Albert Contreras

Teaching with the University Collection

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“I want to [...] paint, paint, and paint! And leave as much of a mark as I can before my time is ended on this planet!”

(Albert Contreras)
PROPOSED GIFT TO WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

"24 UNTITLED WORKS 2004-05" ACRYLIC ON LINEN
12" X 14" EACH (5'6" X 9'6" OVERALL) ALBERT CONTRERAS

“Looking back on it now, when I eliminated the little circle in the middle, I removed the personal, emotional and expressive element from my work. It became a mere idea that lacked feeling.” [2] - Albert Contreras
“I stopped painting because I had set out to do what I wanted to do and it came to an end. I had followed my art to its logical conclusion and there was nothing to do but stop. Anything else felt arbitrary; it wouldn’t have had any integrity.”

(Albert Contreras, cited in David Pagel, “Coming Full Circle, and Then Some,” Los Angeles Times, June 24, 2001.)
“Mies van de Rohe’s ‘less is more’ was my mantra. [...] I felt I’d pushed myself into oblivion. I’d lost the passion and maybe a little faith in myself. It was heartbreaking for me.”

(-Albert Contreras, Cited in E.N., “Back to the Future,” CUE Art, September 17, 2001.)
“I don’t know why 25 years had to pass. I was aware of what was going on around me. Of course I’s go to galleries and museums. But that wasn’t enough to get me started. For reasons I can’t explain, something in me just clicked. It was time to paint. I said to myself: ‘You can paint again. There’s something to paint.’”

-Albert Contreras

Cited in David Pagel, “Coming Full Circle, and Then Some,” Los Angeles Times, June 24, 2001
“What I am trying to convey—I hope—is sort of a boldness and an energy with these Xs.”

-Albert Contreras
Albert Contreras, “Untitled” (2012), acrylic on panel, 18 x 18 inches. Photo by Magnus Stark, courtesy Peter Mendenhall Gallery. ©Albert Contreras.
“Contreras’ choreographed procedure is one way to manage what seems to me a chaotic situation in which the paintings are always threatening to take over the remaining space. They are literally everywhere you look. It doesn’t surprise me to learn that he tried to give them away shortly after he first started...”

“For a while [Contreras] wrote letters to universities and colleges all across America, offering to donate sets of twenty-four paintings to them. Albert shows me a thick three-ring binder in which he keeps copies of the correspondence and photo documentation of the installations.”


“At first glance, because of the smaller scale of these works, one thinks of gift-box covers, candy or jewelry, but these paintings reveal a more pugnacious, dangerous charm, like a drugged gangster, giddy with pleasure.”

“I’m happy and honored that my work will have a home at Washington and Lee.”

-Albert Contreras, 2005
Letter to Peter Grover, Dir. of University Collections

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Letter from Peter Grover, Director of University Collections to Albert Contreras, July 29, 2005.

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Letter from Albert Contreras to Peter Grover, Director of University Collections, 2005
“I learned that art never comes to an end. It keeps reinventing itself, in all kinds of unbelievably beautiful forms. I believe that painting is subjective and expressive and intimate. An artist has to put some of his soul into his work if people are to get anything out of it. I’m trying to express my own vision of the beauty of symmetry and the glory of color. I want to explore as many forms of symmetry as I can, with as much intensity as I can muster.”

-Albert Contreras
Art as Legacy

"Well, these are my babies. I like to think about these...all my paintings are my babies...These hopefully will live on after I'm gone. I guess that this is my form of...what it is called...transcendence? The human race transcends itself ...mostly... naturally through reproduction--through children. That way you go one living, and living, and living--a part of you--through your children. Well, I've never had children, so these I consider my children. So, if they last, then I'll go on living for a while longer, and that gives me satisfaction. And really, one of the reasons that I do it is that um...I'd like to make my mark. Everybody wants to make a mark. There are different ways. Through children, through this and that... I happen to have wanted to do it through painting. I want to leave a mark. I want to leave something behind me. And on top of it, I try to be generous. I have donated quite a few works and if I have any kind of talent then it's for this kind of things [sic] and hopefully other people will get some sort of joy out of this stuff--that I'd gotten out of it.
That's my aim--is hopefully--other people will see something that I see in these. And people have told me... they...I've had some good words from people. They say they want to grab it, they want to bite it, they want to chew it, it's like candy almost to certain people, And that's nice. I like to hear that. They lend themselves to wanting to be touched. And that's another thing that I always tell people. Don't be afraid--when they're dry of course--don't be afraid to touch them. [...] I invite people to touch my paintings, to feel them. They want to be caressed." (31:18-31:58)
### Timeline: Albert Contreras (b. 1933, Los Angeles, California)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Studied</td>
<td>at Los Angeles City College</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attended</td>
<td>Ramona Grammar School and Hollywood High School</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>in the Coast Guard during Korean War (served 2 ½ years)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1955:</td>
<td>Used GI Bill benefits to attend Los Angeles City College;</td>
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<td></td>
<td>focus in painting and ceramics</td>
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<tr>
<td>1950s:</td>
<td>Traveled to Mexico (studied at Mexico City College for six months)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>and Spain (studied at the University of Madrid for a year)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1960:</td>
<td>Moved to Stockholm, Sweden</td>
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<td>Late 1960s:</td>
<td>Moved to New York City based on advice from the Leo Castelli Gallery;</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>took a job at Sotheby’s Parke-Bernet</td>
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<tr>
<td>1972:</td>
<td>Returned to Los Angeles; abandoned painting</td>
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<td>1972-1997:</td>
<td>Worked for the City of Los Angeles as a truck driver, garbage</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>collector, and heavy equipment operator</td>
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<td>1974-1978:</td>
<td>Founded and operated the Albert Contreras Gallery on Cahuenga</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Boulevard (specialized in photorealistic paintings)</td>
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<td>1980:</td>
<td>Painted for three months; destroyed</td>
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<td>1992:</td>
<td>Retired from City of Los Angeles job</td>
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<tr>
<td>1992-1997:</td>
<td>Underwent therapy (some sources indicate that he was in therapy for 8 years)</td>
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<td>1997:</td>
<td>Contreras resumed painting; begins paintings emphasizing circular gestures</td>
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<td>1998:</td>
<td>Begins a series of grid paintings</td>
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<td>2001:</td>
<td>First solo New York show at the Bill Maynes Gallery</td>
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<td>2005:</td>
<td>Began to utilize custom-made palette knives</td>
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<td>Made gift of 24 paintings to Washington and Lee University</td>
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<td>2007:</td>
<td>Began a gestural series focused on Xs</td>
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<td>2007-09:</td>
<td>Undertook a series of taped paintings</td>
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<td>2012:</td>
<td>Began painting Os</td>
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*See bibliography for sources used to compile this biographical timeline.
Footnotes


Bibliography for further reading:


Dave Hickey, Ed Schad, David Pagel, John Yau, Albert Contreras (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2013).*


David Pagel, “Full Circles,” in Dave Hickey, Ed Schad, David Pagel, John Yau, Albert Contreras (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2013).*

Ed Schad, “There and Back Again,” in Dave Hickey, Ed Schad, David Pagel, John Yau, Albert Contreras (Seattle: Marquand Books, 2013).*


*Biographical details drawn from these sources.
Discussion question: Compare these two works in terms of Contreras’s aesthetic goals during two different periods of artistic production. In the 1960s, what artistic problems drove Contreras’s artistic quest? Explain how his aesthetic preoccupations transformed over time.


Discussion question: Read though the Contreras timeline of important life events. Construct a logical order for the 24 works donated to Washington and Lee University, none of which were dated by the artist. Explain clearly the rational for your order. Can you link some of these works to specific dates? Explain your rationale.
Discussion question: Watch the video in which Contreras demonstrates his painting technique. Now observe closely this painting (left) created by Contreras. List out the processes, in order, that Contreras undertook to create this piece. Next compare the work to another Contreras piece (right). Did he employ the same techniques to create both works? What are the differences?