

NEW YORK SPACES

Q&A with Brooklyn-based Artist Sebastian Vallejo

Brooklyn-based artist Sebastian Vallejo answers our questions on his prolific and color-saturated body of work and the influence his Caribbean heritage has on his paintings.

by Nicole Haddad

NYS: How has growing up on a Caribbean island influenced your aesthetic?

Sebastian Vallejo:

There is no doubt that growing up on a Caribbean island has significantly influenced the aesthetic of my work. All of my paintings in some way reflect the light of the Caribbean, especially from Puerto Rico where I was born and raised. It is a place where the light appears to emanate from every direction, including from the ground.

NYS: Where do you get your inspiration?

SV: The majority of my paintings are inspired by the expansive quality and spontaneous shifts that exist in nature. In my paintings, organic and inorganic forms collide and transform, one with the other, to create a visual display of light, form, and space. I am also heavily influenced by literature, especially poetry. Above all, the way metaphors, similes, allegories etc., successfully put forth ideas that are much greater than reality. The way they inspire a feeling or encourage an understanding that with normal and everyday vocabulary would be impossible to re-create.

NYS: When and why did you start painting?

SV:

My father is a painter as well—and a very good one at that. Growing up in an artistic environment had a significant impact on me. I didn't approach art, though, in a truly serious or mature way, until 2000 when I applied for the BFA program in the Painting and Drawing Dept. of The University of Puerto Rico. After finishing the BFA in PR, I moved to Chicago to attend The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I received a Post-Baccalaureate and an MFA degree there.

NYS: Who are your biggest artistic influences and why?

SV: My biggest artistic influences are Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Willem De Kooning. Picasso, by breaking down the image, offered new and infiniteways to approach the visual experience in art. His work is still relevant today. Marcel Duchamp, with his ready-mades and found objects, opened up a whole universe of possibilities for the creative process of an artist. Willem de Kooning and Pollock both took us back to the roots of a simple but existential human need—the need for mark making.

NYS: Can you tell us a bit about your recent body of work?

SV: My new body of work, titled *Malegría*, consists of medium and large-scale abstract paintings that incorporate fabric. I apply each fabric onto the canvas and I then enhance the pattern with hand-applied paint in a seemingly haphazard manner that yields a shockingly harmonious ode to color, light and form. The work exhibits the realization and universal language of experiment and mark making.

In this body of work, the fabrics I use serve as a point of reference or starting point in my creative process. Each particular fabric and its pattern dictates the formal aspects of the painting—in essence what the final composition, texture, spatial choices, and color will refer back to.

Azul de Palenque, 60" x 48". *Malegría* series.

NYS: Where does the title *Malegría* stem from?

SV: The word *Malegría* is a combination of two Spanish words, *Alegría* y *Malestar*. *Alegría* is a state of joy or extreme happiness, while *Malestar* describes a general feeling of discomfort, unease, and annoyance.

They each have a lot to do with a recurring theme in my work. The relationship between opposing forces has always fascinated me—it sets the potential for maximum creation and expansion. The unification of opposing ideas is the draw and the ideal. For example: order and chaos, chance and method. My paintings coverge one with the other on one visual plane.

NYS: What series preceeded *Malegría*?

SV: There are many, many series that preceeded *Malegría*. Among them are *Taquicardia*, *Caribbean Beat*, *Lüx*, *T/P*, *Methodic Chaos*, *Blue Period*, and more. Every series is distinct yet there always remains a common thread between them. Mostly because each new series stems from a learning experiece and/or an evolution from the previous.

NYS: What is your favorite series and why?

SV: Right now my favorite series is *Malegría*. The series itself presents (to me) an open field of endless possibilities, making the creative process one full of joy and inspiration. Previous series that I thoroughly enjoyed are *Lüx* and *Caribbean Beat*. In the case of *Lüx*, the main theme is light, that is why rays of color fly out from all parts of the canvas. I incorporated glitter and tape to recall the reflective quality of light. The word *lux* itself refers to the International System of Units (SI) of illuminance and luminous emittance. (In photometry, this is defined and used "as a measure of the intensity, as perceived by the human eye, of light that hits or passes through a surface.") In the *Caribbean Beat* series, apart from light, the most important aspect is rhythm. Rhythm is created by establishing tension between various composite elements in a painting—as if by the laws of attraction and repulsion. This is where the word *destabilization* enters the vocabulary of the painting—the destabilizers in this case are the sharp-edged or pointed shapes that seemingly take off through the painting's borders. Their function is to accentuate the said tension mentioned earlier. They are also used to break the horizon and the visual stability of the painting.

NYS: Why is color so important to your work?

SV: I've always thought color is the manifestation of light. As a Caribbean, light is very important to me. Through color I celebrate life.

NYS: What is your work process like?

SV: When I approach a blank canvas I don't know what the final result will be, even if I planned something beforehand. I always let the painting guide me through the process.

NYS: What other materials do you incorporate into your canvases?

SV: I incorporate a variety of materials including plastic bags, fabric, glitter, packing tape, recycling bags, spray paint, paper, t-shirts, among many other found objects.

NYS: How do you incorporate plastic bags into your work? What made you decide to do this?

SV: In some paintings, the plastic bags are incorporated as collage. They come in every color and they each serve different purposes. If they are black I prefer them to be opaque, but if they are colorful, I prefer them transparent. In this way, I can achieve layers of color in the same way that is possible with oils and acrylics. I love to sometimes work without being married to using paint. It mimics a "ready made" of color. I also like to use plastic bags because they allow me to create extremely flat and smooth surfaces with a sharp-edge finish.

NYS: Why do you incorporate tape into your pieces?

SV: I use the transparency and semi-reflective quality of the packing tape to my advantage. The artificial and inorganic aspect of tape always plays a role in these paintings. These particular qualities contrast with the organic and malleable quality of other materials I work with and create a tension in the visual discourse. Examples of the paintings in which the packing tape played an important role are: *Vintage* (T-Shirt series), and *Night Waterfall* (*Lüx* series).

NYS: How do you incorporate spray paint into your *Methodic Chaos* series? What do you think this medium adds to your pieces?

SV: The creative process behind most of my spray paint-inspired work is determined by chance and improvisation. I start by making random marks on a non-absorbant surface. Afterwards, the pigments (from the spray paint) are transferred with an acrylic medium onto the canvas by means of collage or monotype techniques. The resulting image, which I have termed *Methodic Chaos*, is one full of intricate and organic imprints where organization and disorder are simultaneously present.

NYS: *Beautiful Creatures*, from the *Methodic Chaos* series, looks surreal...is there something you see in that painting?

SV: *Beautiful Creatures* (from the *Methodic Chaos* series) is inspired by Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*. It is a painting where I try to reveal the exact moment when the light lands in front of the cave. The manner of applying the pigment and the surface marks create a cavernous effect, yielding a reference to Plato's allegory. This famous, insightful analogy to reality is explained below.

NYS: What does T/P stand for in that particular series?

SV: T/P stands for transferred painting. In this series, the same as *Methodic Chaos*, the creative process is dictated by the rearticulation and application of paint in the artistic medium. The oil pigment and spray

NYS: What does T/P stand for in that particular series?

SV: T/P stands for transferred painting. In this series, the same as Methodic Chaos, the creative process is dictated by the rearticulation and application of paint in the artistic medium. The oil pigment and spray paint are transferred by an acrylic medium (i.e. a plastic bag). Through the use of a non-absorbant surface, I create the canvas. The result yields a canvas displaying a true battle between mediums—oils, spray paints, and acrylic. The process recalls much of the techniques used in frescos. The acrylic medium solidifies in a transparent manner and functions as a conductor and as a protective layer for the trapped pigments. Cement played a similar role in the creation of frescos.

NYS: Is the Blue Period series in name and color only, or was it a blue period in your life?

SV: The title Blue Period is a tribute to Picasso and his famous blue period. In the case of my series by the same name, these paintings were made with blue recyclable bags and oil paints (Prussian Blue specifically). I layered four to five coats of recyclable bags until the effect yielded was of profound shades of blue that mimicked the deep blue tones of the ocean while swimming in it.

NYS: You have some religious references in your work (Deep Water, Yo Me Muero, Como Vivi etc.). Where do they stem from and what do these pieces in particular mean to you?

SV: The theme of Jesus is a recurring one in my paintings. I am not very religious per se, but Jesus as an important character in history is one that intrigues me. Specifically, how historically, the story blends the theme of love and pain around his person. The relationship between opposing forces has long been present in my work. Paintings such as Hiroshima Mon Amour (Lûx series) also make references to the relationship between opposing forces and their potential for creation and expansion. In the case of Hiroshima Mon Amour, I touch on the theme of Love, Pain, and Destruction. The cross is an image replete with symbology—both positive and negative in nature, allowing me to work freely with the opposing forces to which I refer.

NYS: Your work feels very cheerful/optimistic...is this a reflection of your character?

SV: My paintings are very sincere. I give all of myself when I paint. My paintings can describe who I am better than anything.

NYS: What would you like an observer to take from viewing your work?

SV: My hope is for observers to lose themselves in my work. To be confused. For their emotions to betray them. That the artwork may inspire felicity and then nostalgia, and vice versa.

NYS: What is your approach to life? How does that influence your work?

SV: I'm open to everything life has to offer. I don't get tired of analyzing all the mysteries that surround us. I think this notion gets reflected in my work in the way that I'm always experimenting with mediums and pushing myself to the limit as a painter and as an artist.

NYS: You have a really large body of work...How often do you work?

SV: I try to paint every day. If I'm not painting, I'm planning and visualizing my next painting.

NYS: How long does it generally take you to finish a piece?

SV: I'm kind of a neurotic artist. If I start a painting, I try to finish it the same day. If I'm working on small formats, I try to work on three or four paintings at the same time.

NYS: Do you work in silence...or is there a type of music that puts in you in the right frame of mind?

SV: I always work with music. Any kind. I just put the ipod on shuffle mode. I usually listen to salsa, punk rock, or reggae music.

NYS: Do your paintings carry as much dimension as they do in the images (especially the ones where you incorporate plastic bags)? Or is that an illusion?

SV: Yes, definitely. And yes, the plastic bags bring a lot of dimension to the compositions. I think it's because of the flat and translucent quality of the bags—they contrast with the malleable and organic quality of other elements in the paintings (such as the oils and fabrics).

NYS: Which is your favorite piece and why?

SV: My favorite painting is Midnight Tree at the Side of the Road (Lûx series). I did that one during my last semester of Grad School in Chicago. Midnight tree represents a "before and after" of my career. It's like some kind of revelation. Through, or with that painting, I found my own style or vocabulary. What I like the most about that painting is that the light comes from within the tree, instead of coming from outside. The tree is aware of its own manifestation. Also, it's like the tree is embracing its own illumination. It is also a work of art that is open to be read in a funny or serious way at the same time.

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NYS: How has your work evolved over time?

SV: My work is always evolving. I learn something new from each painting. It is a constant struggle—in the way that I am always striving to create a better painting than the last one. I don't like the idea of getting stuck in some kind of "safety zone" with my art.

NYS: Have you or are you heavily influenced by a certain period of art or movement? Why and how so?

SV: When I started painting back in 2000, I was heavily influenced by the Expressionists, the Impressionists, and the Fauvists. The elements that drew me were the power in the brushstrokes of the Expressionists, the extraordinary use of light by the Impressionists, and the wonderfully over-saturated use of colors by the Fauvists.

NYS: What is your favorite period/movement if different?

SV: My favorite period in art and history is the Modernism period with all its glory and epic failures.

NYS: Whose walls would you most like to see your art displayed on?

SV: I would love to see my art displayed in important museums and collections all over the world.

NYS: Whose art would you most like to see displayed on your walls?

SV: I would love to see art by the following artists displayed on my walls: Picasso, Matisse, Peter Doig, David Hockney, Cecily Brown, Gerhard Richter, Tomma Abts, Mary Heillman, Sterling Ruby, Basquiat, and Sigmar Polke, among many, many others.