

One summer my father and I were driving cross-country to the east coast of Venezuela. We were heading to Puerto La Cruz – a port from which we would board a ferry to Margarita – the Island where my father was born. We left early before sunrise around 3:00 am. The old 'carretera' de Caracas, now replaced by a highway, meant exiting the city was no longer the treacherous journey through winding mountainous roads I remembered as a child. Even so the cross-country drive to Cumana would take approximately eight hours. The long road flanked either side by vegetation would occasionally become a flatland interrupted only by fading cigarette advertisements or Pepsi-Cola billboards, concrete and breezeblock restaurants and restrooms with hand-painted signs the only other signs of life. As the sun rose, the radio would keep us company on a road trip without many stops or exits. For the journey my father would prepare camomile tea and cold chicken. The car had no air-conditioning; a white Mercedes-Benz (off-white to be precise) which my parents bought straight from the dealership in Germany in 1969 when the 'Bolivar' was strong. Now over twenty years old the cracked upholstery bore witness to its life in the tropics, but 'El Mercedes' was as reliable as you get and never broke-down in all its years of service. My father had a near mystical relationship with this car. It took us to remote parts of Venezuela from the Caribbean, to the Andes, to the Medanos de Coro – a small desert in the west coast of Venezuela. We grew up in this car like it was an extended family home; driving to school, the 'UCV' (the university where my parents taught), Judo lessons, bowling on the weekends, and drive-in cinema nights followed by visits to 'Tropi Burger'. Over time my father developed a short-hand, sign-language to communicate through the car like morse code. A long toot of the horn, followed by a short toot – repeated twice – announcing whenever he was near home; always at a steady pace no matter how keen he was to get back. My father was a good driver who kept to the speed limit other than when overtaking vehicles. The journey to Cumana was steady except for delays when encountering large trucks known in Venezuela as 'gandolas' – a word originating in the 1950s when Italian construction workers building roads in Venezuela would refer to the trucks and transportation vehicles they had brought to the country as *gondolas*, a term that would later become assimilated as 'gandolas'. Overtaking a gandola was a skilled art on a one-lane road, with oncoming traffic restricting opportunities. Skilfully timing these moments, my father would accelerate, calculating with precision the opportune moment for overtaking. The intense heat on the tarmac would occasionally create a mirage illusion of water appearing in the distance as vehicles approached. It was around 8.00 am, roughly halfway on our journey, when a large leaf fell from a tree in front of us. The tree in question was not of a North American variety where leaves would at most be the size of an outstretched hand, but this leaf fell from a tropical tree variety resembling a palm tree normally found on a beach. Green-brown leaves extending onto the road, we noticed one falling slowly, so large that at first, we believed this to be an animal like a 'pereza' (sloth). My father slammed the breaks slowing down; eventually driving over what we could now see was a leaf. Picking up speed again we saw a gandola in the distance. As it neared my father began to time his moment to overtake, when 30-40 metres away the gandola's back doors swung open revealing what can only be described as a giant tyre; two metres tall staring at us like a raging bull about to be released. From this point time moved very quickly but very slowly like in a movie; the left back door now fully opened outstretched onto the road as the tyre began to roll forward leaping out of the back of the truck – hitting the ground and bouncing hard like a rubber ball from a game of 'Jacks'. The giant tyre may have bounced directly in front of us, or perhaps after a second bounce leapt over. Either way, the tyre taller than a car, bounced inches away from our bonnet as we saw this fly above us, land behind and roll away into the distance. My father and I looked at each other in disbelief and without words, but with the suspicion that somehow the fortuitous falling leaf may have instigated an alternative sequence of events. Later that evening we related the story to my mother. She exclaimed how at that time in the morning she had suddenly woken up shouting "Yaya protect them". Yaya: my mother's mother, who appeared to her in a dream on this day the anniversary of her death. During this period in the early 1990s I made paintings in a gestural manner depicting floating orbs one could loosely describe as planets. The planets became structures resembling colourful scaffoldings; later reducing my palette and motifs further still into hard-edge compositions. I spent the next years until the mid-90s making a series of paintings where the letter E was repeated in five colours set within a white border. By the late 90s other configurations had appeared gradually becoming colour-fields. The colour-fields were empty and void of form until the millennium when circles reappeared, not as planets but globes set within facialities; like eyes looking at the viewer.