

The dA Center for the ARTS

presents

SCRAMBLE a solo exhibition featuring Artist ATILIO PERNISCO Curated by Pablo Baler

Exhibition runs from Saturday Nov.13th., 2021 to Sunday Jan. 2nd., 2022

Opening Reception : Saturday, November 13, 2021 5 pm - 9 pm

Artist Talk with CGU : Saturday, December 4, 2022 4 pm - 6 pm

Closing Reception : Sunday, January 2, 2022 3 pm - 6 pm

SCRAMBLE, the exhibition, by Argentine artist **Atilio Pernisco** is scheduled to run from November 13, 2021 to January 2, 2022 at the **dA Center for the Arts** in the city of Pomona, California.

SCRAMBLE is a stunning show of surreal oil paintings, monotypes, charcoals and drawings with a deeply contemporary style.

The show is curated by writer and art critic **Pablo Baler**.

Atilio Pernisco, a graduate of the Art Center College of Design and the Claremont Graduate University, is an internationally recognized artist with work exhibited individually and in groups in the United States, Japan, Italy and Mexico among other places. His work is part of numerous public and private collections.

About the artist, the critic Pablo Baler has written:

“Like all committed artists, Pernisco paints with his hair standing on end, with his chest out, and the brush between his teeth. His painting is violent, produced in the midst of that imminence of a revelation that never ends; or better yet, produced amid speculative blindness. In Pernisco's work we see space falling apart, a race against time; each brushstroke, a drowning hand emerging from the surface of a raging ocean, stroking against the infectious tide of death. As we said, Pernisco's work follows the long tradition of figurative painting, but it aspires in secret to abstraction.”



Estupearfactos, 2021

The Pernisco Universe

*But all the other children
Listen to the music
And the walls of the classroom
Slowly crumble.
And the windows become sand again.*

*The ink becomes water again
The desks become trees again
The chalk becomes a cliff again
The quill again becomes a bird.*

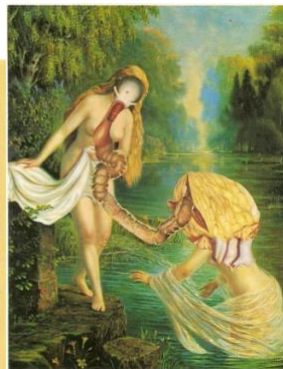
From "Page d'écriture" poem by Jacques Prévert
From *Paroles* (1946)

A group of children sit on a beached whale in a deserted landscape. Fleshy women wearing gas masks wait in a queue among dead fish in the lobby of a Victorian hotel. A nurse is about to give an injection to a fabulous monster, half cock half vulva. Emergency personnel, clad in hazmat suits, graze a herd of pigs around a hospital gurney.

In a preliminary survey of these bizarre scenes by Atilio Pernisco, one cannot help but remember the now classic image proposed by the Count of Lautreamont: "**The chance meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table.**" An image that according to André Breton defines a crucial surrealist procedure: the juxtaposition of disparate elements that can produce a spark of high expressive voltage. In fact, along these lines, Pernisco's paintings are reminiscent of both the absurd photomontages of Hannah Höch (*Heads of State*, 1920), as well as the sarcastic collages of Jindrich Styrsky (*The Bathroom*, 1934) or the disturbing and also narrative visions by René Magritte (*The Menaced Assassin*, 1926). But something else happens when we enter the visceral universe of Pernisco, something more than a romantic exploration of the absurd and irrational logic of dreams.



Hannah Höch, *Staatshäupter (Jefes de Estado)*, 1920



Jindrich Styrsky, *El baño*, 1934
Colección IFA, Stuttgart



René Magritte, *El asesino amenazado*, 1926

Yes, Pernisco probes his memories, nightmares, obsessions, phobias, dives meticulously into the phenomena of his inner life, but the work that arises from that exploration is not limited to an intellectual exercise or a mere illustration of his own psyche, but rather it is the starting point for the creation of a visual universe of a formidable poetic scope.

In Pernisco's paintings, something is happening, has just happened, or is about to happen that we understand and don't at the same time; there is a motive, a background, conflicts and consequences that are continually hidden from us. Cornered into the position of the hallucinated detective, we try to surmise, from a series of elements, stories that are invariably indecipherable to us. Jorge Luis Borges, yet another explorer of consciousness and dreams, defined the *aesthetic event* in terms that refer to this experience of glimpses and blindness proposed by Pernisco. Borges wrote: "Music, states of happiness, mythology, the faces worked by time, certain twilights and certain places want to tell us something, or said something that we should not have lost, or they are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation, which does not occur, is, perhaps, the *aesthetic event*." The *aesthetic event* thus rests in the anticipation of a resolution, never in the resolution itself. The ambiguous scenarios and the abstract bent of Pernisco, in addition to privileging anticipation over resolution, reveal a celebration of illegibility, of that constantly shifting horizon. Thus, the Pernisco universe raises the stakes of that Borgesian definition: it rewrites and redefines the *aesthetic event* not only as a continuously deferred revelation but also as the imminence of a blindness whose possibility is always haunting us.



Pequeña rareza II, 2021



Victoria del recuerdo, 2021

From an emotional perspective, Pernisco's paintings gravitate around two opposite poles. Some works tend towards the sinister, the dark, the intense, while other works lean towards hope, light and transparency. The contrast between the two paintings reproduced above offers a telling example of this dichotomy, not only on a thematic but

also on a visual level. *Pequeña rareza II* reminds us of the horror genre both due to the presence of a monster under the exorcizing gaze of a doctor and a nurse, as well as for the chiaroscuro, the monochromatic opacities, the organs, the tissues and the blood dripping on the raw canvas. This image contrasts with *Victoria del recuerdo*, closer to the “fairy tale” genre, where the almost transparent layers of vaporized oil coatings, convey a spectral atmosphere where childhood memories in the home country seem to coincide with utopian, celebratory fantasies.

On the one hand, a *pathos* that refers to a dire future, haunted by our inescapable demise (our own, personal death, as well as that of our species); and on the other, a *pathos* that beats with the energy of a primeval past, like the spasms of childbirth; that is to say, life itself. The title of this show, **SCRAMBLE**, captures this dialectic, central to Pernisco’s work. **SCRAMBLE** is one of those words, common in English, where two opposite meanings coincide. **SCRAMBLE** can mean both the effort to achieve or possess something, as well as the impulse to dislocate, to make unintelligible, unhinged, chaotic. **SCRAMBLE** simultaneously suggests the solution and the creation of a problem, both the rise and the fall. Following this logic, we can sense in every image created by Pernisco a composition that charts a spiral path. This vortex, closely following Fibonacci's golden rule, can be read as both departure and arrival, as escape route and homecoming. In Pernisco, this simultaneous round trip, always implies, in some form or another, the woman's sex as both origin and destination. One can find there, as a symbolic *attractor* (black hole of expansion and contraction), all the other narrative arcs: the erotic and sexual impulse, childhood, the cycle of life and death. Origin and destiny which are also potentiality and actuality, memory and anticipation.



At any rate, Pernisco does not seek the sublime other than to dismantle it. He knows the best way to get out of a whirlpool is from below. The ironic tone that underlies his work refers to a type of sensibility --corrosive, macabre, hilarious-- that defines another seminal concept of surrealist aesthetics: *black humor*. Thinking of José Guadalupe Posada's sepulchral and humorous woodcuts, Breton speculates that Mexico is the chosen land of *black humor*.

Pernisco, a citizen of this marginal and aberrant Mexico that is Los Angeles, also produces a grin in the viewer that winds up revealing not just the teeth but also the entire skull and the clacking skeleton.

Beyond the suggested narratives, however, the anecdotal dimension in these paintings is always on the verge of unraveling not only into the ambiguous but even more dangerously, into the abstract. Here, realism melts into a gestural expressionism reminiscent of Cy Twombly's doodles. Pernisco's is an inherently expressive, musical painting, constantly moving towards its own disintegration. And precisely because his figurative style is of photographic persuasion, the dismantling and deconstructing effect is even more impactful. The unfinished brushstroke, the blurred edges, the stains, the drippings let us peek into a network of echoes, balances, patterns, repetitions, contrasts and unexpected harmonies. Thus, in the process of that undoing, one discovers the underlying matter. The representation is dissolved into the abstract, and the abstract in turn, is dissolved into the very materiality of painting. The pigment, the oil, the trace, the fibers of the canvas itself, emerge as the primary element and the primordial dimension of representation.



This stripping away of the narrative that thematizes the irruption of matter through a world on the brink of disintegration, becomes more palpable in the series of monotypes; partly due to the very nature of engraving (trace of a presence and of the moment), but above all because in this series, the figurative indeterminacy and the intrusion of the material become even more evocative and more urgent.



Finally, just as we identify in Pernisco a surrealist inspiration, there is also a very contemporary self-consciousness in this gradual dismantling towards the materiality of representation. This self-awareness connects Pernisco with the work of painters such as Jenny Saville, Glenn Brown, Eric Fischl or Mark Tansey; all great artists who, since the 1980s, have not only been redefining figurative art, but also amassing notoriety and inconceivable sums of money in the international art market. And yet, also in this contemporary vein Pernisco seems to be painting his way against the grain.

This contrast between a marginal Pernisco and the glorified artists of his generation could be thought of in terms of a more general disparity between the precariousness and fragmentation of the South and the globalized superabundance of the North. Pernisco, far from being an artist promoted by Charles Saatchi or Larry Gagosian, or coordinated by a global network of art galleries with centers in London or New York, grew up in a neighborhood on the outskirts of Buenos Aires (Liniers), in the southernmost country of Latin America, a region fated to deal with the scarcities imposed by its colonial history and destiny.

At this point it would be necessary to introduce another concept, one of those words that are challenging to translate from Spanish into another language. The word is: **REBUSQUE**. **REBUSQUE** means a "side job" but more generally is a way of making ends meet, of solving problems under hopeless conditions and exhausted resources. Like **SCRAMBLE**, **REBUSQUE** is a concept where two opposite meanings are implied: it is a way of moving forward, but in a world of stagnation and precariousness. **REBUSQUE** is more than a way of surviving, it is a philosophy of life. A philosophy of survival. Pernisco does not build theoretical constructions around his work; on the contrary, he tears them apart. If one were to ask him to define his art, he would only offer a concise but revealing approach; he would say: "My art is a **REBUSQUE**."

A single example can illustrate the distance between Pernisco and that generation of famous artists from Europe and the United States. The monochromatic works that we see in Brown or Tansey are intentional aesthetic experiments that interpellate, sometimes satirically, the history of color in art; when I asked Pernisco, however, about the purpose of one of his monochromatic works, he replied: "It happens that sometimes I only have one tube."



Brown *Anaesthesia*, 2001



Tansey, *Matrix*, 1993



Pernisco, *La misa de los cien cortes*, 2021

Pernisco has made out of his own geographical, political and historical subalternity a stand; a commitment characterized not by the reification of a marketable formula, but by a perpetual side hustle. A perpetual REBUSQUE. Over the years, Pernisco has come across many artistic finds of his own, personal formulas with which he could have built several careers, and yet he has systematically discarded them one by one, as mere stages of a pursuit that only acquires its meaning by continuously extending it. That is the form that the political intention takes in Pernisco's work; a political intention that channels a long tradition of Argentine artists for whom the gesture of resistance is contained in their uncompromising aesthetic exploration. I think of Xul Solar, Marta Minujin, Antonio Berni, or Alberto Cedrón.

Like all committed artists, Pernisco paints with his hair standing on end, with his chest out, and the brush between his teeth. His painting is violent, produced in the midst of that imminence of a revelation that never ends; or better yet, produced amid speculative blindness. In Pernisco's work we see space falling apart, a race against time; each brushstroke, a drowning hand emerging from the surface of a raging ocean, stroking against the infectious tide of death. As we said, Pernisco's work follows the long tradition of figurative painting, but it aspires in secret to abstraction. It is not, however, an escapist abstraction but an abstraction that manages to capture our paradoxical and incomprehensible place in the world. As Sergio Pitol has said, *abstraction is a way not to evade the real world, but to embrace all its possibilities*. Pernisco's work opens up to all these possibilities and, like all classical art, awaits and anticipates its future.

Pablo Baler
Los Angeles, 2021