

Topographies of the soul

by Cynthia Penna

Topography is the "Graphic Representation" of land, as seen from a plane, of a certain area of land, of reduced extension (no more than 30 km) so that the sphericity of the Earth can be neglected." (definitions from Oxford Languages).

Stephen Robert Johns is not interested in topographic maps commonly found on the market; he creates his own topographies through a reversal of topographical science, aimed to invent a totally unreal and abstract one, no longer scientifically based, but artistically. From the height of 10,000 meters of his flights between Los Angeles and Costa Rica, where he also lives and works, Johns draws new topographies; he observes the underlying ground which has a much broader horizon than the one we are used to with our limited "bottom-up" view, grasps a more curvilinear horizon and overturns the terms of the "non-spherical" view of the earth's surface (which scientifically serves to create the real topographies) focusing precisely on those curves, those waves of the ground, those sinuous lines of rivers and land that he transforms into pictorial works that transition into the artistic style named *Organic Geometry*.

Johns defines his work as pertaining to the *Spacial Organic Geometry*, that is to say an organic geometry of space where the mathematical / geometric rules undergo intense modifications of their scientific basis to delve into the world of the imaginary of art.

Stephen Robert Johns began his career immersed in the aura of Californian Minimalism; undisputed beacons of the finish / fetish movement are John McCracken, Larry Bell, Ed Moses and Robert Irwin, whose inspiration Johns merged, with European constructivism in his early development. Even more direct is the influence on Johns work that of the Hard Edge movement that builds the pictorial field divided into geometric modules in which color is applied through a clear separation of the fields with clean, marked edges.

The evolution of his art over time has undergone very particular influences, such as that of the experience in the context of the Japanese landscape, a sense of *Zen Minimalism*, with a reduction applied to his studies of the surrounding environment; and the lush Central America connection, where he divides his time between LA and San Jose, Costa Rica with his wife, Dunnia. The Central American experience determines the definitive evolution of his art from static geometry towards a pictorial structure made of color and biomorphic forms.

Nature in Costa Rica is overwhelming, "fat" and "opulent"; it is no longer made of deserts and ocean as in California, but of hills and jungles where the presence of foliage and flowers is absolute, immersive and engulfing, stretching from the Pacific to the Caribbean.

His art moves to a radical change in which the landscape becomes prominent; real landscape and unreal landscape, a "lyrical" landscape made of color and sinuous shapes that overruns towards the pure sensuality of the environment. The sensuality offered by Nature is never violent but at times it can sometimes appear aggressive in its externalization of shapes and colors because nature lives, transforms, follows rules that have to do with reproduction, birth and death.

The original geometric constructivism is "softened" through a marked naturalistic accent and gives way to sinuous, rounded, organic shapes. Nothing to do with the syntax of the visual perception of color on an early geometric basis, but a soft, serene, lyrical geometry made of contextualization of color within an organic form. From Ellsworth Kelly's *hard edge* and the stillness of the geometric structure of the pictorial field, Johns "escapes" towards a movement and an organicity of shapes that reminds us of a certain moment, of the Italian Futurist *Giacomo Balla* (1871-1958), that captures the sensuality of a flower and transforms it into a wave of color in motion.

The sounds, the noises, the rhythms of nature are made visible by this "dance" of shapes in motion; the pictorial lines intersect and overlap rhythmically by the color as in a modern symphony, "lit", fast, at times apparently chaotic, but still orderly because nature itself is never chaotic, but orderly and harmonious. To capture the rapidly passing views, Johns draws quickly, line drawings, making mental notes as he goes.

The real static nature of the cultivated land seen from above from the plane in flight acquires an unexpected movement, a new dynamism marked by the lines which, in the apparent fixity of their geometric setting, appear instead with an intrinsic movement that surprises and marvels. Johns manages to give an imaginary movement to the fixedness of the cultivated land, to represent that constant transformation of Nature in its equally constant evolution of the land.

Untangling himself in this dance of lines, Johns creates new landscapes, a new terrestrial topography, a different way of seeing our planet, real and unreal at the same time.

Here it is not a reproduction and description of a landscape, but the invention of a new landscape, indeed of a new natural world or of a different way of perceiving the world.

In Johns' world, the Earth breathes, feeds, welcomes: Johns' ideal topographies serve to engage the viewer with questions, explorations and discoveries.

A topography that moves from nature towards the soul.

Cynthia Penna