

Cristóbal Lehyt

IRIS SHEETS

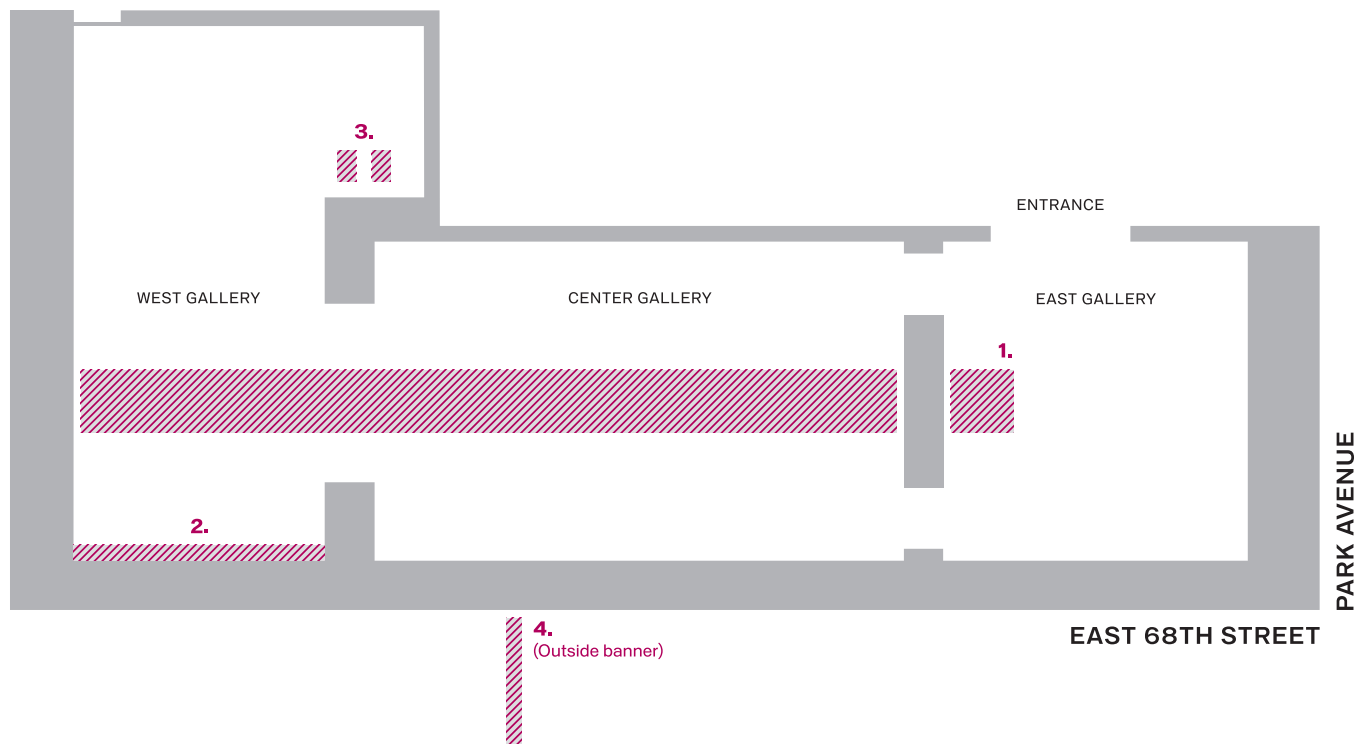
On view

September 10–December 14, 2013

Gallery hours

Wednesday–Saturday, 12–6 P.M.

1. *Untitled*, 2013; wood, wine, metal bolts
2. *Iris Sheets*, 2013; fluorescent paint on wall, black light
3. *Aquarium*, 2013; glass tanks, wine, sand, water, sulphur
4. *Violeta*, 2006; polyester poplin



When the artist had completed the final retouching and laid down his scraper, he stood up to take the sheet away, and spread it out slightly further from us on the revolving platform of a sculptor's turntable — where a small armature of iron wire, in the form of a man, stood next to a set of roughing chisels and a white, lidless cardboard box, whose front displayed the words "Nocturnal Wax," in large, inked letters.

The back of the armature was attached to a rigid vertical metal rod, with its base expanded into a disc and fastened by a screw to a wooden block set on a revolving platform. Thanks to the softness of the iron wire, the artist, by manipulating the armature, easily gave it exactly the same attitude as the clown which his scraper had just created.

—Raymond Roussel, *Locus Solus*, 1914

Cristóbal Lehyt's solo exhibition at Americas Society, *Iris Sheets*, comprises a number of components: two site-specific sculptures, a wall painting, and a banner that hangs on the building's southwestern façade, which, according to the artist, is an abstract presentation that "states the obvious." *Iris Sheets* also proposes an examination of the currency of site-specific sculpture through a large piece that occupies (and divides) the exhibition space as a phenomenological difficulty rather than a cordial encounter with the audience. Lehyt's practice, especially his series of drawings "Drama Projections," departs from a psychological conundrum and typologies of modern neuroses. The project's suggestive title alludes to a space as a "sheet" that also functions as an allegory of sight as blurred vision, or detritus.

Lehyt's approach to site-specific sculpture questions the immediate perception of sight (and the site), presenting it as a device of cultural translation: what you see is not what you get. Although diverse, all the elements combined reflect the tensions of an artist who is not interested in undertaking an essentialist celebration or in restaging the political mythologies of the Cold War. Even though the monumental wood sculpture soaked in wine suggests the shape of Chile, Lehyt frames his ideas and visual strategies through the blend of multilayered references to Conceptualism, Land Art, and Minimalism.

Iris Sheets is nurtured by an exploration of contemporary forms of subjectivism displayed through drawing, painting, sculpture, and appropriation. Symbolic elements, such as wine, water, sand, an appropriated portrait of Violeta Parra, and the lyrics from her emblematic song "Gracias a la vida", are interspersed to create an experiential puzzle. As an artist born in 1973, Lehyt creates works that are informed by the repression of memory during and after the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile and its trivialization caused by the gap between traumatic experience and the past. Lehyt grounds his research in history as an abstracted fact muted by language, oblivion.

This interview with Cristóbal Lehyt was conducted by Christina De León (Assistant Curator, Americas Society), Rodrigo Lobos (Artist), and Gabriela Rangel (Director and Chief Curator, Americas Society) in July–August, 2013. A longer version will be published in the upcoming catalogue.

1. *Iris Sheets* is the title of the show. The phrase contains a play on words caused by the phonetic resemblance of the words "sheet" and "shit." In light of this pun, the title can be read as the sheet covering the iris, the screen of vision, and at the same time the shit of the eye: excretion, tears.

Cristóbal Lehyt: With the "s" at the end of *Sheets*, the title could mean that the iris — the eye — shits by definition. Also, if you repeat it in English many times, like a tongue-twister, another hidden phrase emerges. The meanings — apart from those related to sheets or screens — come through by pronouncing it with a non-American accent.

2. When you discussed your initial ideas about a site-specific sculpture and the process of making it for Americas Society's art gallery there was a lot of humor. Specifically, in your idea to call it *Iris Sheets* but also in the fact that you conceived a monstrous piece of sculpture that moves through the space and which the visitor's very first encounter with it would be seeing its head cut off by the wall. Immediately, one would think, "What's going on here?" But now that the sculpture is complete, it's no longer a humorous gesture.

CL: Which is a funny thing to consider — a sculpture attacked by the building. It's potentially serious at first and then it's, "Wait a second, this is absurd," so it's funny. It became a serious sculpture that started as a joke and then back again, back and forth, like a nervous laughter maybe. The initial reference is related to the site.

3. Are you referring to Juan Downey's 1975 piece *Anaconda, Map of Chile*?

CL: The *Anaconda* piece that had been censored. Typically, you would think it's a critique but it's not a critique, it's more like a way of asking how do you remember something? I thought that's interesting. How do you remember something you heard that happened in that same place? What do you do? You make a monument to something you sort of heard about. It's not institutional critique or anything like that, it's more like how do you remember something that you weren't even part of, but somehow it touches you because of determining ideas about national identity, and also. . . because you choose to. And then you make this huge wood thing. And it's a thought made material. I had that thought, and I did it, and now it's a thing, and the thing is more serious than my initial thought.

4. From the very beginning, when you were thinking about what to do within Americas Society's space, were you taking Downey into consideration?

CL: The same way that if I was invited to do a piece in the Domino Sugar Company, I would think about what happened there, that I know of. How about sugar and diabetes? So I would do a piece about diabetes. That is my first inclination, to see the absurd in the whole construction, place (history), artist, piece, audience. Pulling it all apart and then putting it back together with the hope it amounts to something else, something worth looking at and thinking about.

5. Yes, but you could have chosen a lot of other historic references that relate to Americas Society.

CL: I'm always interested in this idea of what I'm supposed to be doing. So I do what I'm supposed to be doing. . . I'm supposed to be representing Chilean Art. This is a strange imposition which I think is operational, so I do it only in a very superficial way, like a tourist.

6. When you go back to Chile, do you feel like a tourist?

CL: No, but in this case, I use things for what they seem to be, not necessarily for what they are, so that could be more like using things like a tourist, not knowing the exact weight of things. It is a game of sorts, playing with the expectation that I know something that other people don't about a place or a way of looking at things.

7. In other words, for you, is history or historical research a malady related to art like sugar is to diabetes? Is that usually how you work?

CL: I don't think historical research connects to art like sugar to diabetes — although it's a funny thought. I think artworks can function as triggers in an audience, where a linear way of thinking about events is not possible to sustain, because the contradictions are too strong. Artworks are strange, and yet there they are in front of you doing something, if you are open to them, they can affect you.

8. How would you like the public to experience the installation when they enter the gallery?

CL: I would like the observer to be intrigued, and that the experience is a physical one. The show is moving from moment to moment and place to place. The first room is an assembly of wood sort of falling forward. Then, looking towards the bigger rooms, one can see the whole sculpture in an angle — an angle I really like — it is a kind of image. After maybe realizing the connection between the sculpture and the building, to walk and see that the space is divided and smell the wine on wood. That is the first series of moments related to the sculpture.

After this, the wall painting is "shining" with these strange figures. Then, walk around to the corner and see the two fish tanks, which can seem mute and open at the same time.

The outside banner states something that can be read many different ways, I hope it can reflect. . . on the show as much as be a floating statement onto the street.

9. The exhibition constructs the idea of spatial division, a diagram of relationships that takes into account an inside and an outside, a here and a there. The main space of the Americas Society gallery is divided transversally by your sculpture; traversing the interior of the space is obvious in its design, which ultimately produces bodily discomfort inside the space. With what are you making a connection, and what is important about this partition and the discomfort associated with it?

CL: The division is a form of determining the observer's physical presence, body, and vision. Sculpture is a thing, an object in space, half parasitical in the building, half in tension with it; it is a place, places can be walked through, they have corridors and dead spots.

Discomfort is a game because, in an exhibition, one is sure of being uncomfortable on purpose; there is no real discomfort, the movements of the spectator and what's at stake in them is another potentially interesting fiction, I think.

10. There are various layers that make up the exhibition. The wall painting, *Iris Sheets* operates as an in-your-face kind of drama. If it were in black and white, for instance, it would probably not be as powerful.

CL: It would be different. But fluorescent colors are meant to be also regressive — this idea of childhood as when you're younger, you like bright colors. And they affect you more. Fluorescent pigments affect your eyes. They're not just bright colors, they're actually fluorescent colors under black light with all the meanings and sensations that that arouses. So they have a special quality to them. The drawings and the colors remind me of childhood decorations: things that you would find in a child's room, like nightlights, mutated and scaled. The sculpture can also be a thing related to infancy, the playing with sticks, organizing them for some undefined reason that has more to do with the action than the end result.

The wall painting has a strange life; it is less programmatic than the other pieces, which do follow the idea of presenting ideas of resistance in different ways, coded or

otherwise. The wall painting is way more ambiguous and works in other areas in contradistinction to the objects in the show. It is a wall painting strictly speaking; it is grounded in the practice of drawing and painting not a specifically social identity. Even if it looks like something that doesn't settle on anything completely identifiable, even if it promises that it will in some way, it actually asks for a different set of references than the sculptures and banner.

11. Allegory and opacity are relevant features in your work. The two site-specific sculptures and the banner with the sideways portrait of Violeta Parra use images as texts that aim to produce a sensorial (poetic) discourse on the Chilean landscape and contemporary subjectivity. Images go straight to the point, but the objects lack transparency and include self-referential pranks on identity, which makes their legibility complicated. Are these semiotic operations historically linked to coding strategies undertaken by the Chilean Escena de Avanzada in the 1970s and 1980s?

CL: Yes, it is linked to the idea of making the works resist an easy reading that could be co-opted and recuperated. The goal is to make works that escape an easy final meaning that can be nicely tied down. It is, after all, something I studied with devotion when I was a teenager.

There is an equally important way of making works that is not too different to that model. For me in New York, it is tied to having studied at the Whitney Independent Study Program, if we are to talk about lineages. There, the goals are similar to the ones that the most challenging art had during the dictatorship in Chile, the resistance and fight for people's ability to think critically, to fight for a resisting subjectivity. The sculptural works all share this desire to resist, say something, then retreat and then say something else; this is very Chilean as much as it is very American or very Belgian! There are many traditions that one can connect to; the Chilean is simply the one I learned first.

To code and to hide and then show in some other way has been a strategy in Art for a long time. It is to trick people — sometimes playfully — and to show at a later instance something even better than initially thought, that is the hope!

Yet the wall painting is a little stranger; it doesn't participate in the same kind of coding. I don't exactly know what it means in the way I know what the sculptures and banner mean; somehow it seems more permeable and nuanced.

12. Getting back to the title, those for whom English is not their first language constantly make this type of pronunciation error; perhaps because of this, the derivations this situation engenders are of interest — the way in which the signified soils itself. Given the preceding, one can speak of translation, which as a problem coincides with the idea of interpreting a work and the requirement to generate a meaning or obtain information through it. What do you think is produced by bad interpretations, distortions, and confusions in societies obsessed with precision, detail, and transparency?

CL: The question implies that maybe errors are forms of resistance, but it seems to me that it's not so much that, slippage, or an undermining. . . one uses it anyway but with less faith and almost without conviction.

My works are sometimes badly done or badly translated because I am looking for a bad reading as the most interesting reading, because I don't read things well and that way it's more interesting; that happens to me, so I want to see if it works with other people. . . . Bad readings are something vital to me and I want to see how they can be important to other people.

I've made a poor translation of the exterior banner "Gracias a la vida, que me ha dado tanto" (Thanks to life, that has given me so much). I place "life" in a more direct position, without poetry. If I translate it back again, it becomes: "Gracias vida por darme tanto" (Thank you life, for giving me so much), which isn't what Violeta Parra says, but, in a way, on Park Avenue now, it's the best way of translating that text, as far as I'm concerned. It's confusing if you know the song, but if you don't and you're walking down 68th Street between Madison and Park Avenue, it's pretty heavy, it calls attention to privilege and all that. . . . The work is understood well and incorrectly.

Cristóbal Lehyt, born in Santiago, Chile, in 1973, lives and works in New York City. He studied at the Universidad Católica de Chile and later at Hunter College and the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program in New York. His solo exhibitions include the Carpenter Center in Cambridge, MA (2010), Fundación Telefónica Chile (2009), Künstlerhaus Stuttgart (2008), University of California Irvine (2007), and numerous others in galleries in London, Santiago de Chile, Caracas, and Mexico City. He has also participated in group exhibitions at the Mercosur Biennial (2009), El Museo del Barrio (2007), Kunsthau Dresden (2006), the Shanghai Biennale (2004), the Whitney Museum of American Art (2003), MoCA Los Angeles (2002), among many others in New York, Madrid, Santiago de Chile, Bogotá, Caracas, Mexico City, Berlin, Vienna, Beijing, and Rio de Janeiro. He has been awarded the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial

Foundation Fellowship and the Art Forum Fellowship, Harvard University. He is represented by Die Ecke, Santiago de Chile, and Johannes Vogt Gallery, New York.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Monday, October 7, 6:30 P.M.

Exhibition tour with Cristóbal Lehyt and Chief Curator Gabriela Rangel
Free for members/\$10 for non-members

Wednesday, October 30, 6:30 P.M.

Members-only tour with Cristóbal Lehyt and exhibition curators Gabriela Rangel and Christina De León.

Monday, November 11, 7:00 P.M.

Panel discussion at Parsons, Fine Arts

Thursday, December 5, 6:30 P.M.

Exhibition tour with Cristóbal Lehyt and Assistant Curator Christina De León
Free for members/\$10 for non-members

Please check www.as-coa.org/visualarts for updates on all events.

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