Carlos Jiménez Cahua
SAMSON

In his witty Boston solo debut, Carlos Jiménez Cahua added a new twist to a long-standing philosophical quandary: Can art capture and communicate sensations, images, and systems that are normally imperceptible? That the artist answered in the affirmative is perhaps less remarkable than the way in which his compendium of simple gestures was wedged to some of the building blocks of globalization to produce surprising visual effects.

Identified by the gallery as a digital video, Untitled #102 (all works cited, 2013) might be better described as a three-and-a-half-hour durational performance by a machine, in which the native resolution of a display, projected on the gallery wall, is converted from black to white, pixel by pixel, from corner to corner. With the completion of the transformation, one saw the immaterial “copy” in reverse of electronic information that perhaps epitomizes our globalized present. By juxtaposing such pure abstraction with the phenomenological emplacement and unpredictable ambulations of the spectator in the exhibition space, Jiménez Cahua brought to light the gnawing anxiety that sensory perception and bodily operations are becoming more and more organized in the shape of machinic functions. In other words, while staring at the fractured and slightly hallucinatory unfolding of light (easily missed because of the work’s restrained tempo), one had to wonder whether human inscription within contemporary conditions of generalized abstraction leads to a personal and social identity based on greater homogenization or if a glitch might occur in this self-replicating system.

Jiménez Cahua suggests that a totalized alignment between the individual and social gesture arising from networked technology can be resisted in Untitled #104, a high-pixelated ink-jet print of a desert landscape with a mountainous ridge (downloaded from the Internet) that was sporadically humidified by an electric steamer attached like a prosthesis to the print’s surface. The appearance of warily curves along the panorama’s point of highest elevation and the soaking of the paper support to the point of dripping on the floor transformed a rather banal image into a droll sculptural installation and, more important, offered it a distinctive afterlife in its next permutation as a digital reproduction. This strategy of creative dysfunction reminded us that an image cannot make us feel either the heat or the moisture of the tactile environment; it is always a surrogate. Yet Jiménez Cahua’s humor—adding real water to the fake desert, “saturating” an image—suggests that Jean Baudrillard’s discouraging prognosis of our simulacral present as the “desert of the real” can be answered with DIY tactics.

Indeed, Jiménez Cahua aggravates images of all kinds to insist on the material—or analog—quality that lies within them. For Untitled #99.1–89.35 (MA/VDTTH...), the artist covered one wall with a grid of ink-jet prints on low-quality paper; Internet-sourced likenesses of acquaintances whom the artist considers mentors or figures of authority. Each printout has been dipped about halfway in water, causing the ink on the image’s lower portion to bleed and smudge, thus revealing the urinal agency of its constitutive elements. Similarly, in Untitled #93.1, one of four “photograms” riffing on Robert Rauschenberg’s 1951 collaboration with John Cage (a single tire track in paint on paper), a gorgeous, rosy imprint emerges from a concoction of chemicals: a week’s worth of rain, sunshine, and debris surrounding the impression of the parked car’s tire, operating in partnership with the silver-gelatin paper to bring out its distinct phenomenal qualities. These works, seen in tandem with Untitled #78, a color photograph of waves that has been placed in a plastic container of water, insist that images are objects in their own right, rather than docile surfaces.

By producing deviations in our expectations of the “natural” (or logical) behavior of images, Jiménez Cahua also asks whether eccentricities might be provoked within the seamlessness of looking and knowing. With social relationships woven through so many mediatized apparatuses, is it possible to evade standardization by recovering the material substrates of our experiences?

—Nuit Banai