests an idea of paintings being 'dirty' or contaminated by incorporating aspects of the environment where they're made–say a dusty studio –into their final form. This seems to be related to your childhood fascination with building sites and materials. Why are such elements important for your practice?

oscar murillo: It comes from a desire to inhabit an environment where the multiple realities of that space, say, its materiality, its potential usages, its history, are all simultaneously active. In other words, the idea that the various processes which act upon an environment at any given time are made visible. Building sites for example are at their finest when they still are in a raw stage where you can still taste the concrete cooking. In Colombia we call this 'obra negra.' It is in this kind of constructive environment where I feel work is being made even if I am not present.

I make all my work on the floor. In this way, the mere act of walking into this environment constitutes itself as work. Most things become a possibility. The working environment is never tidied up, elements just shift and with time amalgamate. It is in this state of permanence that the work lies, like cooking a long red meat stew.

cw: Was this 'patina' of dirt created deliberately? Is it a critique of paintings's high-art status or a way of giving the work an aura, like archaeological relics?

om: It is an attempt to erase time. I enjoy working environments the most when there's no natural light, when there's no distinction between day and night. The canvases are relics of sorts, but unlike archaeological discoveries they don't particularly make reference to anything outside of themselves. So for me it's a kind of imploded, abject reality: there's no hope, but there are of course traces of actions and making.

The most telling works are the ones that contain words, such as 'beef, work, mango, yoga, etc.', directly referencing an activity. These paintings also function as an accessible archive through modes of display i.e. stacking them or not stretching them or simply just having a single panel lean on the floor against the wall. There's a physical encounter with these objects in the space, but their appearance is also an expression of their environment.

cw: You've talked about a state of 'permanence' in the studio environment. But how many paintings do you make in a year? What is the form of your 'practice' like on a daily basis?

om: It is hard to pinpoint a specific number but I don't mean this because of vast quantities. I like to buy material in bulk, it facilitates my strategy for the working environment. So there are long passages of time where I merely find myself just ripping into large rectangles or squares rolls of canvas in my space; I cut and fold them, sometimes creating piles folded of canvas.

Then, after a long period of time, when I feel these materials have been in the space for long enough, perhaps a month or two, I begin a mark making process using a broom stick and a large oil paint pad. Usually this pad is simply a large sheet of canvas rendered in oil paint laid flat on the ground stapled to a wooden platform, then another sheet of canvas is laid on top of that, and then, using a broom stick, I mark-make using this mono-printing technique.

Other times I make vast quantities of drawings on A4 paper using graphite sticks or a biro. These drawings never leave the making environment I always multiply them on a photocopier and pulp them into more work. When there's too much dirt, I make solid concrete balls (but there's never too much dirt!).

So there's never a routine, a work is usually made, that is—finished—in a matter of hours, even one hour sometimes, but it takes months of toiling to get to that point. It's like a harvest.

cw: I'm interested in how many of the canvases appear to be composites, comprising of a number of stitched together pieces, or stitched patterns, almost like quilting. Folds are also visible. Why do you like the canvas itself to be 'drawn' upon in this way? Or is it about bringing different patches of worked material together into a single work?

om: It's really banal, it all really started by having an attraction to sewing machines, and wanting one. The sewing machine is like a paint brush to me (although I don't use paint brushes). Using the sewing machine is like cleaning or washing dishes, it's so mindless. There are times where all I do is sew fabrics together. But since most of individual canvases are worked independently of each other, sewing them into one single work becomes a critical moment of orchestration, like problem solving.

Untitled, 2012. Courtesy: the artist, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

cw: I'm intrigued that you describe the painting as 'banners', especially in relation to the unconventional way that you 'hang' them—displayed horizontally on the floor on rudimentary plywood constructions, or threaded with rope through eyelets to suspend them. What does a banner signify for you? How does it relate to the idea of painting?

om: Well historically, quilted banners were, or still are, functional devices. They can be symbolic, like flags, or disposable, used during a march or protest (the word 'Bandera' in Spanish or 'Bandum' in Latin). The modes of display I choose are grounded in a desire to suggest that these objects contain a kind of 'timeless' quality. But also, regarding our discussion about relics, to show a trace of their origins. If a 'banner' piece with multiple eyelets is hung on the wall, I feel it communicates a sense of functionality. I want to obliterate the idea of 'painting' in my practice, but I know that I need to have it in my house in order to fight with it everyday.

cw: Could you say something about the materials and processes you use to make your work? There are many layers and many different kinds of paint and materials embedded in the surfaces of your work.

om: Earlier on a lot of the decisions were made for economic reasons, but also because I didn't want to rely on too many 'things' to make work happen. A broom stick is available in London, Cali, or New Delhi. Having sheets of oiled canvas or fabric was a way to stretch a tube of paint further. So these two elements were combined, and the primitive monoprinting process was the outcome. And there's dirt which is free and unpretentious, it is everywhere and it breaks down hierarchies.

cw: I'm interested in the social events you organize that you see as a part of your work as an artist, but are not formalized as 'relational' situations for an audience: the dances, food, Bingo or music events that you've organized in London or in Colombia, for example. In certain events you've had dancers performing on a ruined platform used for making painting, or a hot yoga session set amongst paintings displayed on the walls. How do these events—and others which are purely social—fit in with your project as an artist? Why are these communal events—sharing food and dancing—important in relation to making art?

om: The events are essential and vital to what I do, just like work and play. They nourish me as an artist or simply as an individual, very often they come together with my art in terms of context; by hosting a family party and making it art—not the other way round. They are not relational situations they are spontaneous, immersive situations; playing bingo in a warehouse or taking part in a birthday party in a community center or jogging and dancing in a Roman Amphitheatre to 1970s Fania All-Stars music. These social activities become important contexts to the paintings and are essential to me in describing my 'paintings as archives.' Stacking the paintings, marking the paintings with words like yoga and the way I don't stretch them, aims to suggest, or become fragments of, past activities.

cw: You grew up in Colombia until you were ten years old, and you've talked about your experiences there in relation to the aesthetic of the work, but also about the importance of involving your family (both here, and there) in what you make. In what way has this dual sense of place informed the work you make?

om: In early August this year I travelled to Colombia for four days to host a weekend of parties with friends and family. These things are important, they keep me grounded as an individual. This dual existence is most effective when it is displaced, shifting one culture to another or creating an amalgamation. I feel particularly fortunate, but it is also about staying tuned-in to what's happening around me, socially. In London and in most major cities in the world, for some time now you have hot-yoga or Bikram yoga studios. I find the whole phenomenon fascinating; yoga as an ancient discipline in South Asia was until last century a discipline practice predominantly by men. A displaced version of yoga in western society is dominated by a female population, not only did I work with only women on some yoga events for a while, but as a critical undercurrent in this context, yoga had become somewhat aligned to a superficial idea of western beauty.

There's also currently a branding war with coconut water. Some brands claim to be more natural or invigorating than others. But I find 'vita coco'—which you can find in most hot-yoga studios around world—like coca cola in the 80s. Partly owned by Madonna, 'vita coco' is sourced in Brazil with a headquarters in New York and London, and so it is also displaced, just as I was displaced as a ten year old, removed from a village in Colombia to the clean streets of London. I find myself channeling this reality through my art practice.

cw: You talked about wanting art to be a part of 'reality'. Does that mean you're interested in making a form of 'realism'? Or looking for some kind of authenticity?

om: I think in what I do whether a banner, or an event, I endeavor to strive for a sense of authenticity. What that is exactly, I am on course to discover, I hope. Perhaps I never will discover authenticity as there are too many buffers in the world.

But I think I am on course since dirt is real and is everywhere; it is accessible whether in the streets of London or in the villages of Colombia, dirt is democratic and free, so a dirty canvas is an extension of a reality even if you romanticize it. And the events are also real, they happen late at night with family in community centers at home in Colombia or in London.

This page – Vita Coco, 2011. Courtesy: the artist, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

i'd take you there but it doesn't exist anymore, 2010-2011. Courtesy: the artist, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin

Opposite – untitled, 2012. Courtesy: Carlos/Ishikawa, London

Belisario and Virgelinas Birthday Party, Colombia and London, 2012. Courtesy: the artist, Stuart Shave/Modern Art, London, and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin