

Powerage

Juan Bolivar has described *Powerage* the 1978 album by AC/DC as their most authentic. For heavy rock enthusiasts it has a purity within it. It's one hundred percent rock-and-roll, but with its intermingling of biography and fiction, it's pure storytelling as well. That Bolivar has chosen *Powerage* as the title for his second solo presentation at JGM Gallery makes twisted sense, as his new paintings also entwine narratives with purity – the supposed purity and reception of late modernist painting.¹

In *Maestà* (2020-21), Charlie Brown quizzically stares out from the middle of a Morris Louis painting. The principal protagonist in the famous US comic strip *Peanuts* however is mute. His mouth is absent, removed in what is otherwise a faithful depiction of this much-loved cartoon character. He is also hemmed in and trapped in a void between two bands of painted rivulets which typify Louis' *Unfurled* series of paintings. These works, which Louis made between 1960 and 1961, are the Washington Colour School artist's most well-known paintings and were created by pouring and soaking liquid paint onto unprimed canvas. Bolivar's treatment is very different, however. He has painted both Charlie Brown, the raw canvas, and the painted stains through a deft and matter-of-fact use of stencils and masking. This process, which is similar within all of Bolivar's works, gives these acrylic paintings a hard-edged smooth feel. It is a quality that is completely foreign to Louis' integration of colour into an untouched physical picture-plane, but it sits harmoniously with the more graphic look of the Charles M Schultz cartoon figure. Indeed, it is reminiscent of the look and feel of the flat-colour in painted cell-based animation.

Although started in the 1950s as a newspaper funny, it was a decade later that *Peanuts* really came of age. In the 1960s, the same decade that saw Louis create visual clarity with his series of *Unfurled* paintings, Charlie and the gang not only left the page, and became animations, but also found themselves commenting, through having strong female characters, cross-racial friendships and pointed gnomonic narratives on societal issues. Bolivar's paintings, by jamming together references from high-art modernist painting with retro-cartoons, also speak directly to both society and culture. It is no coincidence that Bolivar's mute Charlie Brown is alone. He was painted in a year of covid-lockdowns. His isolation and inability to speak is testament to our own isolation this past year. And hidden within other, but not all of these seemingly happy-go-lucky paintings are subtle references to being trapped, blocked-out or released. Indeed, is there in at least one of the exhibited works, a discrete but even more direct commentary on this past year? Could the depiction of a blind Donald Duck in *The Healing of the Blind* (2021) be a reference to another blind Donald, Trump?

In modernism, popular culture and abstract painting are often seen to inhabit completely different worlds. With the former expunged at all costs from the latter, in pursuit of a formal and self-referential dialogue with the materiality and qualities of painting itself. Bolivar brings these ideas together. In doing so he reminds us that the history of cartoons and comics runs parallel

1 Pertinent to the title *Powerage* intersecting directly with the reception of modernist painting is how the title links for Bolivar with that of Bruce Barber, Serge Guilbaut and John O'Brian publication *Voices of Fire: Art, Rage, Power, and The State*. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996. This book recounts the acquisition of Barnett Newman *Voice of Fire* (1967) by the National Gallery of Canada in 1989 and the ensuing financial and aesthetic controversy.

Maestà, 2020-21
Acrylic on Canvas, 143 x 187cm



to the development of modernist abstract painting. Both are, after all, visual idioms that have deep roots in the nineteenth century, that they slowly move away from as a more reduced visual language emerged. Both are essentially modernist languages - one high, one low - and both in different ways are indebted to the visual revolution of cubism. A revolutionary form of representation that shattered the traditional picture-plane, with its multiple, non-objective viewpoints, and which emerged in dialogue with popular culture such as developments in modern advertising and typography, as well as with past painting.²

The entwining of these parallel histories is sometimes played out directly. In *The Flood* (2020) Bolivar depicts the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian's painting *Composition B (No.II) with Red* (1935) with a linear depiction of one of the magic brooms from the 'Sorcerer's Apprentice' section of Walt Disney's animated film *Fantasia* (1940). In Bolivar's hands Mondrian's carefully balanced composition - one that sought a visual equilibrium through limited colours and carefully tuned planes and lines - has been wilfully disrupted by the imposition of a cartoon dynamic. Through visual subterfuge, the 'pure' plastic harmony has been disrupted. Yet this is not just an arbitrary coming together. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly Mondrian was deeply appreciative of Disney animations and popular music. After he moved to New York in 1940, he saw *Fantasia* a number of times. This was, though, a transatlantic love affair. Mondrian saw Disney's *Snow White* (1937) in Paris in 1938, and in the same year after he had moved to London sent a series of postcards to his brother where he recounted his new surroundings through the prism of the film, signing himself off as Sleepy.³ *The Flood* reflects both visually and theoretically on this entanglement. In doing so Bolivar collapses art historical hierarchies whilst considering how the private and the public intermingle. This meshing is of course pointed not just at Mondrian, but at the artist himself. These painting also reflect on Bolivar's

2 The relationship between popular culture and early modernism was explored in Kirk Varnedoe, Adam Gopnik, *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991; for a history of early cartoon animation see: Adam Gopnik, 'Hot Ice-Cream Dreams, The marvellously mixed-up masters of early animated cartoons', *New Yorker*, 28 December 2020, pp.78-81

3 Simon Grant, *Hello from 'Sleepy'*, London: Tate Etc, September 2010



Baptism, 2020-21
Acrylic on Canvas, 150 x 150cm



Spring Call, 1961, by Kenneth Noland
Acrylic on Canvas, 209 x 209cm

own ongoing and deep love of high modernism and its disconnects - be that in paintings, the utopian modernist architecture of Caracas, where he spent his very earliest years, the TV cartoons of his later childhood or within the exhibition's title; the rock music of his adolescence.

Kenneth Noland's *Spring Call* from 1961 is one of a number of that artist's classic circle paintings, that Bolivar has appropriated within his work. Here perhaps the connections are more dead-pan and visual. The concentric circles which stain this Washington colourist's canvas end with a soft pink. This colour seems to dictate Bolivar's choice of the Pink Panther being superimposed on to Noland's rings of colour. In *Baptism* (2021) Bolivar has noticed how the composition of *Spring Call* also echoes the closing circles of a Looney Tunes cartoon. Although the Pink Panther is a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer figure his general mischievousness makes his sauntering across an echo of their credit line, or indeed an actual Noland painting, highly appropriate. But that's not all folks, the way the figure in Bolivar's painting is in fact in front of the stencilled and cartooned work by Noland, also opens up a much older dialogue about pictorial space. This is not concerned, however, with debates about modernist flatness that so concerned Noland and his circle, rather, the shallow depth that Bolivar has created through the flatness of the cartoon figure imposed onto the flatness of painted background link to a similar pictorial depth in Italian *trecento* painting. In works, by Giotto or Duccio a similar measure can be seen. Bolivar has referenced this debate directly by titling the Charlie Brown painting *Maestà*, a title taken from Duccio's altarpiece which itself can be seen as response to the development of pictorial space in Giotto's work. These Italian paintings, frescos and altarpieces also often utilise storytelling through the use of repeated panels or frames. Frames that can be read much like a comic strip. And these early Renaissance paintings were through their internal geometry, flatness and visual clarity instrumental to the development of formalist criticism in the early twentieth century. Criticism which was so instrumental to the development of modernist painting. In Bolivar's hands these references, nods, connections and conjectures are far from arbitrary.



Maestà, Duccio di Buoninsegna, 1308–1311

That Bolivar chooses Colourfield painting as the lodestone for this exhibition reflects an understanding that those late modernist works marked the end of something and the beginning of something else. Although championed in formalist circles for their pure opticality they perhaps also latently contained an echo of the popular culture outside of what was supposedly their *raison d'être*. To the dogmatism of pure formal abstraction any such contamination was heresy. It has been argued by the American painter David Reed that the bold colours in Barnett Newman's *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue III* (1967-68), a painting that Bolivar himself references in a work, echoes the colours in pop art and of the fictional superhero from DC Comics, Superman.⁴ If some Colourfield works hinted at a mass-produced world through their use of colour, then their clean and clear visual compositions can also be seen to resonate with the logos and insignia of corporate America. Bolivar's paintings in *Powerage* further complicate these observations as they bring those worlds together but also solicit the projection of narrative on to them that is both real and fictional. These are paintings shaped by connections and quotations from within art history and popular culture that are tempered by more subjective and personal leanings. In that respect Bolivar's use of other people's images is miles away from the post-modern pick-and-mix aesthetic of painters such as David Salle, where he just "took images because it was easier than making them up, like using ready-made paint in the sixties".⁵ Rather it is a borrowing that is more akin to T S Eliot's belief that to electively use another's image one must have something spontaneously like the feeling which created the original image. Bolivar inhabits this feeling – with a love and respect for his sources – but also realises their twisted intertextual connections.

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4 David Reed, artist talk in association with Barnett Newman, London: Tate Modern, 20 September 2002 –5 January 2003

5 David Salle quoted in, Peter Schjeldahl, *An Interview with David Salle*, New York: Avedon/Vintage Books, 1987, p.37