

Armando Reverón: *Prisoner of the Air*

Prisoner of the air,  
you are now in its whistling,  
which dings you,  
and in the silenced weft of time,  
nothing sustains you:  
only the voice that summons you to walk  
over the spume  
only the traveling chant that announces you a  
fishing of clouds, miraculous.<sup>1</sup>

Luis Pérez-Oramas, *Prisoner of the Air*, 2008

Andrew Edlin Gallery is pleased to present *Armando Reverón: Prisoner of the Air*, the artist's first solo exhibition in the United States since his 2007 retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (MoMA). Despite his rare recognition outside Latin America, particularly beyond his home country of Venezuela, Armando Reverón's (1889-1954) oeuvre stands as an essential body of work in the discourse of modern art. His practice engages deeply with investigations into the nature of painting as a medium, explorations of light, the subversion of linear and hierarchical conventions, and the reconfiguration of artistic canons. The complexity of an artist who received formal artistic training in Caracas, Barcelona, Madrid, and Paris was overshadowed by the constructed image of an eccentric, misunderstood genius living in isolation in a hut on the Caribbean coast—an image often reinforced by Reverón himself, who was fascinated by the theatricalization of his own existence.

While acknowledging the institutional efforts and the growing openness of the global contemporary art scene toward Latin American artists, there remains an urgent need for systematic and sustained engagement from audiences outside the region with an artist of such stature—one who achieved remarkable milestones both in his lifetime and in his enduring legacy. Although this exhibition features works from what is considered his most recognized period, centered around his so-called white landscapes—including *Vista del Playón* (*Beach View*, 1929) and *Figura con Paisaje* (*Figure with Landscape*, 1938)—and its ricochets—such as *Muelle de Las Goletas* (*The Barquetines' Pier*, 1941) and *Litoral Guaireño* (*La Guaira's Coastline*, 1943)—it also sheds light on lesser-known yet critically significant moments in his

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<sup>1</sup> This is an excerpt translated into English from a poem written in Spanish by Venezuelan poet and art historian Luis Pérez-Oramas (Caracas, 1960), published in the eponymous book in 2008. Pérez-Oramas is the most significant living authority on the life and work of Armando Reverón. He was a professor of history and theory of art at the Armando Reverón University Institute of Higher Studies in Plastic Arts in Caracas, and has written several texts about the artist, including the essay collection *Armando Reverón: de los prodigios de la luz a los trabajos del arte* (Museum of Contemporary Art of Caracas, 1990), and the text Armando Reverón and Modern Art in Latin America in the catalogue for the exhibition *Armando Reverón* (2007) at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, where Pérez-Oramas served as curator of Latin American Art from 2003 to 2017. The excerpt from the original poem in Spanish reads as follows: "Prisionero del aire, / ahora estás en su silbido, / que te aturde, / y en la urdimbre callada de los tiempos / nada te sostiene: / sólo la voz que te llama a caminar / sobre la espuma / sólo el canto viajero que te anuncia / una pesca de nubes, milagrosa." This text is dedicated to Luis Pérez-Oramas.

career, presenting pivotal works such as *La Cueva* (*The Cave*, 1920), *Paisaje* (*Landscape*, 1922), and *Desnudo* (*Nude*, 1948). To present Reverón's work is not only to celebrate his artistic excellence but also to engage in a critical endeavor—one that challenges established narratives and reaffirms his rightful place in the history of modern art.

A rigid art historiography might categorize Reverón—considering his generation and the artistic context surrounding him—within the Escuela de Caracas ("The Caracas School"), a landscape painting movement that held significant prominence in Venezuela's artistic milieu. This group, which emerged from what remained of the Circulo de Bellas Artes, was characterized by a keen engagement with European Impressionism, where colorism played a pivotal role. Their approach was primarily defined by *en plein air* painting and the development of a landscape model shaped by the portrayal of a modest coastal city set against the backdrop of a dominant mountain range—Caracas and the Ávila Mountain, respectively.

Similarities with this aesthetic system can be found in works from what we might call Reverón's "Spanish period"—paintings created around the time of his studies in Spain (1911–1914), where he was taught by José Ruiz Blasco (1838–1913), the father of Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). This phase—more visual than strictly chronological, given his comings and goings—is exemplified here by the masterful *Paisaje* (*Landscape*, 1922) and *Entrada de una casa* (*Entry of a House*, 1919), where the canvases are dominated almost entirely by dense, vibrant, and incisive brushstrokes. Though his time in Spain fostered works of this kind, it was during this period that he immersed himself in the works of Francisco de Goya (1746–1828), whose theatricality and intensity—as well as his portrayals of nude *majas*, such as *La maja desnuda* (*The Nude Maja*, 1800)—would later heavily influence Reverón's practice. This is evident in *Figura con paisaje* (*Figure with Landscape*, 1938), a significant study for the pivotal *La Maja Criolla* (*The Creole Maja*, 1939), a painting open to critical readings ranging from biblical scenes to allegories on the racial mixing incited by the European invasion of Latin America in colonial times. Similarly, Goya's influence permeates *La Cueva* (*The Cave*, 1920). In this enigmatic and historical painting, ghostly muses emerge beneath a mystical blue veil of light, central to what is understood as his symbolist "blue period."<sup>2</sup> It does not seem like a coincidence that a cave, an ultimate allegory of seclusion, is presented by Reverón in the very year that precedes his moving to Macuto seeking seclusion—or liberty during the political madness in urban Venezuela at the time. About this painting, John Elderfield writes: "The blurry blue paint glazed over *The Cave* invokes a mist of perfumed smoke that, in a nicely irreverent touch, just clears enough for us to notice the crucifix on the necklace of one of the temptresses in their subterranean venue."<sup>3</sup>

However, the connection between the Escuela de Caracas and Reverón's work is merely chronological and, for a certain period, social—linked through figures like Nicolás Ferdinandov (1886–1925), César Prieto (1882–1976), Samys Mützner (1884–1959), and Emilio Boggio (1857–1920), all painters with ties to Europe. In almost every way, Reverón's mature practice

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<sup>2</sup> *La Cueva*, among the 1922's *Paisaje* exhibited in this show, are considered seminal paintings of Reverón's so-called "blue period" (1920–1924), a categorization coined by Alfredo Boulton in an attempt to establish a parallel with the chromatic phases that historiographically divide Pablo Picasso's works – this would also happen in a "white period," between 1925 and 1933.

<sup>3</sup> John Elderfield, "The Natural History of Armando Reverón." In: *Armando Reverón*. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007, p. 22.

stands in opposition to the principles of the *pintores del Ávila*. The pronounced chromaticism of the group gives way in his work to a subdued—almost monochromatic—exploration of light and shadow. The opulence of thickly applied, vibrant pigments that define forms is replaced by a delicate interplay between paint and surface, where the exposed weave of the unpainted canvas becomes an integral visual and conceptual element—not only in the images he depicted but also in the tautological nature of his oeuvre. This haptic visuality in Reverón's work extends to his creation of objects, which often served as models for his paintings—such as his extensive collection and production of dolls (*muñecas*)—or simply as elements inhabiting his world at *El Castillete*. He was drawn to the countershot of what his contemporaries painted: like a mirror<sup>4</sup> inverting the *Escuela de Caracas*'s perspective, his works offer a view of the Ávila mountain from the coast rather than the other way around (from the Caracas' valley.)<sup>5</sup> Rather than serving as a geological barrier enclosing the city, the mountain emphasized an expansive sense of landscape—or of painting itself. In this way, Reverón positions landscape not merely as an image or theme but as a dialectical tool.

In 1921, the artist chose to retreat to Macuto, a coastal Caribbean village, with his lifelong partner and model, Juanita Ríos (1904-1972), settling in *El Castillete* (The Little Castle), a kind of hut solely built by himself and Ríos that encapsulated their own world. There, metaphorically blinded and illuminated by the absolute Caribbean sun, he developed his striking white paintings. *Vista de Playón* (Beach View, 1929) is a painting of daytime light, one of the most exultant and least melancholic, where the blue sea is bordered by an infinity of palm trees in shades of white, beige, and touches of green, expanding into infinity as it negotiates pictorial space with the absence of paint. What Reverón accidentally discovers is the body of painting itself as a safeguard for the representation of painting. What sustains the corporeality of the world in a state of blind, hollowed painting is the raw canvas—the very platform of painting. By understanding the disappearance of the visible as the body of its own medium, unconcerned with resolving the grand problems and theories of modernity, Reverón strikes at the heart of the conditions of modern art.

Around the mid-1930s, Reverón's reclusion also aligned with a growing preference for interior scenes, where he investigated the behavior of light in enclosed spaces rather than the blinding, tropical midday sun. In *Desnudo* (Nude, 1948), for instance, one can see in the background the curtain system Reverón built in *El Castillete* to tame the light to his liking and illuminate the nude bodies he painted—whether living models or dolls. As with all movements in Reverón's practice, there is a cyclical nature, avoiding strict chronological lineages. A return to landscape painting emerged in the early 1940s, exemplified in this exhibition by the masterful *Litoral Guaireño* (La Guaira's Coastline, 1943). While it shares the reduced visual system and suggested forms of his white paintings, as well as the tactility of the painted surface—in this case, the roughness and sepia tone of burlap—Reverón's later landscapes are increasingly concerned with the decisive presence of shadow, counterbalancing the absolute blindness of light in his earlier white paintings. In his final works, this exhibition also highlights a significant last

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<sup>4</sup> As a metaphorical synthesis within Reverón's own work, I highlight the centrality of his object *Espejo* [Mirror], 1940s, bamboo, paper, aluminum foil, and wire, 43 3/4 x 24 7/16 inches, Collection Fundación Museos Nacionales, Caraves, Venezuela.

<sup>5</sup> There are, however, some exceptions to this compositional approach, such as *Paisaje de La Guaira* (La Guaira's Landscape, 1941) and *Calle de La Guaira* (La Guaira's Street, 1942).

series: his self-portraits. These compositions maintain the same pose but feature varying backgrounds, a prime example of which is *Autorretrato con pumpá* (*Self-Portrait with Top Hat*, 1947), included in this exhibition.<sup>6</sup>

In many photographs taken at El Castillete, Reverón appears painting shirtless, with a tightly bound cloth cinched around his abdomen. He claimed to do this to separate the two energies of the body, as if painting could not be contaminated by what came from below the waist. This physical understanding of his own energy flows aligns with a path his work always seemed to follow: *kenosis*, the theological process of emptying one's own will in acceptance of divine desire. The world is emptied—vision, light, painting, home, conventions, and the self are all stripped away. Yet this emptiness is material; it can pierce the retina, be placed on a canvas, and even be imposed by a fabric that compresses and divides the body in two. Reverón both remains and escapes, simultaneously, consigned to madness, isolated in his hut, surrounded by his dolls and masks, trapped in his own freedom—a prisoner of the air.

Mateus Nunes, PhD

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<sup>6</sup> Reverón also painted a self-portrait with a Venezuelan top hat (*pumpá*) in 1949, *Autorretrato con pumpá* [*Self-portrait with top hat*], and a beardless version wearing the same type of hat in 1948, *Autorretrato con muñecas y pumpá* [*Self-portrait with top hat and dolls*]. The use of his dolls (*muñecas*) as the figures composing the self-portraits' backgrounds was predominant in this series.