



Caio Fonseca: *Pietrasanta*, 2007. Mixed, 52" high.

Navigating Change

BY KATHY RODRIGUEZ

CAIO FONSECA

Selections From the Studio
Octavia Art Gallery
New Orleans, LA

CHRISTOPHER SAUCEDO

Pints, Quarts, and Gallons
Le Mieux Gallery

CHRISTOPHER SAUCEDO AND Caio Fonseca, respectively showing simultaneously in “Pints, Quarts, and Gallons” at Le Mieux Gallery and “Selections from the Studio” at Octavia Gallery on Julia Street, both hail from New York, but their exhibits show other commonalities. Each graphically emphasizes the most basic, fundamental concepts of design – color, time, volume and mass, proportion and scale, line and shape – resulting in profoundly personal and highly evocative compositions.

Saucedo’s branded works on paper and Calder-like sculp-

tures utilize self-made iconography representing devices for measurement, ranging in scale from shot glasses to gallon jugs. The isolation of the quotidian object references Pop, immortalizing the everyday form by isolating it in a bright, flat field, whether within the picture plane or against the wall. However, Saucedo removes labels and brands, and reduces the objects – twelve-ounce cans, sixteen-ounce water bottles, go cups, gallons, and five-gallon jugs – to outlines, revealing their interior spaces.

The utilitarian quality of the measuring devices speaks of their universality. As the artist states, it’s easy to agree that these measurements equal each other – their volumes are understood as fact, but in actuality they are invented, subjective amounts. Departing from Pop aesthetic, Saucedo opens interpretation of the function of the objects – cans could contain beer or cold drinks, depending on the viewer. The isolation of the object suggests individualism, and aloneness, as happens with subjective interpretation. But, by linking them in series, or physically in the mobiles, Saucedo creates togetherness – much like, as he describes, a shot glass and a pint go together for many with a seat at the bar, in the



Christopher Saucedo: *Halos With Blue II*, 2015.

company of strangers who are, or become, friends.

Saucedo is consistently reverent of Renaissance geometry in his work, which is the driving force behind example after example of 15th and 16th century architectural, sculptural, and painterly artworks composed with perfectly harmonious proportion. Saucedo's *Fluid Volume (Scrovegni Guilt)*, composed of emptied vessels haloed in gold leaf against a background the same blue as the ceiling of the Arena Chapel, is in one way evidence of this respect and acknowledgment. Mathematical harmonies play in less directly referent ways throughout the rest of the work.

Volume is the content of his ongoing series about identity, which deals directly with the concept of proportion. Saucedo's well-known comic depicting the process of displacing an amount of water from a barrel by stepping into it – which evolved from a game he played with his children in the New Orleans summer – accompanies a line of branded paper works depicting plastic bottles. Red, blue, and various values optically fill the branded, highly figurative forms in various amounts, playfully considering, with primary colors, the various amounts of information, experience, or life with which those figures are filled at given points.

In a series of twenty-four images, titled *The Cup Half Full, The Cup Half Empty*, the illusion of fulfillment, apparent in images of volumes, forms the content. Perfectly registered deckles of handmade paper create the appearance of half-full, or half-empty, vessels. Saucedo describes the laborious process of cre-

ating the deckles, pressing them, and branding the outline of the vessel into the paper into a cohesive, registered whole as rife with difficulty and potential hazards. The process is much like that of casting, a method very familiar to this sculptor, and results in two-dimensional forms that are more objects than prints.

Water as subject opposes fire in the objects in the exhibit, just as the geometry of the forms opposes the organic quality of the handmade paper. The papermaking process involves working with wet pulp, which Saucedo then presses and brands with 800 degree steel casts, as in casting – a form of physically changing liquids with fire. The alchemy of bringing the elements together involves balancing the poles of these two elements, which are also the two that Saucedo has had to directly face in his personal history. The ephemeral quality of burn traces in the permanent brands and the softly effusing edges of the deckles appear and disappear in the paper works. Much like the smoke from just-extinguished candles represents the fleetingness of life in *vanitas* paintings, these forms suggest transience and impermanence.

The equalized proportions of negative and positive volume within the outlines of the shot glasses, cups, bottles, and jugs forms exact balance that plays on the eponymous optimistic versus pessimistic viewpoint of the title of *The Cup Half Full, The Cup Half Empty*. In his recent interview with Neda Ulaby on NPR's *Morning Edition*, Saucedo discusses the triumvirate of disasters that have marked his recent biography: the attacks of September



Christopher Saucedo: *The Cup Half Full, The Cup Half Empty*, 2015. Installation view.

11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina, and Superstorm Sandy. After such a series of events, though, he found it hard to rely on an optimistic outlook. The absence created by the white embroidery on a red, black, and white Red Cross blanket, titled *Red Cross Blanket (Self-Portrait in Fluid Volume Tally)* evokes this sentiment.

However, Saucedo states he does not want to be the “artist who has misfortune” in the interview. The installation of indexical signs in *Half Full/Half Empty* creates an image of the balance of positive and negative, and equilibrium between viewpoints, marking a place that contains the hope of safety found in the mental state of a realist. Making the work, Saucedo acknowledges, is in itself an optimistic act.

The concept of the navigational aid is also posed in the NPR interview, and certain objects in the exhibition are clearly related to this subject. *Gallon of Moon* superimposes a print of moonscape in the shape of gallon jug over a map of Lake Pontchartrain and its environs. Though Saucedo now lives in New York, he spent decades in this city with his family, working as a research professor in sculpture at the University of New Orleans, even after Katrina flooded his home and his family moved back to New York, where he moved just before Sandy visited the area. Tracking the “travels” of the moon across the sky is an aged way of

marking time and place, and the map is a physical device used for navigation. Some of the maps note water levels, indicating places where boaters may not want to sail.

Saucedo is, of course, sensitive to the rise and fall of water, but looks at the maps as a metaphor for how art functions. In the interview, he says, “sculpture and art are navigational aids to help us navigate safely through the hazards that we face.” He relates that navigational methods utilize a nautical language that only the initiated truly understand – a kind of culture shared by those who engage even to academically appreciate art.

At Octavia, Fonseca’s images are populated with Pop-like hard lines and Ben-Day dot-like circles. As in Saucedo’s work, this is only a formal and historical starting point. Strong, flat, curvilinear shapes in high-contrast paintings appear to reference typography at first glance, but are more closely associated with sine waves and hard geometry, as well as the black-and-white written language of compositional scores. Together, the forms reference the lyricism of Kandinsky – especially in newer works on paper.

Trained as a classical composer, like Kandinsky, music is Fonseca’s foundation. His iconography includes the lines and dots that are the written form of music. As with Saucedo’s parallel be-



Caio Fonseca: *Fifth Street C14.6*, 2015.

tween nautical and visually literate vocabularies, Fonseca makes visual metaphors for music with formal language that derives from musical literacy.

In the *Wildwood* series, comprised of paintings on paper from 2015, Fonseca positions shapes and lines in achromatic or primary colors along vertical, rather than horizontal, bars, upending traditional musical notation. He crosses them with lines and spirals, evoking the numerically derived, classically academic compositional strategy of the Golden Section, especially in *Wildwood P15.25*. Composition forms the content.

Fonseca is more known for small- to large-scale mixed media paintings on bulkier substrates with high-contrast vertical shapes against a monochromatic background. Closer inspection of the rigid compositions shows speckles of paint, or meticulous under painting, above or below the monochromatic surface, as in *Fifth Street C12.4*. Yves Klein-blue or saturated reds brush across the paintings, contained within clean boundaries. In these, Fonseca builds order out of underlying chaos, like the formation of a galaxy from primordial light and dust. The balance of energy and control, or spontaneity and precision, suggests not only the process involved in working through painting, but also composing music. In historical context, they recall early modern movements aimed at

conveying the possibility of utopian harmony, such as de Stijl and Suprematism.

Harmony and proportion also contribute to Fonseca's musically rhythmic time created through the medium of paint. Curvilinear shapes reach toward each other like arms in the *Pietrasanta* series, named for the area in Tuscany where the artist resides part-time. The shapes may be arms caught in the gesticulations of conducting, arms stretched across the body of an instrument, or arms reaching from opposing positions toward understanding and communication via the medium. In any case, the even distribution of weight between them and their centralized, harmonious alignment also recalls classical love of evenness and balance.

Both Saucedo and Fonseca embrace clean line, ordered composition, and high formalism in their work. Look more deeply through the surfaces, and engage in the delicate and intimate content that each explores. Both acknowledge the messiness and sometimes sublime unpredictability that marks day-to-day life. While initial appearances suggest all is in order, both nod to the ongoing possibility of dramatic change, and provide a means to navigate through it. □