



Glexis Novoa's Dystopic Futurism

Alfredo Triff

Since the famous Roman Vitruvius's treatise "On Architecture," we think of designing buildings as the paradigm of human reason and order against chaos. Yet history shows that order may be a pause amid longer periods of human-caused chaos. If architecture could stand like the mark of human endeavor, perhaps history looks more like layers of civilization buried under the boot of the chaos.

In modern times, ideas of civic freedoms have always been at odds with the calculations of political power. Throughout the 20th century, human autonomy was annihilated by different *übermensch* utopias. Putting ideology over rights and terror over truth, dictatorships from the right and left sanctioned their control with huge mausoleums, endless avenues, monstrous buildings, and jingoistic statuary.

Glexis Novoa, one of the most important Cuban artists of the so-called Eighties generation—that first group to have been born and raised after the revolution—likes to remind us that terror is always present. His voice is that of the skeptic who makes us ponder if our civilization is an accident instead of the cause of progress.

Novoa—who came to Miami via Mexico in the mid-Nineties—belongs to a group of Cuban artists disillusioned with Communism but aware of today's deceiving political discourse. From his first Miami show, "La Habana Oscura" (Dark Havana), at **Ambrosino Gallery**, which depicted the Cuban capital as a cold and cruel place, to his post 9/11 show "New Works" at **Bernice Steinbaum Gallery** in December 2003, Novoa keeps his vision in synch with world events.

This artist's interest in architecture goes back to his childhood, when in the company of his mother they would sightsee in Havana's historic district. Novoa was also curious about ideological symbols, which he explored during the 1980's when he produced ironic, Constructivist-like agitprop art. It was just a matter of time until these pseudo-patriotic messages in placards, flags, and slogans turned into a structure with a geometric perspective.

While in Mexico in the early 1990's, Novoa felt akin to Tomás Sánchez's treatment of the landscape (though Sánchez's trade is the country not the metropolis). Later, he fixed his attention on the often-ignored, detailed background renditions of the Flemish masters' paintings and engravings. Add to this Eduard Baldus' photos, Escher, and American pop—plus all architectural styles enamored with power—and you get an idea of Novoa's influences.

Why the city? Because since the Industrial Revolution, the city has become Totalitarianism's center where modern utopias such as Marxism-Leninism, Fascism, and Nazism found a core for the state's expansion and surveillance. Novoa's work articulates this aesthetic of power, expressed through the urban landscape.

Let's take the idea of order. Throughout the 20th century, architectural order has been implicitly political. Totalitarianism conveys the idea that the worst tribulations of our present are justified in light of a promising future. This future and its result, the New Man, was Cuban Communism's main motto for the past four decades and the promise became a caricature, an essential element in Novoa's art.

See Novoa's Escher-like panoramas of futuristic hyper-reality, where triangle and cube are the core of imaginary constructions. From above the roofs we observe pointed towers and ring-shape forms, highlighting huge slabs of truncated solid mass. Absolutely empty of human presence, these cityscapes evoke a desolate abstraction in which life is transformed into concrete and marble.

Drawing—not painting—these possible worlds is what interests Novoa, a perspective virtuoso who indulges in a practice considered second to painting and passed along (since the Renaissance) to the architecture profession. His pulse is careful and precise and his fantastic images are realistic and obtained in extremely small detail.

Glexis Novoa elaborates visions reminiscent of science fiction. I can recollect some of his futuristic ziggurats with converging stairs leading to needle-shape obelisks evoking the buildings of ancient sacrifice. This is where political—not just religious—rites take place. As Georges Bataille concluded, monumental architecture (buildings, statuary, roads) is the stage for the ritual, but eventually it becomes sacred itself.

One may think that Novoa's work is ominously serious, but there's plenty of irony and cartooning and he lampoons with gusto the straight-faced ritual of patriotic pomposity. In a work from 1999, *Motherland Proudly Watches*, Novoa played with a verse from the Cuban national anthem and explored the political biography of this century.

Against the profile of a statue with a sword in hand—a replica of the Motherland Memorial in Volgograd (formerly Stalingrad)—we distinguished a sea-horizon dotted with words, fragments, statements, and punctuation signs. The Promised Land (America) is also not paradise. This new place has its own version of control, which is in some ways a more insidious machine. *Motherland Proudly Watches* turned the myth of exile upside down; the tradeoff between hopes and reality.

Novoa's first work on marble was *Inundaciones 2000*, a permanent 84-foot long site-specific drawing at **Centro de Cultura Contemporanea de Barcelona** in Barcelona, Spain. I find something intractably romantic in Novoa's vision who after a 500 years tradition of drawing on paper, decides to draw on marble, an ideal medium for a messier art form, sculpture.

In 2001 at **MAM**, Novoa unveiled *Untitled*, his version of the universal utopia's hecatomb. The earth's ice has melted and all that's left is a little continent drifting away, inhabited by survivors who live off some kind of submarine recycling. The island contains the wreckage of our industrial civilization plus the iconoclastic ruins of the modern architectural canon. It all becomes the artist's suggestion of a possible, though not yet actual, future: A different history being "drawn" after the end of the world. Or is it in between civilizations?

Since 9/11 Novoa has started depicting marginal Expressionist perspectives of a ruinous global village; a mix of all the histories one can muster in one big spectacle. His pictorial foresight comes close to Paul Virilio. In his essay "The Overexposed City," Virilio leaves open the possibility that architecture will simply become another way of dominating the planet by destroying the urban environment. Novoa goes past this moment, when the planet has already been obliterated.

An example is *Europa*, a work from 2003 at the **Bernice Steinbaum Gallery**. The piece showed a multicultural, postcolonial EU just before the forces of fundamentalism win over, the fulfilled prophesy of Al-Qaeda. A makeshift war campsite, the sky filled with huge eyeball surveillance machines, domes of all kinds, minarets, gothic towers, spires displaying thin flags, as if in some unlikely Christian/Islamic HQ. Who and where is the enemy? Inside itself, amorphous, plotting destruction.

The end of history may not be the final synthesis of a great unfolding—neither utopia nor dystopia. Not a whimper, not a bang. What is there after the end? Another beginning?

In "Approaches to Nothingness," Edgar Morin explores the idea that death does not mean the destruction of our bodies, because at some point our selves can end up in the equivalent of some supercomputer's hard drive. This is the awareness of one who has already disappeared. Perhaps Novoa hints at the oblivion of our collective memories; if we ever come back we will repeat the same mistake all over again—which, as we know, has already happened.

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