



John Sparagana
GD #3: Cairo, Tahrir Square Protest, Morris Louis "Unfurled Series: Beta Ro" (1959-60), Hélio Oiticica, "Metesquema" (1958)
2011
Sliced and mixed archival inkjet prints, acrylic on paper
59 x 88 inches
Image courtesy of the artist and Bryan Miller Gallery

John Sparagana

Bryan Miller Gallery, Houston
Through October 22
by Benjamin Lima

In John Sparagana's recent work, photographic prints become a kind of textile: cut to ribbons, multiplied then woven back together in a shimmering, engrossing fabric. The source images are legible, but stretched out by the process creating a kind of interference in our view of the images, as though we were seeing them through a window screen, or perhaps a very thin film of water. Most of the source images depict crowds of people; four in particular show those gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square as part of last spring's protests against President Hosni Mubarak.

At Bryan Miller Gallery, two series of these works, all from this year, are on view. A group of five smaller works is generated from magazine pages that are fatigued then cut apart and reassembled on paper. Also, three larger works, identified with *GD* in the title, are made from sliced and reconstructed archival inkjet prints overlaid with painted (oil pastel or acrylic) quotes from Kazimir Malevich, Morris Louis and Hélio Oiticica.

The works made from magazine pages utilize a technique of fatiguing the glossy pages, generating a more matte surface, before the mixing procedure begins. In each of these pieces, most of the surface shows the results of this distressing, which yields a faded and indistinct image; but at the same time, a small section of each surface is brighter and clearer, drawing our attention to a small section of the crowd. The effect is like a camera lens focused on a selected target. In a paranoid interpretation of *Untitled (Tahrir Square Crowd)*, we could imagine this as the point of view from operatives of the Mubarak regime conducting surveillance on persons of interest.

The works in the *GD* series align several types of meaning, overlaying them on one another. Two of these meanings deployed by Sparagana explore the phenomenon of multiplicity: first, the strips of image woven

together like threads into cloth, and second, the individuals who swarm together in the depicted crowds. The third is less obvious but should not be neglected: the symbolic associations of the modernist paintings that Sparagana juxtaposes with the mixed photos. Malevich's Suprematist paintings are icons of the Russian Revolution, and in particular, of the avant-garde dream of a utopian future that would entail the individual's joyous absorption into a larger collective^[1]. In fact, the photographs of the Tahrir Square crowds look like just such an instance of the people coming together in mass for a political revolution: a happier parallel to the Russia of 1917. Meanwhile, Oiticica's *Metaesquemias* belonged to the Neoconcretist movement which emphasized a sense of vitality in the experience of art. Oiticica's quadrilateral forms seem to jostle together, to pulse and move on the surface of the picture. As used by Sparagana, this kind of rippling, pulsing motion has a definite parallel to the experience of being in the midst of a great crowd of people—the delirious ecstasy of a rave or a political rally. Altogether, both of these modernist painters refer to elements of experience that closely relate to the subject matter of the source photographs.

Sparagana's rich work allows one to dwell on both their reference to social reality—the experience of multiplicity in the events of Tahrir Square—and on their formal complexity—the integration of multiple media and kinds of surface. That richness makes their references more than mere quotations, but elements of an active, dynamic dialogue.

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[1] Malevich wrote: "Collectivism" is one of the paths marked out on the road map which leads to the 'world-man,' but perhaps it is still no more than one of the necessary crossings on the main highway, restraining the millions of egos; it offers no more than an instantaneous convergence of forces, on their way to perfecting the image of 'being'; in it each ego preserves its individual force, but if we want to attain perfection, the self must be annihilated – just as religious fanatics annihilate themselves in the face of the divine, so the modern saint must annihilate himself in the face of the 'collective'..." Quoted in T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 2001), p. 226.

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