

Gustavo Pérez

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In ceramics as in music, it is clear, with subtle precision, how little one needs in order to create a new, marvelous form. A piece of ceramics is born from a bit of matter that is essentially just earth and water, an ordinary, shapeless mass out of which it is nevertheless possible to build an entire universe. Like a sonata or a sonnet, a clay bowl grows from itself, feeding off of its own insides, so to speak. Painting requires much more: canvas, paints, brushes. Ceramics can be made from any garden, or even the smallest plot of land where some kind of dirt can be dug up; hence the infinitely varied hues in ceramics, from the darkest black to the most luminous white, ranging through every shade of gray, red, and yellow.

Gustavo Pérez once did this exercise in reverse: he started with a beautiful sand-colored vase and compressed it in several stages, whereby the original object—the use value of which was its capacity to be filled with water, with flowers—gradually lost its functionality and increasingly became pure form. In other words, through its own deformation, the pot paradoxically assumed the forms of a series of enigmatic presences, sinuous, enveloping beings devoid of any precise meaning but no less evocative for it. In the end—a subtle surprise—the initial vase was returned to what it had been at its origin: a mass, a blob of earthen material within which every form in the world was nevertheless stored *in potentia*.

Pérez's work always involves the possibility of drawing a whole out of clay; that is, attempting to exhaust all the ways that substance, clay, can become a tangible body. Perhaps that is why form is one of the terms that comes to us from the Greek *morphē*, which is also the root for Morpheus, the creator of forms, and thus the god of dreams. No one knows exactly how the spontaneous forms of dreams are produced, over which the dreamer seems to have no control whatsoever. The same is true of the ceramics presented here, for they sometimes give the impression that their creator is not the artist but rather form itself, manifesting itself as it pleases. In that regard, it is organic, even when it is geometrical, because it tends toward a diversity that can only be compared to that of primordial life. Right before our eyes, it brings to life the vast epoch of the plants and organisms that first populated the world, infinitely heterogeneous forms that the artist nevertheless knows how to tie together, as if uniting them with an invisible thread.

Five decades have passed since that young, unfocused student—who took a bit of engineering, then mathematics and a smattering of philosophy—first encountered clay. As he put it, this discovery entailed "the fascination and formidable challenge of delving into a world I was completely ignorant about, whose ancient secrets I would only be able to access by mastering the craft." Since then, his initial intuition that "this was what [he] wanted and needed, contact with a material that you touch, that you work with your hands" has remained intact. Immersed in a meditative reverie (as Gaston Bachelard called the daydream that meditates "on the nature of things"), Pérez sees clay not as a mere constitutive principle, but as a creative force. The difference here is key: he is not a potter

who makes pieces that might be beautiful but are repetitive and fundamentally practical, but rather an artist who seeks to reach the heart of matter and cause plastic possibilities to emerge from it spontaneously. As he has said, "I follow the clay, wherever it may lead me."

Over the years, Pérez has developed an expansive body of work that challenges the rigidity of the traditional corpus of a craftsman on all sides. Although he has mastered his craft to perfection, his aim is not to confine himself to the canons of the utilitarian object, but rather to push beyond the notion of ceramics so vigorously that his work merges with the most imaginative—and, I would almost dare to say, oneiric—sculpture. This could be why he tends to work in very long series, with one form following another like a sequence of musical variations. An initial form will give rise to a second, which will pick up the main features of the first—its color or the illustration on its surface, for example—while altering them, and these will then be explored further in a third form, a fourth, and however many follow. When the pieces are viewed together, this combination of patience and enthusiasm presents us with the successive modification of a single theme that has been dissected into all of its component resources. Pérez has explained that his series end not because he reaches "the feeling that the theme has been exhausted," but rather because suddenly something else will "grab [his] interest and pull [him] in another direction." And so he starts afresh the game of echoes and reverberations through which his ceramic work lays claim to its profound originality.

The key word here is process, for Pérez believes that getting to work is more important than the anticipated results. To be sure, the results can be marvelous, but he would never arrive at them without being aware of the inescapability of exploring and moving through matter. The point is not to rush down the path in order to arrive at the final form, but rather to unwrap that form slowly, to find it with his hands, little by little. As a result, these works take us beyond simple contemplation, beckoning us to imagine the process that brought them into being. That is, they invite us to follow them not just with our eyes—for there is always much to see in them—but also with our hands. One can hardly resist wanting to touch them and feel their texture, their topographical development. As images that retain their manual origin, they easily awaken our active being, our desire to partake of their form.

Then there is everything that Gustavo Pérez adds, with his highly personal style. Furrows, protuberances, cavities, fissures, orifices, reliefs, holes, appendages, and of course color—almost always black, but also every now and then a yellow, a blue, a green. It is here that Pérez acts as an illustrator, producing strokes—at times slender like a strand of hair, at times deep like blade wounds—forming the skin that characterizes his works almost from the start. Thus he creates the surface: cutting it, creating volumes and contrasts out of it by superimposing miniscule perspectives that recall landscapes, fish scales, star-filled skies. This desire to organize the external face of his works is occasionally expressed as an intense schematization; that is, through geometrical crisscrossing, series of parallel incisions, constant features, grids. But here there is also the instinctive, free abstractionism based on movement that produces more lyrical, playful compositions. In both cases, it is nevertheless a matter of making energy visible, as the poet Juan Eduardo Cirlot would say, "in its rhythms, in forms that order and constrict, or in forms that expand and unleash."

Finally, it must be said that Pérez does not declare himself a total opponent to craftsmanship. Some of his pieces even retain some of their usefulness; e.g., dishes and pitchers that could be used in everyday life, if one were bold enough to dirty them. He sees his work not as being in contradiction with that of the traditional craftsman, but rather as a consequence of it. The point of departure, as I have said, is not whether or not to make something functional, but rather to push form to its ultimate consequences, which is why this exhibition also features pieces that openly reject usefulness in order to delve into a universe that could be called architectural, consisting of small, drab green, utopian models and tiny sand castles that have been built to delight us with their spontaneity and their deliberate lack of tethers.