

## Ernesto Burgos: When a bird lands on the ground it invariably stops singing

What gives rise to the creative impulse? The Greeks believed it to be the way we earth-bound mortals attempt to fly. According to the evolutionary musicologist Joseph Jordania, however, art proceeded from a baser need for self-defence: as the only ground-dwelling species who sing, humans produced music to make themselves appear bigger to predators – what’s known in ethology as “counter-signalling.” Airborne animals, on the other hand, fall silent as they descend, so as not to attract too much attention. It’s from Jordania that Ernesto Burgos takes the title of his latest exhibition, in which the artist’s gravity-defying works – which are classifiable neither as paintings nor sculptures – have lifted off the floors and moved onto the walls. If the earliest art emerged from a defensive posture, Burgos’s works have precisely the opposite aim: they embrace a certain vulnerability by reaching beyond the limitations of their medium. Their curved surfaces warble hopefully, like birds in flight.

Gravity is a central concern for any sculptor, and you can see Burgos contending with it in his earliest works: heavy domestic furniture like couches cut up and sutured with resin in unconventional arrangements designed to be circumvented in the round. And yet, such works reveal an equal concern for texture that would eventually drive Burgos to explore the rectangular format of painting. Applying many layers of paint to those assemblages, he treated their upholstered surfaces as canvases or skins. Furniture, of course, is a frame upon which the body rests – not unlike the frame of a painting that invites our gaze. Its construction prompts us to consider the ways our experience of art is contingent upon the institutional structures, such as architecture, within which it is exhibited.

The process of making those sculptures was as intensely physical as works themselves, and along the way Burgos noticed that the resin he was using kept falling on the cardboard mats protecting the floors of his studio, where it built up in layers. As the synthetic medium soaked in, the paper began to buckle in unusual ways. Thus came the first of many epiphanies, as the artist turned from the material before him on a plinth to one that lay inconspicuously beneath his feet.

The world is an accumulation of such accidents. If you hold the scientific view of evolution, you believe it developed without any grand design. Great art, too, doesn’t know exactly what it will be prior to its conception. “Perhaps the way one tells how alive a particular art form is,” Susan Sontag proposed in *Against Interpretation* (1966), “is by the latitude it gives for making mistakes in it...” Liquid fiberglass takes a while to harden, so the forms of Burgos’s works continue to move for a time after he sets them, a latitude that invites the thrill of chance. “I like to be open, so I give it some direction, but it’s not a hundred percent control,” he says. In the 1930s, Jean Arp similarly created his scattered collages with controlled drops onto paper, laid down on his studio floor. Describing chance as his “raw material,” Arp aimed for what he called concretion: “the material process of condensation, hardening, coagulating, thickening, growing together. Concretion designates the solidification of a mass. Concretion designates curdling, the curdling of the earth and the heavenly bodies.” Concretion is palpable in Burgos’s sculptures, which have slowly ossified into voluptuously organic forms.

Burgos’s first experiments with liquid fiberglass variously recall early works by the ceramicist Peter Voulkos, the papier-mache hollows of Vince Fecteau, or the twisted steel assemblages of John Chamberlain. The eye follows their Möbius curves – rough in some sections and smooth in others – as they move seamlessly between interior and exterior space. We might think of them as folded frames: a furniture not for the body but for the mind. “To fold a frame is to produce and simultaneously dispel distinctions between inside and outside worlds,” observed the art historian Irene Small. “It is to treat the liminality of the frame as a generative structure – a structure with which to fold.” Burgos’s sculptures invite us in, but as soon as we delve into their surfaces, we find ourselves transported to the other side. Such a phenomenology undermines the rigidity of art historical categories like painting and sculpture while calling attention to our own constantly shifting relationship to objects in space. In Small’s words, it is a penetrable “structure that is both a shelter for the body (or bodies) and an externalization of the body’s skeleton.”

Burgos admits he was initially reluctant to engage with the conventions of painting, that most canonical of mediums, but says his latest works “wanted” to hang from the wall. You can almost sense this in their intriguingly ambiguous forms. Their sculpted surfaces break up the flatness essential to the modernist picture plane. Meanwhile, the paint has been scraped away from some sections, like flesh from bone. See, for instance, the scratched incisions in the large squiggle at the centre of Blotter, its umber colour laid down in loose, undulating strokes so it appears to still be wet. The work moves from translucence to opacity and back again, as Burgos applied various materials – including charcoal, oils, and polyurethane wood stain – with different brushes as well as a spray bottle. Meanwhile, certain colours and gestures have been chosen to enhance optical effect: the yellow lozenge in Belfry, for example, fills and deepens a central dimple on its support. The shaded or darkly outlined edges around these works affirm their insistent three-dimensionality, inscribing each within a self-contained frame.

There’s a commonly held myth that the famously loose, splashy gestures of Abstract Expressionist painting were spontaneous and unmediated. As Hal Foster has noted, artists from Jackson Pollock to Franz Kline controlled what were meant to be read as outbursts of id. The concretion of abstract marks in Burgos’s work are no more accidental. Instead, they transform painting’s flat, static support into an unstable and constantly shifting ground. This position reveals a certain irreverence for the canon, as it torques and distends art historical mediums to their breaking point. And yet, Burgos isn’t just taking us along for a ride: each of his sinuous fiberglass constructions invites us to move around them and witness them change before our eyes. In this way, the artist seems to acknowledge our agency as viewers, and the fact that no two subjective experiences of art – even by the same person – will ever be alike. As his works evolve along with our perception, but one constant remains: no matter the angle, they never stop singing.

**- Evan Moffitt, September 2023**

Ernesto Burgos (Chilean-American, b. 1979, Santa Clara, CA) lives and works in New York, NY. Burgos was born in Santa Clara, CA and raised in Chile. In 2004, he earned a BFA from the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, CA followed by an MFA from New York University in 2008. Burgos’ work has exhibited across the U.S. and internationally, most notably in solo exhibitions at Parrasch Heijnen, Los Angeles, CA; AK Contemporary, Cologne, DE; Kate Werble Gallery, New York, NY; Julian Cadet, Paris, FR; the Goma, Madrid, SP; Nino Mier, Los Angeles, CA; Halsey McKay, East Hampton, NY; David Castillo, Miami FL; Ross+Kramer Gallery, East Hampton, NY; Galeria Revolver, Lima, PE; and is part of the public collection of Kunstmuseum Magdeburg in Magdeburg, DE.