Pérez Barreiro, Gabriel, "Quid rides", *Miguel Harte*, Buenos Aires, Mansalva, 2018.

I first came across Miguel Harte's work in the early 1990s, while working on David Elliott's groundbreaking exhibition Art from Argentina at the Museum of Modern Art Oxford. As is so often the case, any contemporary artist I spoke to was indignant that this artist (and therefore not them) had been chosen for the rarest of honors: participation in an important international exhibition. This was a long time ago, and things have changed: the "*bienalization*" of the contemporary art world means this is no longer such a big deal, but the shock at the time was clearly palpable. Aside from the professional jealously and conspiracy theories that are par for the course in these cases, and perhaps particularly so in the hypersensitive porteño artworld, Harte really was a strange choice. His polished and kitsch *martilux* surfaces peopled by strange insects and deformed figures were a slap in the face to the notion of good taste, and it was pretty much impossible to find parallels in the art of anywhere else at the time. Of course Elliott, one of the leading contemporary art curators of that time, was drawn precisely to the difference he saw in the work, suffering, as so many do, from seeing versions of the same art being produced around the globe. Elliott contextualized Harte through what he saw as a trend in Argentine art that favored the bizarre, the grotesque, or the abject. In this narrative, Pablo Suarez was rightly given pride of place as an artist and mentor who cast a long shadow. Within the fickle and changing winds that are intrinsically part of the art system, few international curators and art historians are today aware of Suarez's work, his fame being eclipsed to a certain extent by the more easily-digestible aesthetic and politics of León Ferrari whose seemingly limitless production flooded the art market for many years, perhaps unintentionally obscuring the remarkable legacy of Suárez, Luis Benedit, Alberto Heredia, Norberto Gómez, Victor Grippo, and others of that generation. Within this legacy Harte's work continues to be strange, but perhaps not so isolated.

So while many lineages can be established for Harte's work within the rich, albeit slightly obscure traditions of Argentine art, his work is also quite unique. One of the ways in which Harte's work declares its individuality is through the recurrent use of the self-portrait. Harte is blessed or cursed with a very distinct set of features, topped by an intense pair of bulging eyes. These eyes appear frequently in his work, from his early paintings to his more recent dwarf sculptures, and serve not only as an indicator of the artist, but also of the very challenge of looking. If looking at his works is already an intense experience, it is doubled when these eyes look back at you, often in a simultaneously challenging and pleading expression, as if asking for help, while making you wonder if you should really help or not. The self-portraits are often ambivalent in this way, creating a moral tension in our responses that fluctuate between attraction and repulsion, horror and empathy. In many of his works the structure is such that we are put in the position of omnipotent observer, either peeking into a globe, or leaning over a table, or squinting through a peephole in order to see the scene unraveling in a world that is not familiar. At one level this could be seen as a critique of the western scientific gaze, the

idea that our disinterested analytic vision is the primary tool for understanding the world: ours or that of an 'other'. Of course that gaze is mediated by desire, by a certain kind of perverse interest in what is happening in a context into which we are not able to enter unless through the act of seeing. It's no coincidence that many of Harte's works use quasi-scientific devices such as globes, platforms or spotlights, but the effect is often of a dystopian experiment gone wrong, a mutation that runs the risk of contaminating our world from which it is separated by a thin membrane. In popular culture fears of contagion and epidemics have greatly increased. The flipside of a global economy is that the unwashed hands of a tourist can spark a biological catastrophe among a population with no protection to that particular virus. In the pantheon of modern fears epidemics coexist with genetically modified foods, biological warfare and climate change as the seeds of a new Armageddon that will destroy the planet. As we plan and build the large things of life, the biggest risks seem to come from small almost invisible cultures (in both senses of the word).

Many of Harte's works play with scale to create the impression of distance and strangeness within his created world. The painstaking details and textures create a consistent and convincing plateau in which the reigning logic is palpable, but not ours. As in a Bosch painting, the details help us to believe the unbelievable whole. It's a similar effect to many science fiction movies where the walls of elaborate panels of flashing lights and meters help us to believe that there is a whole technology and elaborate system that is keeping the space station functioning. In almost all sci-fi movies there is a moment when the spaceship comes under attack and those same panels start to explode into sparks as the cables come loose. Yet somehow the ship continues to fly, so maybe they were not so necessary after all. We need to establish the fiction to then disregard it. Something similar happens in Harte's constructions: we see the painstaking attention to apparently superfluous details and an extreme craftsmanship in the particular way a viscous liquid seeps over a branch, but it is all just a ruse to make us believe for long enough, and we ultimately believe because we want to, we want to think that these other worlds exist, if only so we can look at them a little bit longer.

I would argue that Harte's work is particularly ocular, of the eyes. Not only through the many references to actual eyes in his work, but also to the act of looking that is the start, middle and end of the experience of his work. While much contemporary art---and indeed the conceptual art from which much contemporary art is drawn---is concerned above all with communicating a message or position, Harte's work seems to actively avoid such predetermined outcomes. It's hard to know exactly what is going on in the works, or what precisely we are supposed to think about them. We are seduced into looking, engaged by what we see, and then walk away with the vague feeling that something strange just happened in a world immediately adjacent to ours that is simultaneously familiar and alien. The things that we actually see in his work are quotidian: insects, sticks, eggshells, plants, but we have never seen them like this, in contexts that are unfamiliar yet apparently totally consistent within their own world. The experience of interrupting

expectations and smooth narrative flow is central to his work, yet the disruptions seem to be generated from inside the work itself rather than being the result of a conscious reorganization along a predetermined artistic or aesthetic agenda.

Many thinkers from Carl Jung to Joseph Campbell have drawn attention to the importance of myth and narrative in structuring and reinforcing core functions of the human psyche. Fairy tales, sagas, creation myths, oral traditions, all serve to lay out the fundamental stories and situations that structure our deepest personal and social expectations. Through the fairy tales of the Grimm Brothers, for example, generations of children learned to cope with fear, the unknown, the path to safety and many other necessary emotions to deal with daily life. Harte's work has a similar fairy tale-like atmosphere: the creation of world that is peopled by characters who are different, but whose function we broadly understand. We see battles, Edenic landscapes, small villages by a river, all apparently stage-sets for scenes that will transport us into a parallel world from which we will similarly be able to take away conclusions and experiences that will teach us something about our life and society. Except that in most cases we are left wanting, the moral certitude of the fairy tale is no longer present, we have no idea what happened immediately before or after our arrival, a strange sense of abandonment as if this particularly story didn't quite work out the way it was supposed to.

Many of Harte's scenes share a certain affinity with Tarkovsky's version of Stanislav Lem's short novel Solaris, which tells the story of a mission to an abandoned space station that was sent to investigate a mysterious region in which peoples' dreams seemed to continually build and destroy reality. The only glimpses we get of this rumored world, Solaris, are strange magma/cloud formations that coincidentally bear a visual similarity to some of Harte's liquid and reflective surfaces. The scientists who remained on the space station are haunted by the ability to coexist with their deepest desires and memories in a parallel reality, and as such they completely abandon their expected roles as scientists, and by extension, as disinterested observers. The Solaris story posits a world just beyond the scientific method in which dreams and fantasy become more real than matter, or rather the expected relationship between the two is inverted completely. Although none of these scientists understands what is happening, they are unable to leave the environment and resist any attempt to return and they also, significantly, stop reporting back. Meanwhile, the authorities back on earth can only think of blasting Solaris with radiation, understanding its mystery to be an existential threat to their understanding of the universe. On a smaller scale, there is something of the Solaris ambience in many of Harte's works, a place where the unformed or in-formation matter reflects some of our deepest fears and desires, yet whose logic is not entirely our own.

The question of observation and distance is central to Harte's work. It's telling that photographs of the work tend to oscillate between distant overall views and extreme closeups. In many cases the traditional viewing distance for a sculpture or painting---around 2 meters from the surface---is the least satisfying perspective for these

works. It seems that the work requires or a greater distance to see how it occupies space, or a very close proximity, in order to be able to appreciate the complex details. This impossibility of a general perspective that would deliver all of the information is consistent with a body of work that demands a very special type of attention. The ideal viewing position is often uncomfortably pressing up against the surface, hunched over and nervous about the possibility of falling or damaging the object. Contemplation in these circumstances involves a certain amount of risk and trepidation, the visual discomfort paralleled exactly in its physical counterpart.

Miguel Harte's work can be inserted into a long lineage of the grotesque. Throughout history, artists and writers have consciously chosen the abject and ugly as a platform from which to construct truths about our existence. It is as though conventional beauty is understood to be a veil behind which more profound meanings can be obscured. In the grotesque, we are all reduced to our most basic reality, the naked, physical and imperfect body. This body, while repelling our notions of good taste, also connects us deeply, as we instinctually understand its place, feelings, and functions. The grotesque tradition serves as the natural antidote to the traditions of idealism, in which the particular, the specific, the basic, are denied in favor of a constructed and lofty notion of perfection. The grotesque tradition has its heroes in Bosch, Francisco de Quevedo, Rabelais, Shakespeare, Durer, Francis Bacon. Within the traditions of Latin American art, José Luis Cuevas led a revolt against the idealism of Mexican Muralism through a revival of the grotesque that was to find its echo in later generations often responding to adverse political conditions. Within the Argentina of the 1970s and 1980s, the aforementioned Suárez, Heredia, Gómez, and Emilio Renart represented a revolt against the 'cold' conceptualism that was also used to protest oppression from a more ideological and linguistic perspective. This embrace of the grotesque, implying a distrust of all constructed discourses and positions, was to be extremely important to the next generation of artists who, like Harte, found inspiration in this return to the darker and more complex explorations of human nature. Harte, together with his generational colleagues Sebastián Gordín, Marcelo Pombo, or Feliciano Centurión explored the popular, the kitsch, the sexual, almost as ways to avoid the ideological generalizations that characterize much 'political' art.

The grotesque is a genre that often appears in moments of political or existential crisis and acts as a kind of 'back to basics', a reminder that all discourses and solutions mask a deeper more complex reality of what it means to be human. As such, despite its apparently ugliness or rejection, it is a language that tries to recover a sense of vulnerability and compassion into art. Harte's insertion of his own naked middle-aged body into his works can also be seen as an act of intentional vulnerability, the artist whose job it is, after all, to expose himself, does so quite literally in a quite disarmingly honest way. In an early work, *Autorretrato desnudito*, the artist, suspended in a glass ball, is holding his oversize penis with a self-absorbed and happy childish grin. Tellingly, his eyes are closed, as he is lost in an entirely personal sense of pleasure, suspended in his own

world free of the need to perform and alone with his dominant manhood. As in many of his works, society is absent and isolation here recalls the womb, but a womb with all the knowledge of grownup life and therefore doubly pleasurable.

The grotesque is, perhaps unexpectedly, also a call for universality. In Argentina, as elsewhere in the southern cone of South America, geometric abstraction has a long and rich tradition. Abstraction is of course the language of universalism par excellence, reducing all the specifics into absolute forms and colors. However, the case made by the grotesque tradition is just as compelling: we all share not only an ability for abstraction and generalization, but also an experience of the particular, the physical, the cycle of life, pain, joy, etc. It can be argued that these experiences unite us more than rational archetypes, that they are independent of any cultural construction or history. The grotesque therefore appears at moments in history when we are at risk of taking ourselves too seriously. Within the visual arts it comes to reset our sense of taste or propriety, as a humbling reminder that all knowledge is ultimately born of the body, and the body is transient and imperfect.

The Roman poet Horace in his Satires said “Quid rides? Mulato nomine, de te fabula narratur”, which translates as “Why are you laughing? Change the names and the story is about you”. This quote points to the universality of many jokes or parodies. While we may think the joke is on the other, more often than not, we are equally implicated. Looking at Miguel Harte’s sculptures creates a similar effect: while we first think we are looking at a world quite separate and different from our own, in fact, the stories being told there are universally applicable. The many devices Harte uses to separate the scenes from the viewer end up having the opposite effect, our gaze and curiosity is engaged not by the unfamiliarity but rather by an uncomfortable recognition of our own perversions, fears and desires.