



PAUL HENRY RAMIREZ

*Space Addiction*

July 18–October 11, 2002

**WHITNEY**

Whitney Museum of American Art  
at Philip Morris



Paul Henry Ramirez, *Space Addiction*, 2002 (installation views). Acrylic on canvas; acrylic, enamel, and flashe on panel; acrylic and flashe on wall; formica, furniture, lighting, and sound. Collection of the artist; courtesy Caren Golden Fine Art, New York

## Paul Henry Ramirez: *Space Addiction*

Seen from outside the gallery, the deep reds, pinks, and shades of orange-peach of Paul Henry Ramirez's *Space Addiction* beckon. Only upon entering the space itself, however, does the riot of color and form that comprises Ramirez's site-specific installation fully emerge. On the back wall of the gallery, three large panel paintings hover close to the floor, seemingly pushed by fingers of color extending from a velvety-matte block of red painted directly onto the wall. Soft-edged shapes, like geometric forms gone limp with satiated exhaustion, drape over one edge of this large color field. These shapes lead the eye to another set of paintings—seven rectangular panels stacked like children's blocks marching toward the ceiling. On the right wall, curved bars of color stretch from the floor and ceiling as if to gently support another series of canvases—concave swirls of concentric colors that create the impression of cartoon eyes peeking this way and that. Ramirez treats the wall itself as another canvas; his wall painting extends around the entire gallery, dripping a large, stretchy pink form over the doorway valance, squirting up from the floor like a gush of multicolored liquid, or unfolding like a snake in thick curves of color.

The compositions of the paintings on panel and canvas speak intimately to the forms painted on the wall. Bulbous, organic shapes flop and stretch across the surfaces; thin, precise lines reach out to push against other monochrome areas or to splatter against corners and crevasses created by color. Some of the shapes seem to droop with their own weight while others slip like light, hairy tendrils across the plane of a canvas to curl delicately against its edges. Scattered through the gallery are low, cubic seating units, upholstered in fabrics that similarly correspond to both the individual paintings and to the overall installation.<sup>1</sup> Sized exactly to fit the granite floor tiles of the gallery, the seats are fully integrated into the space, inviting contemplation of the paintings that surround the viewer and of the sound element—commissioned specifically for the installation—that slowly makes itself heard.<sup>2</sup>

“I would like the viewer coming into the space to feel as if they’ve entered the belly of the painting,” Ramirez says, “to feel as if they’re inside the work...”<sup>3</sup> The metaphor of the body that the artist uses to describe his vision of the installation is apt; not only do all his abstract forms seem to recall physical forms, their activities—dripping, drooping, flopping, melting, bubbling, and bursting—also allude to functional processes of the body. Though conceptually the abstraction of the body has been a point of reference for Ramirez since his earliest works, his characteristic style also stems from a severe illness he suffered nearly a decade ago. That experience affected him so deeply that he began to develop a large group of drawings based on his physical and mental response to the illness. Over time, it was the exploration of physicality and its relationship to one’s psychological state, rather than the notion of illness, that became a basic theme of Ramirez’s work.

Ramirez’s imagery walks the line between identifiable and abstract, resembling body parts and flesh while also recalling the bright finish of mass-produced products—candy, or children’s toys, perhaps—and the sugary cleanliness of cartoons. The latter reference is enforced by the animation of the organic forms themselves, which seem to cavort across the walls and canvases. There is constant tension between the multiple readings of the imagery—lines strung across the paintings, for example, might be strands of hair or the highly artificial lines of motion drawn in comic books. The biomorphic abstraction of Ramirez’s imagery recalls the Surrealists’ use of bizarre biological twists set in contrast to the perceived mechanization of the modern world. In *Space Addiction*, a similar tension is internalized in the presentation: the organic sensuality of the soft, curved forms is undercut by stylized rendering, precise lines, and a crisp palette. The undeniable eroticism in the work is nonetheless playful, nonaggressive, and never completely resolved. Emotional depth, Ramirez feels, can be communicated through an uplifting sensory experience—the cliché of the tortured, angst-ridden artist being no weightier or more convincing in communicating a psychological state.

Ramirez’s work has been described as biomorphic abstraction, but infused with a vivacious, Dr. Seuss-like palette and an infectious energy that recall the comic book-based imagery of Rube Goldberg and Carrol Dunham. Like many artists who returned to painting in the 1990s, Ramirez energizes the notion of a “pure” abstraction with ideas of site-specificity and pop cultural reality. As a group, these artists were less interested in the mid-century formalist debate about the medium—popularized by the critic Clement Greenberg—than in painting as an approach to investigate contemporary issues, from gender and identity politics to sexuality and the body. In the wake of the dissolution of the historical opposition between Minimalist abstraction and Expressionistic figuration, Ramirez’s clean, formal aesthetic does not seem at odds with his energetic figurative references, but rather a means to explore new agendas.

In fact, the marriage of seemingly opposite approaches is characteristic of Ramirez's work overall, which succeeds in holding each extreme in just the right balance. Sensual, organic forms fuse with the hard-edge, graphic minimalism of Ellsworth Kelly's monochromes or Peter Halley's techno-geometric paintings as seamlessly as Ramirez's canvases form a part of the larger wall paintings and site architecture. Ramirez's suggestion of a 1970s mod palette and vocabulary of forms keeps at bay the seriousness of references to Color Field painting, while the scrupulous attention to detail and the formal, elegant clarity of his compositions rein in the bumptious motion and dramatic sensuousness of the forms themselves.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, the artist's working process synthesizes extreme spontaneity with a minutely considered, meticulous execution. Ramirez begins with hundreds of small sketchbook drawings, which he refers to as automatic compositions, laid out in quick, schematic strokes whenever he is struck by an idea. From this constantly evolving library of sketches, he then selects a group that will be elaborated into a painting, often on a project-specific basis. While remaining as close to the initial sketch as possible to retain the feeling of spontaneity, Ramirez enlarges the composition onto a vellum surface, which he then uses to transfer the drawing onto the canvas. Despite the inevitable remove from the original created by this process, the impromptu feeling is retained in the occasional free-form pours of paint that are introduced cheek by jowl with the splatters and splashes captured by precise drawing and taping on the canvas, as well as in the spontaneous meanderings of the wall painting that reach out to embrace largely unnoticed site elements: an electrical socket, the top surface of the doorway overhang, the pilasters framing the glass doors.

Ramirez determines palette along the same lines as composition: from his meticulously maintained collection of color swatches, he pulls samples based on an initial inspiration and works out precise color combinations in advance. He rigorously maps out the tonal relationships that create a dialogue between all the component parts of the exhibition—setting a range of creamy, velvety colors on the wall against a splash of hard, acidic ones in a painting, for example—keeping the installation thrumming with contained energy through constant visual and spatial juxtapositions.

The candy-colored pop sensibility of Ramirez's paintings, the influence of cartoon and comic book imagery, and the precise, labor-intensive rendering of initially spontaneous impulses all bring to mind Roy Lichtenstein's *Little Big Painting*—a wry commentary on the Abstract Expressionist gestural brushstroke. In Lichtenstein's work, the drippy immediacy of the paint is rendered in laboriously applied Benday dots, a mass-production technique used in commercial printing and especially in comic books. While undeniably related to a Pop art sensibility, Ramirez's approach sidesteps the Pop artists' distanced irony; though the forms and motion of the works are often humorous and playful, the artist is seriously invested in the synthesis of the initial spontaneity and the final, multiply transferred, precision rendering of his process.

The conversation between shape and movement, form and color, and object and wall is all-important to Ramirez. The sense of motion that leads one's eye up and around the room, and the implication that each explosion of color and splatter of paint has in the overall composition, is reflected within the compositions of the canvases as well. For example, the concave canvases and concentric circles of color of the round works mimic on a larger scale the "paint pours" (the artist's term for the circular splatters of paint that appear spontaneous but that are in fact precisely layered buildups of poured color) that Ramirez incorporates into the composition of



the stacked paintings. The geometric monochrome areas of the rectangular canvases in turn speak to the large swaths of wall painting that balance all the elements of the installation, while the lines of motion that both push and support other paintings on the wall are echoed within the smaller compositions. Throughout the room, Ramirez creates a rhythmic sequencing in which one visual event seems to generate the next.

Ramirez's interest in the reflexive, evolving dialogue within the work feeds logically into a site-specific focus on the viewer's interaction with the space. Ramirez intends his installation to function as an enveloping environment composed of discrete, self-sufficient elements, a drama that evolves for the viewer

walking through it in the same way that the image of the room evolved for him. Ramirez sees the space as a continuous blank canvas, as evidenced by his preliminary designs in which the entire installation is sketched out on a flat piece of paper, as if the four walls were unfolded. This mode of visual presentation mirrors the seamlessness of his installations, and stems from his background in visual merchandising. The importance of the compositional balance and obsessive attention to even the smallest detail lest it corrupt the harmony of the overall scheme recalls high-end commercial design, synthesized with the traditional fine art techniques and formal vocabulary he has mastered.

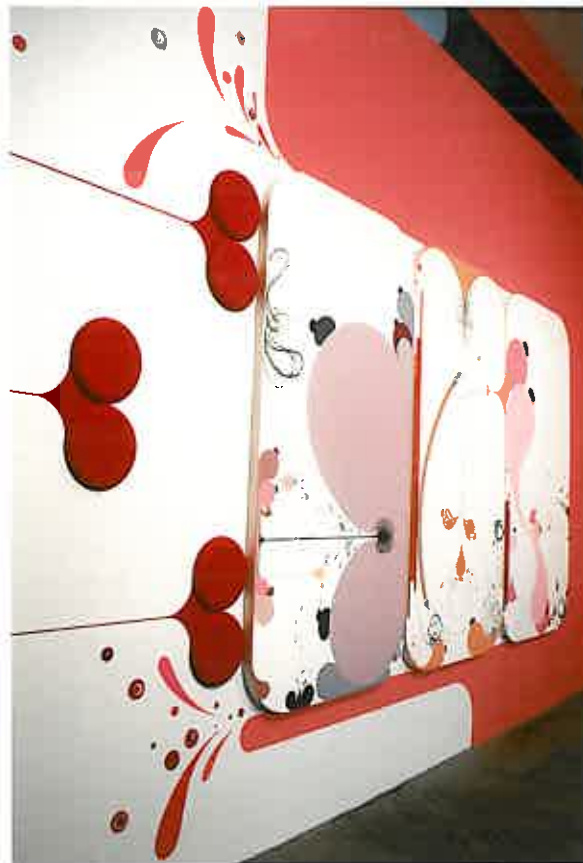
Reversing the process by which he translates the investigative spontaneity of his unmediated sketches into an installation, *Space Addiction* envelops the viewer in a precisely constructed world that encourages an immediate, visceral, sensory response. The eye dances across varied textures, color pushes against walls and architectural elements, forms compress and feed into other forms, and paintings are caressed and held by blocks of color. The physicality of the work and the relationships within the environment of the installation create an interactive space for viewers, an awareness of themselves and their own form in the space as they move through it. The furniture objects suggest a relationship between the viewer and a total environment: this is not a discrete artwork to observe from a distance. The sound element of *Space Addiction* also enhances this multidimensional sensory approach.

While Ramirez has incorporated sound in his previous installations, this is the first instance in which a piece has been created specifically for one of his works. Like the visual aspects of the installation, the sound piece creates an auditory rhythm, cycling through periods of minimal music that morph into vibrant, tuneful bursts and then settle into moments of contemplative silence.

Ramirez believes in the physical, visceral appeal of art, and does not shy away from notions of beauty and pleasure often maligned in purely cerebral aesthetic investigations of the late twentieth century. The denial of the senses and of the seductive power of color and form that emerged from the Dadaist denunciation of truth and beauty—and reached its apogee with Conceptual art in the 1970s—is still deeply embedded in contemporary art practice. Yet the primacy of the sensual, sensory experience in

Ramirez's installation and the immediacy of its aesthetic impact clearly proposes that beauty—as serious as it is pleasurable—is indeed back in style.

—Shamim M. Momin



#### Notes

1. The seating units were created by furniture designer Stuart Basseches.
2. The work was created by sound designer So Takahashi.
3. Interview with the artist, May 20, 2002.
4. *Ibid.* Ramirez cites his formal influences as ranging from Henry Moore's elegant, sensual sculptures and Gustav Klimt's flattened, decorative surfaces to Francis Bacon's brushy monochrome backgrounds and Philip Guston's earthy, organic painted forms.

I would like to thank Shamim Momin, branch director and curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, for her unfaltering faith in my ideas and her willingness to give me carte blanche to transform the Whitney at Philip Morris gallery for the *Space Addiction* project. I would also like to acknowledge Howie Chen, Kelly Feltman, Austin Yang, and the entire Whitney at Philip Morris staff for their hard work. My deepest appreciation goes to Caren Golden of Caren Golden Fine Art and Rena Bransten and the staff of Rena Bransten Gallery for their dedicated and unwavering support of my career. A special thanks to furniture designer Stuart Basseches of biproduct and sound designer So Takahashi of Heads Inc. (with musical contribution by Takako Minokawa) for their ability to translate my vision into other forms. And, as always, the insightful advice of David Seyler, Luke Gray, and Dorke Poelz has been indispensable.

—Paul Henry Ramirez

# Paul Henry Ramirez

Born in El Paso, Texas, 1963

Raritan Valley Community College,  
North Branch, New Jersey

University of Texas at El Paso

Lives and works in New York City

## Selected One-Artist Exhibitions

2001

*Elevations Transcendentalistic*, Contemporary Arts Center,  
Cincinnati (traveling)

1999

*Edging into Excess*, Rena Bransten Gallery, San Francisco

1998

*Real Pretty Simple Innocent Paintings*, Caren Golden Fine  
Art, New York

1997

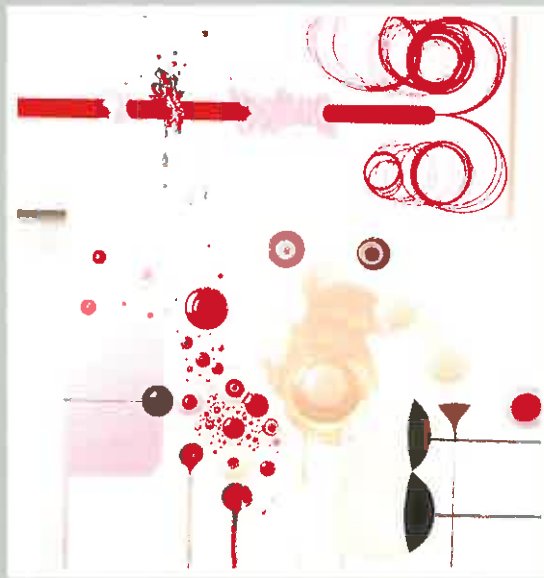
*Liquid Squeeze*, Caren Golden Fine Art, New York

1996

*Arena*, Brooklyn, New York

1995

*100% Virgin Vinyl*, Franklin Furnace, New York



## Selected Group Exhibitions

2002

*Looking Back at Looking Forward: The Aldrich Museum's  
Emerging Artists Awards, 1997-2001*, The Aldrich Museum  
of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut

2001

*Accumulations*, School of Art Gallery, Kent State  
University, Ohio

*Humanoid*, Frederieke Taylor Gallery, New York

*LaLaLand*, Temple Gallery, Tyler School of Art, Temple  
University, Philadelphia

*MAX 2001: All About Paint*, Art Museum of the University  
of Memphis

2000

*The Figure: Another Side of Modernism*, The Newhouse  
Center for Contemporary Art at Snug Harbor  
Cultural Center, Staten Island, New York

*Good Business Is the Best Art: Twenty Years of the Artist in the  
Marketplace Program*, The Bronx Museum of the Arts,  
New York

*Line*, Arena@Feed, Brooklyn, New York

*The S-Files*, El Museo del Barrio, New York

1999

*American Abstraction/American Realism: The Great Debate*,  
Susquehanna Art Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania

*Body as Commodity*, Nexus Contemporary Art Center,  
Atlanta

*Fluid*, The Center for Curatorial Studies Museum at  
Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

*Zero-G: When Gravity Becomes Form*, Whitney Museum of  
American Art at Champion, Stamford, Connecticut

1998

*Pop Surrealism*, The Aldrich Museum of Contemporary  
Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut

1997

*Artists in the Marketplace: Seventeenth Annual Exhibition*,  
The Bronx Museum of the Arts, New York

*Current Undercurrent: Working in Brooklyn*, Brooklyn  
Museum of Art, New York

*Memory Frames*, Austin Museum of Art at Laguna Gloria,  
Texas

*Suture*, The Rotunda Gallery, Brooklyn, New York

1994

*Selections Winter '94*, The Drawing Center, New York

# WHITNEY



## Gallery Hours

Monday–Friday 11 am–6 pm

Thursday 11 am–7:30 pm

## Sculpture Court Hours

Monday–Saturday 7:30 am–9:30 pm

Sunday 11 am–7 pm

## Gallery Talks

Wednesdays and Fridays, 1 pm

## Free admission

Tours by appointment.

For more information, call (917) 663-2453.

## Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

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