

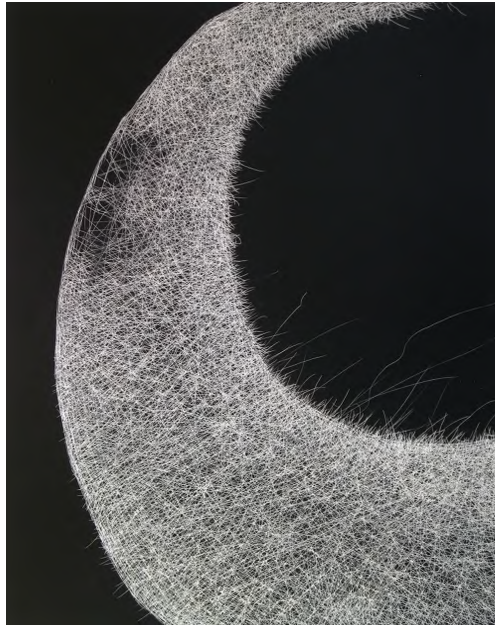
MARIO TREJO

CATHARSIS

Essay by Hannah Piper Burns, April 2009

Catharsis, the new series and exhibition from Mario Trejo, refreshingly remixes the artist's process while reiterating his core artistic values. The title has its root in the Greek *katharsos*, for "pure". In Trejo's case, the word captures his fierce commitment to creating a universe piece by identical piece. While each component of *Catharsis* stands alone as an environment in which the artist's marks swarm and form, congregate and coagulate, as a series they show the tremendous potential for fluctuation within a rigid system of atomized gestures. The binary chromatics, parity of mark-making, and consistency of dimensions evident in all of the pieces are what Trejo has imposed on his own process: a purification of form and content. What results from this structure are compositions that radiate a controlled chaos and a sophisticated treatment of volume, perspective, and scale.

Trejo has long been a shaper of positive and negative space, using a black and white palette to emphasize the contrast between background and gesture. The images he has created for *Catharsis* utilize this method to elegantly occupy the picture plane as if in a photogram or some sort of electroscopic imaging print. That is, they seem evidentiary. And like all his work, that state of seeming truth is balanced by an ambivalence of scope: Are these satellite photographs of some astronomical wonder? Or simply the extreme close-ups of the tangles of human detritus found behind the radiator or under the bed? Trejo's dense clouds of spidery filaments occupy and transcend both the monumental and the minute.



It is somewhat of a departure from his previous *Idiosyncratic* series, begun during the artist's graduate studies and currently ongoing. *Catharsis*, Trejo's first new body of work since he emerged in the St. Louis art scene this past year, denotes an evolution of the artist's vision of the mark as the building block of the performance and remnant, and of the void as the arena for battles between hand and instrument, space and perception, part and whole. The *Idiosyncratic* drawings, with their heavy blackness imposed on the white void of virgin canvas and panel, and evocatively severe titles like *Imperium*, *Ad Infinitum*, and *Struggle*, privilege massivity and numerical record. They deal with conceptual influences including the history of war and the physics of astronomy, divergent source material rooted in the overwhelming and not totally comprehensible aspects and conditions of

experience. Populated with anywhere from a few hundred to a million hand-drawn circles, these pieces epitomize the struggle of the artist, not just over his own creation, but over his own physical limitation. Having witnessed the artist at work, bent over a sawhorse-supported panel, furiously attacking the surface with tight rotations of a micron pen in one hand, while obsessively recording his progress into a calculator with the other, I feel it is safe to say that this struggle is not feigned. It is a mode of creation in dialogue with Abstract Expressionism and performance that requires physical training to prevent serious hand or wrist injury. Thus the density of the circles, as they spread and cluster,

is both victorious and sinister. It signifies the striving toward a sublimity whose failure is built into its inception. It is the human attempt at illustrating the overwhelming smallness of one's own existence through the nearly pugilistic determination to quantify infinity. Paradoxical, yes, but this ambivalence is part of what gives the *Idiosyncratic* series its visual power.

By contrast, the *Catharsis* series displays a lightness absent in Trejo's earlier work. The marks no longer close in on themselves, but burst abundantly forth from multiple points of origin. Line quality re-asserts itself. The artist's hand is still recorded in every stroke, but the resulting

forms take on an energetic exuberance and almost electric pulse that is wholly new. While in the *Idiosyncratic* series the mark subsumes the void to the point of becoming the void itself, in *Catharsis* the void remains, at least in the majority of the pieces, dominant. This allows new experimentation with mathematics and optics to suggest weight, mass, and charge. Perspective, shading, and scale are elegantly and sparingly employed with deftness that now enhances the artist's raw determination and physical endurance. Titled simply with Roman numerals, the *Catharsis* drawings could be iterations of the same set of marks perpetually re-configured, as if a pile of iron filings

swept over and over again by a giant magnet, even as the shift from circular to linear gestures has dramatically expanded the lexicon of visual referents that the compositions can suggest. The particles begin to form horizons, as in *Untitled I* and *XVI*, thickets, as in *Untitled II*, *X*, and *XIII*, and follicles, as in *Untitled XX* and *XXI*, all the while resisting the finality of total classification.



Clearly the artist has begun to massage his own system, an adaptability that bodes well for his future artistic viability. It shows that even within a very particular and highly structured practice, he is no one-trick pony. Rather, he has the ability to push the boundaries of his own artistic ideals in order to recognize their

potential more and more fully. In this contemporary moment, when art objects are not always honest with the viewer about their origins, making, and meaning, Trejo maintains a fundamental commitment to work that contains its own history as well as its own self-evident value. That this fundamental commitment to purity can result in work that embodies such mystery, metaphysical energy, and optical wonder is a testament to the artist's disciplined mind and unflinchingly precise hand.

-- Hannah Piper Burns

Hannah Piper Burns received her Master of Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute. She currently lives and works in Portland, Oregon as a multimedia artist and freelance art writer. This essay is one in a series of the gallery's exhibitions written by fellow gallery artists and friends.

Images:

Mario Trejo. *Untitled III (Catharsis drawing series)*, 2009. India ink and acrylic on board, 20 x 16 inches

Mario Trejo. *Catharsis (Installation View - detail)*, 2009.

ABOUT THE GALLERY

Bruno David Gallery is a contemporary art gallery and one of the most important places to see art in Saint Louis. The Gallery represents some of the best artists that Saint Louis has to offer, along with artists of national and international reputation. The editors of the St. Louis Magazine awarded the Gallery: *Best Gallery in St. Louis* in 2008. The gallery is located in the heart of the Grand Center arts district, directly opposite the Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts and the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis.