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When Abstract Art Isn't

Four rising talents explore unseen content, references and meanings. BY JOSEPH JACOBS



Omar Chacon

A work like Omar Chacon's wild, colorful "Sancocho Trifasico" looks as abstract as art can be, with its peacock-feather dot-and-curve shapes streaming across the surface of the canvas. But as with much non-representational painting today, this image is highly referential. Chacon, 27, was born in Colombia but moved to the States when he was 10. Today, he resides in New York, but still feels strong ties to his Latin American heritage and hopes to establish a studio in Colombia.

"My work always comes from somewhere; it is not pure abstraction," he says. "It is always operating at a conceptual level." The dots in "Sancocho Trifasico" are quite personal, since they evoke for the artist a memory of his grandfather, a self-taught artist, making an abstract painting of small dots. The dots also came to represent people, more specifically "the masses, as in a peace protest," he says, and adds that "the metallic grays intentionally recall the armor of the Spanish

conquistadors." Actually, each oval form is in a sense an individual, since each is carefully made with a buildup of acrylic paint on a plastic surface and the acrylic then peeled off and glued onto the canvas. The starting point for his palette was the red, yellow and black of the Spanish flag, which Chacon made tropical by adding green, blue and purple—colors reminiscent of the plumage of exotic birds. They are also meant to recall the festive hues of indigenous textiles. The picture, like many of his abstractions, is meant to represent the "mestizo mix," the blending of many cultures to form the richness of contemporary Latin American life, a concept even reflected in the title: "Sancocho" is a Latin American soup that blends elements from Spain and indigenous cultures, while "trifasico" refers to the combination of meat, fish and pork in a single dish.

Representative: Greene Contemporary, Sarasota, Fla. 941.365.9406.

Kathryn Refi

It is hard to imagine that Kathryn Refi's painting "Color Recordings, Day 4" is the result of the artist strapping a video camera to her head and continuously recording her entire day, except for time spent sleeping. To make the painting—one of seven similar enormous abstract canvases "documenting" seven days—Refi streamed the video footage through a computer program that analyzes the color in every pixel of every frame. From 729 hues that Refi pre-selected, the computer identifies those colors that make up at least 0.125 percent of the pixels in that day's filming, a number she arbitrarily chose. These dominant colors then constitute each stripe, each stripe a single color, with as many as 137 stripes in a painting. At this point Refi abandons her preconceived conceptual method for making art and instead relies on her subjective powers to determine the placement of each color in her pulsating parade of vertical bars.

While evoking the non-referential formalism of Minimalism and Color Field painting, Refi's paintings are filled with light and

Kathryn Refi, "Color Recordings, Day 4," 2006, oil on panel, 61" x 100". Omar Chacon, "Sancocho Trifasico" (above, left), 2006, acrylic on canvas.

