

Ubay Murillo

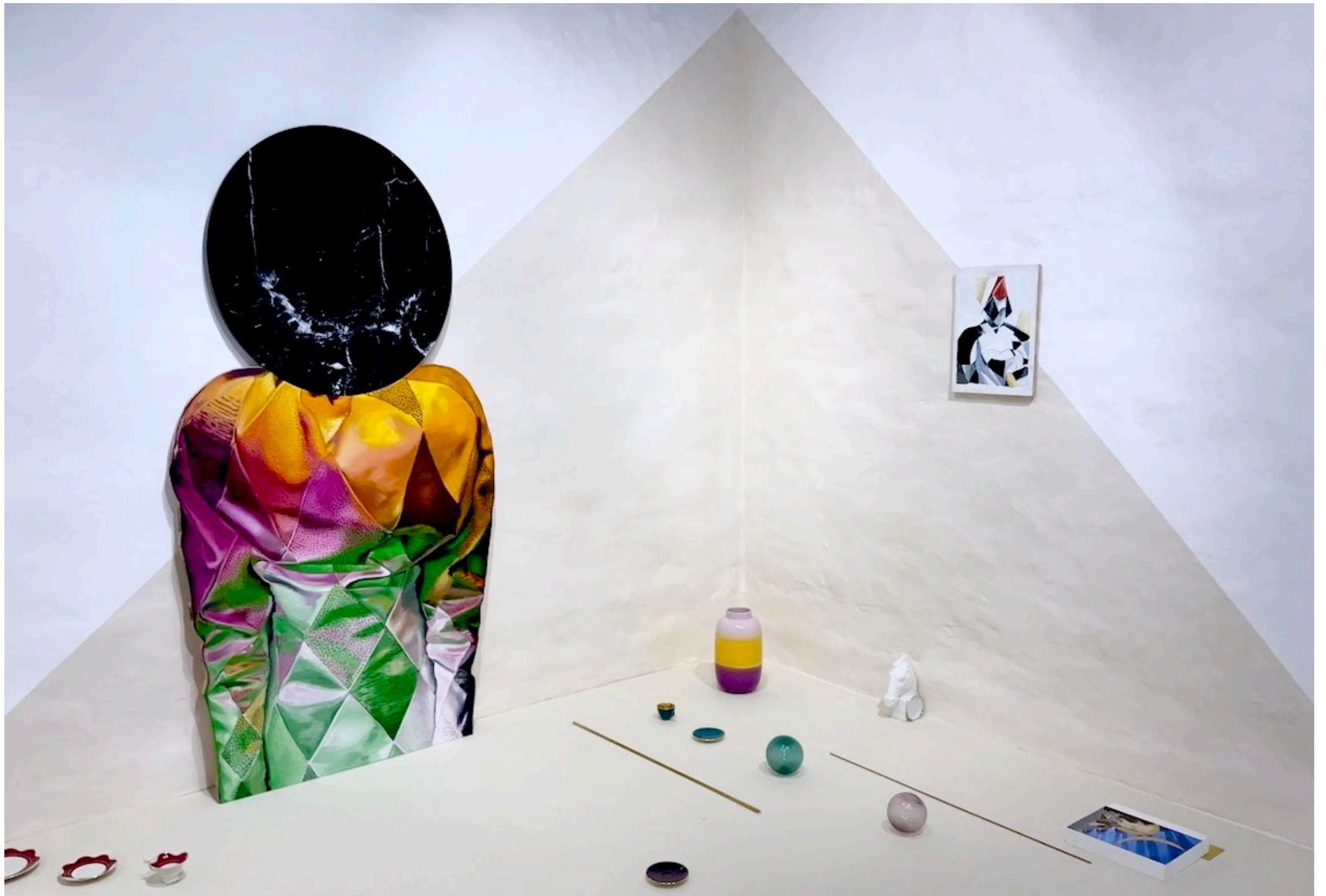
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A time of collision

Ramiro Carrillo

In 1719, apparently as part of the decor for a café, Jean-Antoine Watteau painted *Pierrot*, one of the most suggestive paintings of the French Rococo. The image is a full-length frontal portrait of one of the characters in the *commedia dell'arte*, a popular form of theatre at the time. Dressed in spotless white, Pierrot stands with his arms down by his sides, as if inanimate, looking forlorn, cutting a truly pathetic figure compared to the grandiloquence of the characters—gods, saints, aristocrats—who populated the paintings of the time. Faced with these exceptional models, Pierrot's figure recalls the idea of the subject as a comedian, a puppet; indeed, the protagonist of the painting was a person in disguise and, therefore, evades all classification: neither rich nor poor, neither deep nor banal, neither comical nor tragic, neither entirely man nor woman, neither inside nor outside the system. A character that today we might call *queer*.

A similar vein also runs through the comedians that Picasso painted two hundred years later. *Harlequin with a Mirror* (1923), for example, returns to the melancholy character, an ambiguous subject who gazes at his reflection, and one wonders if he sees who he is, or who he is pretending to be. As a pictorial figure, the harlequin is two people at the same time: the one shown and the one hidden behind the costume. To that extent, it is the image of a split subject, a scattered, fragmented being, in a state of collision between what is and what has to be.

Hence Uбай Murillo considers the harlequin a “hinge figure”, the expression of a subject in imbalance that, as Jean Clair would say, is an image of a time of collapsing balances; hence his fascination to discover the figure of the harlequin revisited in the fashion editorials of magazines such as *Vogue* or *Harper's Bazaar*, material with which Murillo has been working for twelve years.

This interest in fashion editorials focuses on the friction and collisions that emerge with the visual grammars of the avant-garde. Since the time of Coco Chanel, fashion is no longer simply about designing clothing; it produces discourses about the subject, about their “being” in the social space, generating powerful images that are mediators of the ways in which we feel and produce our bodies. Fashion editorials, like as fashion shows, shop windows or any other communication device, are emulators of these discourses, and it is not uncommon for them to emulate formal grammars, even certain practices, of contemporary art. Uбай Murillo explores these connections—which flow in both directions—and considers them evidence of how the visual findings of the artistic avant-garde, conceived within the framework of utopias of the emancipation of the subject, have ended up permeating the cultural industry, serving the capitalist machinery put in place to generate desire.

These grammars, such as abstraction or the fragmentation of the body, when used in fashion images, are necessarily resignified, which implies their trivialisation and, therefore, their deactivation as formal rhetorics of avant-garde utopias. Murillo seeks to “return” these patterns to the space of contemporary art and, in doing so, explores the complex frictions between high and low culture, between artistic avant-garde and cultural industry, between art and merchandise.

In this context, the reappearance of the figure of the harlequin in current fashion editorials is interpreted by Murillo as a revealing sign that connects the era of the first avant-gardes or the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution —when Picasso and Watteau were painting— to our own

“time of collapsing balances”. Situated in this new time of collision, the harlequin appears as a disguised subject, caught between two identities — with a fluid identity?—and halfway between an attachment and detachment from historical processes.

Thinking about the relationship between the subject and History leads Murillo to investigate its pictorial expression: the dialectic between background and figure. In contemporary painting, the subject is postulated as a fragmented figure, situated against an equally fragmented background. That is why Murillo proposes the dismantled picture, its components scattered on the ground. By opening out the painting in space, Murillo redevelops the Cubist or Constructivist reduction of the elements of painting to their basic geometric components —lines, rectangles and circles—, objectifying them in golden metal rods, bits of wood and porcelain plates. He also utilises other objects, whose genealogy comes from pictorial images, but which have become serial production pieces, therefore kitsch, such as tableware, plates and coffee cups, some of which are the product of avant-garde patterns and designs adapted to be used by people, by their hands, by their mouths, in their social interactions.

They are objects that, for Murillo, evoke the idea of the social body. But they are also formal elements: circles, plans, lines, which allow for the composition of dismantled avant-garde paintings in space, as dismantled as the contemporary subject. Ubay Murillo’s pictorial installations—his “expanded paintings”—deliberately situate themselves in the space of collision between artistic installation and window dressing, conceptualising the painting as a shop window and staging it as merchandise, while, in the ambiguous figures that inhabit it, the daring formal innovations of the avant-garde have been turned into ornament; they are now motifs printed on the impeccable clothing of the harlequin.

