

## The Mutable Art of Carmelo Fontáñez

"The artist performs only one part of the creative process.  
The onlooker completes it, and it is the onlooker  
who has the last word."

—Marcel Duchamp

Carmelo Fontáñez's eye is keenly attuned to the formal universe that surrounds him. He observes and calibrates the tonal and chromatic scales of his artwork. But the painter's gaze is also drawn to what is seemingly more trivial. Simple, daily things can spark his creativity: a piece of broken glass, the rough textures of mountains painfully cut open by a highway, the frenetic activity of a stone quarry with its mills spewing jets of ground gravel, or the tactile qualities of a lump of coal. These dissimilar experiences and observations, along with the formal investigations he began in the 1970s, have driven the artist to experiment once again with the fundamentals of drawing.

As a revolutionary first step, Fontáñez banished paper from his worktable and suspended particles of charcoal, graphite, and pastel between overlapping glass plates. The result was an art object that navigates the waters between sculpture and drawing: small-format boxes that, with the exception of paper, retained all the components of a traditional drawing—including the frame with its glass—, but this time these components appeared reorganized by the artist's creative imagination.

After years of developing a vast body of abstract drawings, Carmelo Fontáñez has decided to take the medium a step further, emphasizing its material plasticity and moving away from its mark on paper. In his most recent work, the artist reevaluates the physical qualities of his tools: the sculptural beauty of pencils, the metallic luster of fine, bare graphite sticks, the opacity of pastels and colored pencils, the textural richness of charcoal in its different forms—crushed, powdered, vegetable, or compressed—and the luminous and delicate lines created by the shattering of glass. These are the formal elements that construct his new three-dimensional drawings.

By replacing paper with overlapping glass plates, the artist is forced to think like a sculptor. The proximity and distance of the planes no longer depend solely on tonal and textural variations, but also on the placement of materials in the real space between the different glass plates. The resulting three-dimensionality invites detailed and oblique observation. Its beauty and definition are reminiscent of digital aesthetics, even though the handcrafted simplicity of these boxes is very apparent.

The particles fall between the panes like cascades of dust and tiny stones, stopping where the bright edge of the cut glass imposes its limit, forming thin layers of accumulated material. Thus, once again, the methods of the drawer and the sculptor are exchanged. The lines, so essential to design and composition, are cut into the glass instead of being drawn. The glass panes function like the stencils of an engraving, establishing spatial relationships between negative and positive forms. The transparent effect that Fontáñez previously achieved through delicate gradations of graphite on paper is now replaced and accentuated by glass translucency.

Static electricity and other phenomena not anticipated by the artist cause graphite and carbon dust to stick to the glossy surface, creating subtle glazes. As a visual counterpoint, the sometimes-dense textures formed by the material, which has been crushed to varying degrees, as well as the accumulation of mechanical pencil leads and various fragments of pencil points and pastel sticks, take center stage. The adhesive tape that holds the numerous glass panes in place traps some of these remnants, which dangle from edges or stand mysteriously upright, adding a new dimension to the ever-changing compositions of these boxes.

I call them *mutables* because the material inside is loose and lacks any fixative. Its position in space changes according to the movement, the box's orientation, and gravitational force, which is itself curtailed by the artist's skillful cutting of the glass design. As Fontáñez points out, not only are there two opposing and simultaneous drawings in each box—one on the front and one on the back—but each time the viewer moves the piece, a new drawing is constructed over the previous one, and each movement leaves an imprint of the materials engraved on the glass. Consequently, we are not seeing the artist's original drawing, but rather the sum of all the drawings produced by the arbitrary manipulation of the box over time. As the artist told us in a recent conversation, "creation seems to rebel against its creator's design like a Frankenstein." Moreover, the act of creation continues with the viewer, who becomes a co-creator of the work.

The combination of movement, time, and chance evokes historical precedents such as Futurism, Dadaism, Joseph Cornell's boxes, and Alexander Calder's mobiles. It also recalls Marcel Duchamp's emblematic work, *The Large Glass*, which, like those by Fontáñez, is a glass box made of several panes within a frame. In both cases, the artists chose glass as their medium because they valued its transparency and its ability to integrate the surrounding space into the work. Duchamp incorporated the accidental breakage of his glass as part of the final piece, just as Fontáñez accepts that chance transforms the contents of his boxes. For the Puerto Rican artist, the dust marks and the mold growing on the glass are part of the work's mutability; the French-born, naturalized American artist intentionally "grew" dust for months on the glass surface, before varnishing it. However, the aesthetic intentions of both artists go in opposite directions. Marcel Duchamp's work was eminently conceptual and anti-retinal, aiming to "avoid all formal

lyricism" so as to achieve what he called "the beauty of indifference." By contrast, Carmelo Fontáñez's current work maintains a striking continuity with his earlier production in the field of abstract drawing. Through this new medium, he has successfully adapted his previous vocabulary of organic artistic forms in dynamic contrast, along with his elegant and intelligent handling of space and his penchant for contrasting textures. However, we also find some beautifully rendered anthropomorphic compositions, which point in directions seldom explored by the artist. To reignite our surprise, in pieces where he uses numerous small wooden pencils, he subtly introduces elements and titles that invite a narrative interpretation.

For those unfamiliar with Carmelo Fontáñez's long and distinguished career, this exhibition might be interpreted as a gratuitous attempt at reinvention, disconnected from his earlier work. Nothing could be further from the truth. During the 1970s, Fontáñez created his first wooden boxes and Plexiglas plaques, which he filled with salt, colored sawdust, tiny pieces of paper, plastic beads, sequins, rhinestones, and other materials. These works were exhibited at the University of Puerto Rico's Mayagüez Campus, the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture, and as part of the U.N.E.S.C.O.'s National Painting Salon in Puerto Rico.

Perhaps the creation of these boxes is linked to an aesthetic the artist inherited from the 1960s, which made ample use of transparent plastics in interior design. However, as the artist confides, it is rooted in his fond childhood memories, a golden age when he would experience ecstatic joy sitting next to his mother's sewing machine, watching the light refract through a small, transparent plastic box filled with colorful beads.

### **Rafael Trelles**

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