

Bob Nickas

E Pluribus Unum

Do artists, in the moment in which they begin to engage with the world, ever have more than a vague sense that their work will not only reflect but transcend its time and enter into history? Looking back on the just-passed by way of the culture, the counterculture and the vast and wild undergrowth of subcultures encompassing the 1960s, '70s and '80s, it's becoming clearer that there are more pieces to the puzzle than we, or the artists themselves, may have once imagined. We find ourselves in the midst of an extended period of rediscovery of much that was lost, forgotten or barely known, allowing us to see how past and present inform one another, and how to go on. And what are three decades? No more than the blink of an eye. In that brief space of thirty-odd years, the very notion of the historical—particularly in terms of Art with a capital A—as reduced to winners and losers would dilate and contract and dilate once more.

You wake up in the morning, lids lifting as if from a narcotic sleep, then gradually the room comes into focus, and one by one you begin to rouse others from slumber. As you shake off the sense of being on the outside looking in—as a consumer, as part of an audience—a possibility begins to emerge, a possibility you circle in your subconscious and daydreams: to grasp culture as something in which to participate, without need of anyone's permission. Little by little, acquiring a heady momentum, everyone allows everyone else. As the pieces begin to converge and interlock, often uneasily, that picture reveals itself to be bigger, increasingly complex and more challenging. But then art, like life—how to make a place for yourself, invent or reinvent yourself—is a matter of problem-solving. While some may see the artist as a solitary, romantic figure, let's imagine that the artist embodies something else entirely: a gang of one. Walking along the street, you may encounter these other one-member gangs and an initial problem is solved: discovering that you're not alone. A first step in establishing a personal declaration of independence is to recognize that this awakening occurs for others as well—in charged moments almost simultaneously—and that you are one out of many.

If there's any place to reinvent yourself, or at least if there once was, it was New York. Like so many others before him and since, Arturo Vega headed to New York when he decided to leave home. Home was Mexico City in the early '70s, a far more troubled and convulsive place than New York in that period. Of course our fair city had dangers and degradation of its own back then, but along with the crime and the grime it was also dirt cheap. Young artists might live in a sketchy neighborhood, but they could survive with a part-time job and still be able to devote time to their work. If this sounds like a million miles away to an artist arriving in New York now, it is, and you probably can't get there from here. Caught short in these coordinates, there's only one guarantee. Anyone who wants to make art in this town has to either embrace or resist the Warholian notion of the business artist. Curiously enough, among the early artworks that Arturo Vega made, dating from 1974, are paintings based on the seal of the Department of Commerce, the

beginning of his fascination with the power of the logo. At first glance these works resemble modernist targets, closer to Kenneth Noland than to Jasper Johns: graphic, clean and direct. At the center, the bull's-eye, is a text which reads: "Packed Under Federal Inspection." In appropriating this sign and its meaning, Vega affords himself citizenship in the United States and a place among the society of artists, mischievously conferring an official seal of approval upon himself, as well as acknowledging that a painting is a form of currency. New and relevant, a painting can also be considered "legal tender," a commodity that participates actively in its circulation, value and exchange. We all know this today. In our hyperinflated market, every studio and gallery and museum that's run like a business is a de facto Department of Commerce. (Not forgetting that the inspectors include critics, curators, consultants and collectors.) Having been made 40 years ago, these works are certainly prescient. A painting from 1974 appearing no less than newly minted, any of these might have been made yesterday.

While several years would pass before Arturo Vega began his silver-dollar paintings, they follow these earlier works closely in terms of sensibility and conception. And yet they are visually more sophisticated. They are still graphically dynamic, but there is a heightened sense of mystery. There are layers of imagery, overlays of color, a play between abstraction and representation (no representation without taxation), and the hand of the artist as alternately visible and invisible, receding and coming forward. In many we can see that the silver dollar is held in the palm of a hand. This could be someone panhandling in the street—which Vega would have encountered at that time—though the change they ask for is not really change at all. This is a dollar, cast in silver. The metal had to be extracted from the ground. This is not a flimsy dollar, perhaps not worth the paper it's printed on, the ink nearly rubbing off on our fingers. In these paintings we can also discern the swirls of fingerprints, unique to each of us, potentially used against us, to be taken if we're arrested. Equally sinister and poetic, this trace of the body brings to mind another New York émigré and Bowery/East Village artist, the photographer Robert Frank, and his book *The Lines of My Hand*.

Engraved with the American eagle, its wings spread, poised for flight, ready to swoop down on its prey, the silver dollar is a sculptural object imbued with the power of church and state. (On its opposite side are the dual declarations *Liberty* and *In God We Trust*.) Inscribed above the eagle's crown is the Latin phrase *E Pluribus Unum*, which translates as "One out of many." Seeing this over and over again in Vega's paintings, we're reminded of one of the key compositions by the Last Poets, a group that emerged from Harlem at the end of the '60s, merging jazz, funk, poetry, black consciousness and political engagement—a mix which presaged and would come to influence rap and hip-hop. In the lyrics to "E Pluribus Unum," a song that appeared on their album *Chastisement* in 1972, there are parallels to Vega's silver dollars, to their undertow.

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Continued

*Credit cards, master charge, legacies of wills
real estate, stocks and bonds on coupon paper bills
Now the US mints on paper prints, millions every day
and use the eagle as their symbol 'cause it's a bird of prey*

*The laurels of peace and the arrows of wars
are clutched very tightly in the eagle's claws
filled with greed and lust,
and on the back of the dollar bill
is the words IN GOD WE TRUST.*

In addition to silk-screened images of a silver dollar and the palm of his hand, Vega has also incorporated in these paintings flags from countries in North and South America, Africa, the Middle East and Asia. Serving as backdrops for the silver dollar, they assert—at a time when there were more currencies in circulation than today, and of pre-globalization—that it is the American dollar which serves as the one globally accepted currency. These flags introduce a strongly modernist and pop-inflected iconography into Vega's paintings. In addition to circles and “targets,” there are stars, stripes and crescents in these works, motifs which are conveyed in repetition. In the duplication of imagery by means of printing techniques such as silk-screen, stenciling and what appears to be Xeroxing (in the grittier black-and-white works and passages they take on the eerie glow of X-rays), pop's strategy of parody and appropriation is evident. Although it's often the case that classic pop appears readily identifiable as '60s, Vega's approach does not in any way date his works. His use of printing applications and a graphic sensibility in the service of painting aligns him more closely with the current crop of “un-painters” who avail themselves of scanners and printers—our new age of electronic reproduction. Vega's paintings can be linked as well to today's process-oriented artists. Rather than painting on traditional canvas support, he chose material most commonly used for drop cloths. On close inspection, we see its seams and imperfections. Vega's silver-dollar paintings, if shown tomorrow at an art fair by a Chelsea gallery, could easily be mistaken for brand-new works by an up-and-coming star. They might readily be snapped up by speculators and within six months turn up at auction. Flipped, as it were. But this would be no mere coin-toss—heads I win, tails you lose. In the case of Arturo Vega, imagine him looking upon the present—where, as the saying goes, too many know the price of everything and the value of nothing—and leaving us with these words: “Today your love, tomorrow the world.”