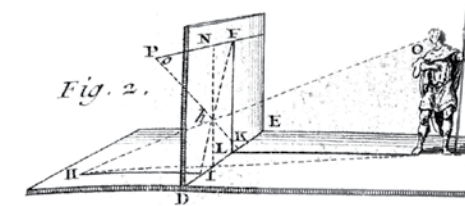




José Seoane
Open Sesame



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Open Sesame: José Seoane

Housed everywhere but nowhere shut in, this is the motto of the dreamer of dwellings. In the last house as well as in the actual house, the day-dream of inhabiting is thwarted. A daydream of elsewhere should be left open therefore, at all times.¹

Walls, Borders and Invisible Lines

When I first viewed the work of José Seoane, I was mesmerized by his use of paint; layer upon layer is applied over time through a very labour intensive process as he pushes, pulls, rips away, pierces and preserves the surface of each canvas. As you come face-to-face with these life-sized works you are consumed by the physical space that each painting embodies. Your eye is entranced by the earth tones of brown and orange, and elevated through the touches of red, blue and hits of yellow. Warmth generated in the work holds you still, in one place, as you stand pondering your own relationship to space. Seoane would describe his process “as a slow process — in search of an essence of place.”²

How we understand or define “place” is an ever-present question that for many is difficult to answer. Seoane is originally from Cuba, and has been living in Canada for the last ten years. As a migrant to this country, there are repeated dualistic questions regarding notions of transculturation and cultural identity represented in his practice: what is absent from the past and what is now present, what is revealed and what remains hidden or untold, and am I here or am I there? According to Stuart Hall in his essay, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” cultural identity “belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history, and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation.”³ There is

Open Sesame 2, 2009

a back-and-forth struggle in Seoane’s work as he tries to come to terms with his own ancestral displacement and the diaspora experienced now between two very different worlds. Physically and conceptually his paintings can be viewed as symbolic “walls” between two places, constituting a divide that has been built up over decades and is not purely physical, but also metaphysical and psychological. Moreover, this divide takes time to crumble.

*Explorando en mi silencio y entre mis guardianes de ocasión
no encuentro más que las mismas palabras, voces cruzadas,
lineas y sombras... Fantasmas de mis fantasmas.⁴*

It is this loss of identity not only of self, but also of culture that is an impetus for Seoane. In the exhibition *Open Sesame*, Seoane reveals this space-in-between as he magically invites the viewer into a new place, an elsewhere, holding the door wide open.

Open Sesame

The popular term “Open Sesame” is a secret password that comes from a fictional Arabic story, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*, which was written in the early 1900s. It is not so much the literal narrative that is important with regards to Seoane’s use of this phrase, but rather his interest in the metaphor. In this tale, magic opens the door and reveals the treasure beyond the walls of the cave. Yet, this is an illusion of grandeur: with these new-found riches comes a price. Seoane states, “Freedom is very obscure — once the door is open and the walls and borders fall, the struggle is not over. The password is only the beginning.”⁵

In an earlier work entitled *Open Sesame 2* (2009) Seoane reveals this illusion as the viewer is visually forced to scrape through the painting beyond the solid blue surface. What is being revealed and what is behind



those small circular peep holes that are randomly pierced into the canvas? Seoane continues to play with perceptions of space and place in *Open Sesame 9* (2010). A drain appears in the centre of this work — is it a floor or a wall? As we stand witness to the painting on a two-dimensional plane our own physical sense of space is altered. Potential lines of latitude and longitude run up and down the canvas — measurements of place, a formational grid to assign an understanding of our coordinates that is so foreign to our experiential and mnemonic relationship to a given location.

The Space Between

*Al cruzar la linea, marcas del miedo, fui condenado al regreso y el olvido.*⁶

This body of work has been created over the last eight years. As I started to pull back the conceptual and material layers of Seoane's work, I came to compare his creative process to that of an archaeological dig, excavating through his origin and history. The work is very much tied to an autobiographical tale, a history of a journey that has no beginning and no end. There is an internal and external conflict that the work itself holds; Seoane mines this binary in search of a new space that is somewhere in between. Each painting is created in the present, but it seems that one foot is planted here, and the other there.

In this central work, *Lost Steps* (2009), moveable cement pieces or steps on castors are positioned on the floor in front of the painting. Seoane physically invites viewers to move through the space, repositioning us in different relationships to the painting and to the overall installation of his work. These are precarious and unstable objects on wheels, and there is a sense of risk involved as well as imminent danger, depending on our individual perspectives and abilities. Similar to the representational imagery of the stairs in the painting itself, viewers are presented with an escalation into the unknown. Stairs leading up, but





Confesionario, 2012

then stopping, leaving us nowhere to go — are we to jump off, are we near the top or the bottom? Seoane’s inspiration for this painting came originally from a Cuban novel, *Los Pasos Perdidos (The Lost Steps)*, written by Alejo Carpentier in 1953. This text was required reading when Seoane was in grade school. “How to find and construct your right path, notions of something that is lost and difficult to locate as well as finding origin”⁷ were all themes from Carpentier that have resonated in the mind of Seoane for years.

Seoane’s autobiographical approach is tied to the heart, is authentic and pure in its expression within a contemporary context; it reaches far beyond early formalism or modernist abstraction. Its objective is not empty or void of meaning, “It is layered, upon layered with historical as well as personal meaning that is reflective of my life and my experiences.”⁸ In *Confesionario (Confessions)* (2012), the title itself alludes to the vulnerability and exposure customarily experienced in a confessional chamber. Again, divisions in space are presented: what and who is beyond the curtain? This is an experience dependent on trust and faith in the intangible. On the introductory pages of this catalogue there is a small sketch of an early technical drawing device that was used in the theory and practice of one-point perspective. In this image the viewpoint of the figure looks through the canvas to what is known as the vanishing point beyond the surface. This line of sight is suggested in the hole positioned in the top centre of *Confesionario*, generating interest behind the work itself.

Sifting through the stratification of Seoane’s work, I realized that it is much like the navigation between two languages — in Seoane’s case, his native tongue, Spanish and then English. These small openings into another world similarly require that one knows the password in the appropriate language. My husband, who also speaks Spanish, once told me, “There isn’t a word in English to describe this emotion or feeling in Spanish.” There is a loss in the translation that again creates this obvious “wall” to be excavated between one culture and the other.

The Bridge

The work of José Seoane holds space between two worlds — and I would argue that these are not merely “walls” symbolically represented in the paintings, but that the work itself now metaphorically acts as a “bridge.” That in the act of exposing and opening up these parallel or polar opposites, the emphasis is on a new environment, a new place of freedom.

*We should think, instead, of identity as a “production” which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.*⁹

Sarah Beveridge is an artist, curator, educator and writer. She holds a Masters of Fine Arts from the University of Western Ontario (2002) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Windsor (1997). Beveridge currently resides and practises in Windsor, Ontario and is the owner of SB Contemporary Art.

Notes

- 1 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. Mary Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969. p. 62.
- 2 José Seoane. Interview with José Seoane conducted by Sarah Beveridge, April 24, 2012.
- 3 Stuart Hall. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994. p. 236.
- 4 José Seoane. Artist Statement, June, 2012. Translation: “Exploring in my silence amongst occasional guardians I encounter only the same words, intersecting voices, lines and shadows. . . . phantasms of my phantasms.”
- 5 José Seoane. Interview with José Seoane conducted by Sarah Beveridge, April 24, 2012.
- 6 José Seoane. Artist Statement, June, 2012. Translation: “Upon crossing the line marking fear, I was condemned to return and oblivion.”
- 7 José Seoane. Interview with José Seoane conducted by Sarah Beveridge, April 24, 2012.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” p. 234.



Step Up, 2012



Lost Connection, 2011



(facing) *Triptych*, 2012





The End of the Beginning, 2012

Vertical Transgression, 2012



Open Sesame: José Seoane

September 14 – October 21, 2012

Curator	Carl Lavoy
Curatorial Assistant	Sonya Blazek
Essay	Sarah Beveridge
Editor	Alison Kenzie
Photography + Cover Design	Sigi Torinus
Printing	Aylmer Express Ltd.

ISBN 978-1-894651-83-7
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List of Works

Lost Steps, 2009; 340 x 150 cm; acrylic on canvas, cement steps on wheels

Open Sesame 2, 2009; 172.7 x 172.7 cm; acrylic on canvas

Open Sesame 9, 2010; 195.6 X 139.7 cm; acrylic on canvas, toilet drain

Lost Connection, 2011; 165 x 223.5 cm; acrylic on canvas

Confesionario, 2012; 180 x 94 cm; acrylic on canvas

The End of the Beginning, 2012; 119 x 148.6 cm; acrylic on canvas

Step Up, 2012; 195.6 x 101.6 cm; acrylic on canvas

Triptych, 2012; 132 x 193 cm (each panel); acrylic on canvas

Vertical Transgression, 2012; 172.7 x 127 cm; acrylic on canvas



José Seoane (b. 1956, Santiago de Cuba, Cuba)

1982 Academy of Fine Art "San Alejandro," Ciudad Havana, Cuba

1985 Philosophy & Aesthetics. Postgraduate studies at the Instituto "Nico Lopez," Ciudad Havana, Cuba

José Seoane is a painter and installation artist investigating ideas around transculturation, cultural identity, and processes of cultural adaptation and integration. His work extends from the gallery into site-specific spaces that include interactive interventions and large-scale murals. In 2002 he immigrated to Canada, and he currently teaches at the University of Windsor's School of Visual Arts.

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Artist Statement

My current body of work explores how physical and symbolic 'walls' evoke the struggle of the migrant's attempt at integration and re-invention while travelling between Western and non-Western cultures. Acting as barriers or fortresses, sanctuaries or prisons, these symbolic spaces at the same hide and expose our adopted past while providing the surface upon which we incorporate elements and simulacra of our old lives in a constant act of re-invention and re-evaluation. The resulting visual language is formed through stratifications of elements, foreign to each other yet cohesive, and evokes past and present, permanence and transience, absence and presence, belonging and displacement, the worldly and the spiritual.

Since moving to a border town, I have begun to explore how the thematic and symbolic treatment of wall spaces can be expanded to examine the idea of border culture. Much like the migrant experience, there is a distinct conflict of identity when two separate social and economic cultures share a separate but identical geographic space. In a border culture one is pulled toward 'the other' by virtue of convenience and need, repelled/attracted by differences, and separated by the barrier or wall. My research reflects the interplay of geography, object and spectator/actor in the perpetual act of perception, creation, recreation and re-evaluation.



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Thames Art Gallery exhibitions and programs are generously supported by The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Municipality of Chatham-Kent.

