

# Energy Flows

SOFÍA HERNÁNDEZ CHONG CUY  
INTERVIEWS FEDERICO HERRERO

*During the month of April 2017, curator Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy had a number of exchanges with Federico Herrero over Skype. Their exchange centered on Federico's artistic trajectory. In these casual interviews, they discussed particular uses of shapes and colors in Herrero's work, as well as some of his influences, from artists who have inspired him to the landscapes and urban realms he worked with and intervened upon. They talked about how Herrero's interest in expanding beyond the pictorial realm—or the canvas frame itself—has been expressed in, among other ways, site-specific work, as well as in the creation of the independent art space Despacio in his hometown of San José, Costa Rica. Throughout their dialogue, they both inquire and imagine ways in which energy flows shape the ever-expansive nature of art making.*

**Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy: You decided to become an artist at a young age, and began working seriously at this when you were twenty years old. How did you become aware of your interest in art and discover your vocation as a visual artist?**

**Federico Herrero:** As a child, while growing up, it was about a certain flow, which kept me drawing all the time. I even remember drawing in the air with my hands, so it was like a constant flow of energy. But it wasn't until my teenage years that I started to look into art history books, which I casually found at my grandmother's place. And this was when I actually felt the desire to participate in a conversation. I used to look at these books carefully. They transmitted a sense of belonging. I started to grasp the various notions of art, to understand different periods, styles and painters. This is how it really started.

**And when going through these books, what kinds of images and stories particularly inspired you?**

At first, I was especially drawn to Dadaism. Then I was extremely curious about Cubism, and later, in abstraction in general. I definitely had a strong connection to modern art. For a while, I was doing figurative drawings like Salvador Dalí's.

**It seems that most artists from your generation have been fascinated by Dalí's work during their formative years. However, Dadaism is less**

**of a common reference. What about Dadaism interested you then?**

I connected with Dadaism's explorations of unconscious planes and access to other dimensions. This provided a fertile ground at that moment to invent things in my mind, to have my own interpretation of things.

**And did Dada's explorations of primitivism or its anti-establishment view of art have any significance to you then?**

Yes, but at that time I was more interested in understanding a wider picture—in understanding the different aspects of each movement and so on. Other artists, like Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, were also very important for me.

**What other movements or artists inspired you at that time?**

Well, Roberto Matta's paintings had a big impact on me.

**Was your arrival to Matta's work also through books?**

Yes.

**And do you recall the first time you saw Matta's work in person, and the kind of impact his work had on you then?**

I saw some of his works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. One in particular, a huge canvas, struck me. I took notice of how he was able to jump from a very intimate situation to a monumental approach, whether he was working on a very small canvas or a larger surface. I was fascinated by his way of painting energy, like conveying non-physical aspects of a landscape.

**Let's move on to your environment. You grew up in San José, Costa Rica, where you are still based. What was the arts education like there in the early 1990s, when you had begun exploring your vocation as an artist more seriously?**

It really didn't offer me much. And it wasn't that there was nothing to see in San José. It was just that my immediate milieu didn't encourage this. I grew up in a family of mostly engineers, and at home we weren't in the habit of visiting art exhibitions or things like that.



Roberto Matta

Untitled, 1937

Wax crayon, brush and pen and ink, and pencil on paper

©\_bpk / The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Pierre and Maria-Gaetana Matisse Collection, 2002

**Is this why you left San José, if temporarily? I know you studied abroad...**

Yes, I went to study painting at Pratt Institute in New York City.

**You've mentioned before that your experience there wasn't exactly inspiring, why?**

It was a very good school, and the late-nineties was an interesting moment to be in New York. Apart from going to school and working in my studio, I was visiting museums and attending exhibition openings at art galleries as much as possible. I think I learned a lot from doing that. But I also felt there was a lot of disconnection between what was going on in school and what was happening in the world. I had the feeling that I was interested in making art, and not so much in participating in the art system. It was evident for me that something was wrong with the agendas of the art world, and it didn't make any sense to continue studying there. So I decided to drop-out of school, and went back to Costa Rica with a kind of master plan in mind: I saw myself living in nature without having much contact with society.

**Did you actually start developing the plan of keeping to yourself, painting in your family's garage cum art studio, or did you make an effort to engage in San José's artistic community?**

Soon after returning back home, I began being more relaxed with the idea of wholly disconnecting from society. I realized that my dislike of the art world that I had come to witness was simply situational; that it wasn't the only art system. In San José, I started to engage with some artists my own age, and we used to talk a lot with local artists like Joaquin Rodriguez del Paso and Priscilla Monge. Our community began to grow. I was starting to get in touch with the art world from another perspective then. It felt more natural. Joaquin was the one who showed some of my paintings to his San José gallerist, Jacob Karpio, who then offered me a solo exhibition that year, in 2000. That's how I had my first exhibition.

**And what kind of work were you developing at this time that you were immersing yourself in the art community of Costa Rica? What were some of the ideas, forms or experiences that you wanted to convey through painting?**

Just before returning back home, while I was in New York, I had seen the work of Gabriel Orozco, and had fallen in love with it. I was especially drawn

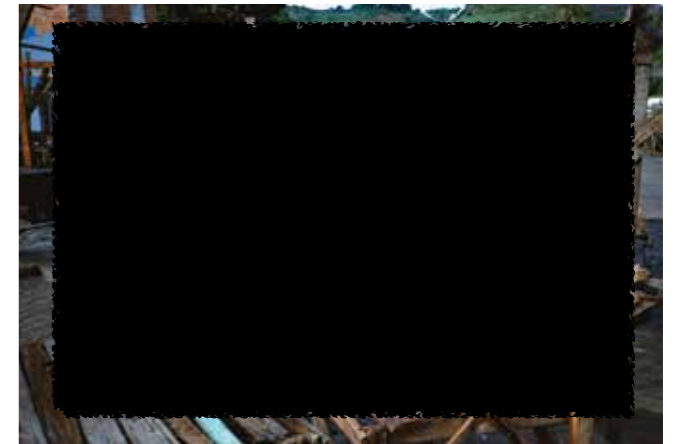
to one of his works, *Turista maluco*, for which the artist placed oranges on various surfaces throughout a market [the assemblage exists as a photograph, dated 1991]. Experiencing *Turista maluco* was the best school I had. And, upon my return to San José, I was ready to apply this way of working with spaces that I had learned from that work. I saw the city as an extension of my studio. First, I started placing in public places invented signs and abstract advertisements I had made, and hanging my canvas paintings on trees outdoors. I was interested in losing control of these paintings, of letting them out. Interesting things happened with these works. For example, I noticed that some of the paintings were re-hung elsewhere by strangers. Another kind of work that I was doing at the time was re-painting yellow transit lines on the streets. So very early on I felt connected to the notion of a totality of things, of a city's flow and of public spaces as a fertile ground to work with.

**It's interesting that your studio work and your interventions in public space unfold as parallel practices, given they ultimately have rather distinct audiences, a voluntary one and an accidental one, so to say. What is more remarkable is that for both practices you've used the same non-figurative visual language.**

Yes, at same time as I was doing that kind of work in public spaces, I was painting very intimate canvases, where I started exploring the notion of abstraction as an open structure. I began using the same method as Roberto Matta, where there is no sketch or previous idea. The painting would emerge right in front of the white canvas.

**You mentioned Matta earlier, but your work is distinctly different than his, visually, say, in terms imagery. In what ways can you see your work in dialogue with his?**

Matta was also very interested in urbanism. His paintings are like maps of highways of energy and space. Landscape in the end contains all these. Visually our language is very different but I tend to connect the canvas work with the way I see things grow. It's always a push and pull, especially in a



Gabriel Orozco

*Turista Maluco / Crazy Tourist, 1991*

Chromogenic color print

Courtesy of the artist, Marian Goodman Gallery,

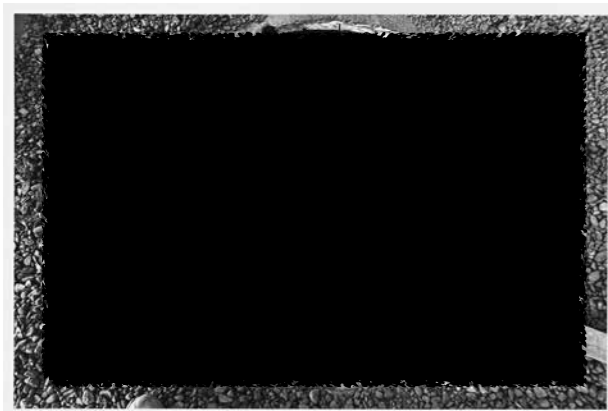
New York and kurimanzutto, Mexico City



Federico Herrero

Installation view of painting in a tree, San José, 2003

developing country. The urban structure here is always ready to change and most importantly it is never finished. It's always open-ended, to be continued... When I am painting a canvas I apply this notion of openness to the point that it becomes the method. The core of the painting is an open structure not only in how it is self-constructed, but also in how it can be interpreted as clouds in the sky. I would like every person to see something different and the more you look the more things you see. But I am also thinking of a landscape.



Gordon Matta-Clark  
View of Office Baroque  
Antwerp, Belgium  
1977  
Courtesy The Estate of Gordon Matta-Clark and David Zwirner, New York/London  
© VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2017

**I would love if we can expand a bit more upon Matta's influence, for example, in terms of the difference between his color palette and yours. More earthy tones predominate in his work. Brighter and poppier colors characterize yours.**

Normally a lot of my paintings are landscapes where the pigment has a quality of gravity or where color and shapes can float in an image. Pigments are jumping from place to place in my paintings. I connect this with how I perceive public space. I see painting jumping from place to place there as well. The continuum of paint and signs in public space shapes our perception, so I am always looking where painting is happening. I want to add here that I was also inspired by the work of Matta's son, the artist Gordon Matta-Clark. It felt to me that what Matta-Clark was doing in the actual, physical space was what his father was doing in some of his paintings on canvas.

I connected these ideas immediately, and thought it was interesting to think that these two practices could coexist and develop simultaneously. Also, Orozco also always spoke of the term "activate." He referred to his actions as activating the public space. Roberto Matta was painting the metaphysical aspect of this activation. And Gordon Matta-Clark had this notion of experiencing multiple places at the same time when realizing his cuts on the buildings... a fragmented model of space. For me, the work of these three artists has a very strong connection.

**Whether it is the paintings of Matta, the installations of his son Matta-Clark, or the 1990s work of Orozco, which he called sculptures even**

**when they were experienced as photography, the approach to space by these artists is measured in a way that your work isn't, I feel. There's a palpable joy in your work that distinguishes your take on abstraction from theirs, even in how you approach urbanism or landscapes. However, I find this contrast is not exactly expressed in composition, but more outwardly in the very color palette you have chosen to work with, where bright blues, green, yellows and even pinks predominate. So, again, I want to insist on tackling the meaning behind your use of color. Can you speak about the palette that you've chosen to work with?**

When choosing the palette I tend to think of color as sound and volume, or, to give it properties like weight. For as much as I may be thinking of a kind of mental landscape, I paint this as if it were a musical composition. These translations in the process are very important for me. I also think these are especially hard to talk about or put into rational thinking. Some color choices, however, do have a connection with the earth, as I see it, for example, the use of blue and green.

**The particular hues of blue and green you use are also characteristic of the landscape in Central America—of the tropical waters and flora of the region—and are also recurring colors found in the urban space, as many homes and buildings use them in their facades. Now, when you refer to your paintings as landscapes, are you considering that the isolated or stacked forms and blotches on your canvases are ways of conveying the energy amassed in your immediate surroundings? And if so, do you connect this with the metaphysical in Matta's work... or am I missing the point?**

Yes, that's the way I see it.

**Your home and studio, which you designed, also seems to be an extension of this idea of spatially organizing energy or of simply acknowledging its flows, rather than merely a design or arrangement of quarters.**



Interior of Federico Herrero's house  
in Heredia, Costa Rica

When I built this house ten years ago, it was clear to me that I wanted to do architecture with humor, a place that could be playful. It was also very important to me that I approached its building as an open-ended process. So, a decade later, the place hasn't been completely finished. It is always in a constant state of development and change. When people enter the house, they ask me why I don't have furniture or when I am planning to finish it and things like that.

**I may have asked you one of those questions! I can't remember now, but what I do recall vividly is the entrance—its circular shape and its peculiar size.**

When I began designing the architecture, I was very focused on human scale. My height was the measure of that entrance, for example, and a point of departure for deciding the proportions of some of the doors and interior spaces.

**What other considerations did you take in mind in designing the layout?**

I wanted to separate my studio from my home with a garden that is small but that looks like a jungle. I wanted to have this separation, to create a distance between one space and the other, yet all the while to have both work and life experiences in the same area. The place is also like a hamster house. You can go up and down to its different floors from either inside or outside the building. Upstairs, there is a room that can only be accessed through a long, narrow wooden bridge. Now I am thinking of removing that bridge and having the room isolated, to make it an unreachable space.

**How do you feel that the characteristics of this built environment relate to your artwork or artistic practice?**

I definitely consider its design-in-progress and ongoing construction an integral to my practice. The place overall has provided me with a space for experimentation. Most importantly, it feels like a house on the beach. Its environment has the ability to stop time or to slow it down.



*Terrace of Federico Herrero's house  
in Heredia, Costa Rica*

**I wasn't planning on asking you about Despacio yet, but this seems like an appropriate time. (The Spanish word "despacio" literally translates in English as *slow*, but also incorporates the term *space*.) Can you speak of your interest in slowness and, relatedly, of your interest in creating the Despacio art space in San José?**

I see the notion of "slowing down" mostly as a tool. It can provide a ground for making content and it can allow one to notice a fertile ground, too. This is something needed in a city like San José. With globalization and the accelerated experience of information, the human condition can become a bit distracted. So, in a way, slowness is a tool for being present.

About Despacio, well, at first I just wanted to have a studio downtown, let's say, to have a parallel space for something like an idea-based practice in the city. But then the original plan took the form of an artist-run exhibition space. When I founded Despacio, in 2007, I felt there was a lack of spaces to welcome ideas that weren't totally ready or that were still developing. Contemporary art exhibition spaces in San José, such as TEOR/ética and the Museo de Arte y Diseño Contemporáneo, were primarily focused on showing the work of established artists.

Despacio was meant to encourage young artists to give concrete shape to his or her artistic processes. Through exhibitions, their ideas materialize and don't remain just as pure fiction. Also, on a personal level, I feel it's an informal school and a common ground for a lot of artists that have shown at Despacio or participated in its program in one way or another. In a city like San José, a small project can have a big impact. Things here can also be done easily. And I think it's always possible to be an active force in shaping a city, to think of what it's lacking and of what can be done, with playfulness and poetry.

**How do emerging artists that participate in Despacio's program get critical feedback on their work? And, what are some of the ways Despacio assists them so that their work can be meaningfully received by the local arts community?**

The most important kind of support artists get is probably by materializing ideas into artworks and by spatializing these into exhibitions. For me, filling this gap between the immaterial and the concrete is crucial. The fact that I was given a space to show my work when I was still young encouraged me

to keep on working my ideas—and to do so with others, to have a practice connected to a public. Secondly, at Despacio we try to engage artists with colleagues that are interested in similar topics. We create networks of knowledge and we try to provide artists with a better understanding of their context, and place what they do in a wider picture. Then comes the public. We try to engage them through programs like artist's talks or private exhibition visits. We also try to make connections with the other institutions in San José, to generate more collaboration.

**And your role in all of this is...**

My involvement in the process is mostly to mediate between all these various elements, and sometimes to assess what's possible to do or not in terms of production. But I ultimately relate to all of this as an artist. I try to give input to artists based on my personal experiences, but also keep an open mind to be able to adapt to each case. I personally take this all as a learning process. I constantly see myself involved in every step, and see this as a way to keep learning and keep questioning things all the time. I understand the various processes artists have to go through to make a work, as they do, and how ideas and concepts unavoidably have to take some form in order for these to be communicated to a public.

**Can you mention some of the topics that Despacio has engaged with?**

Most recently we have worked with the notion of absence. Relatedly, a year ago, Sandino Scheidegger joined the team and he proposed a 3-year program. For example, last year, we made exhibitions dealing with the absence of logic. This year, we are working with the absence of divisions, and, next year, with the idea of the absence of art. So we are trying to connect with a concept as a point of departure. But before we began this kind of approach, the program had been more about making sense of an artist's process, as an individual practice or in terms of a body of work developed across a period of time. We also just presented an exhibition in Germany at Sies + Höke Galerie. The show includes work by artists from Latin America, and was titled *The First Day of Good Weather*. Some artists have even shown at Despacio multiple times. Such is the case of Naufus Ramirez Figueroa from Guatemala. Over the



Installation view, *Absence of logic, 2016*  
Despacio, San José

years, he has presented more than five performances at Despacio.

**Ah, yes, one of these is *Para ti el banano madura el peso de tu dulce amor* (2008), which I consider one of the best artworks made in recent years.**

For that performance, the artist slept at Despacio for several days, embracing a bunch of bananas until they ripened, with the assistance of his body heat. In another, Naufus asked the public to bring any object to the space, and with those objects he proceeded to create a performance. Carlos Fernandez has also participated in Despacio's program several times. He is a local artist engaged with agriculture. Over the years, he has been gradually connecting his experiences with art and agriculture. Now he has an agriculture class with farmers, and has been developing his theories about it through art making. I think this experience surfaces or condensates on the surface of his paintings. This is just an example. Throughout the years, we've presented work by several local artists.

**As well as many other artists active in Central America...**

...Jonathan Harker and Donna Conlon, who are based in Panama, Ernesto Salmeron from Nicaragua, and artist Angel Poyon from Guatemala, to name a few. We also just presented a survey exhibition of the Guatemalan artist Anibal López, who recently passed away. This was one of the first occasions when audiences were able to see a larger body of work by him.

**And how does Despacio function within a city that has few market opportunities and philanthropic efforts supporting contemporary art?**

A local and active art market is one of the few elements missing here. Perhaps it will eventually develop. For years now, however, I have been working internationally with galleries in Europe and South America. The sales of my work have allowed me to fund Despacio so far. At this point, we are three people in the team of Despacio, and it works well. There is a good balance.



Naufus Ramirez-Figueroa

*Para ti el banano madura el peso de tu dulce amor, 2008*

Courtesy of the artist and Despacio, San José



Installation view,

Anibal López

*Despacio, San José, 2016*

**You've mentioned TEOR/éTica and the late Virginia Perez Ratton a couple of times in our exchange, here and elsewhere. I would love if we can go into these a bit more, since these are references for Despacio, and no doubt catalysts in your own artistic trajectory.**

I think that what Virginia Perez Ratton did over the years here, and what she left us after her passing, was to create a very connected microsystem of artists and institutions. We are now aware of who is working and doing things, and this is a platform that became possible after the active efforts of Virginia and her team. TEOR/éTica is an example. Looking at its footprint gave me an example of how to engage with the local community, and a possibility to do so, too. It became clear to me that if you have a feeling of belonging to a place, then you want to participate in it and have a dialogue. There is a lot of potential in a place like San José. And I think that feeling and working with the immediacy of things is one of the main ways to articulate that potentiality.

**Yes, Virginia's curatorial work and TEOR/éTica's program can largely be credited with connecting artists in Costa Rica and more broadly within the region. She created a network of artists and cultural producers, and built many opportunities for them to have**

**visibility there and elsewhere. There are a handful of other art spaces now in Central America that have been working with artists in the region, and also doing some of this cultural work. One of these is Proyectos Ultravioleta in Guatemala City. Some years ago, you created a rare installation in their exhibition space. It was an environment of sorts that brought together the kind of work you create in public spaces and in paintings on canvas. Can you speak of this painterly-architectural installation you titled *Cataratas* (2011)?**

When you mentioned earlier the idea of a photograph that is actually a sculpture, I think in a similar way. I am interested in a painting that, even while having a three-dimensional form in a given space, can still be considered a painting. When I work on a project like this, I try to

connect a lot with the proportions of the space and to create a rhythm in it. For example, in the exhibition at Proyectos Ultravioleta you couldn't

see all the mural paintings—what you describe as a painterly-architectural installation—unless you were positioned at the very end of the room; then they would be revealed. So these paintings were jumping from the space into concrete forms. In these primordial forms, some of them in the shape of pyramids, some just blocks, I was interested in a notion of perception—in how one could perceive these objects and how your body navigated them. I am interested in a notion of a painting that cannot be seen all at once; that is fragmented in the space. So the brain creates a map of it but it's never completely revealed at once. These volumes made in concrete are architectural forms. I have worked with the notion of site-specific paintings for several years now. I wanted to incorporate this practice and to connect it with notions of gravity and sound, for example, which I've mentioned here before.

**I associate this particular installation at Proyectos Ultravioleta with a scaled-down version of pre-Columbian city. It seems that the composition is assembled with awareness of this and also of the experience of a modern urban space. Built knowing both references. It resembles both kinds of spatial organizations and bodily circulation flow. Like archeologically conscious. Take the concrete pyramidal structures supported by found furniture and pieces of wood and connect by painted lines, like the yellow line of a pedestrian street-crossing indicator.**

I am not interested in the archeological aspect of these forms nor in what they may resemble, but rather on the primordial aspect of them.

**So where does site-specificity then function in all of this?**

Yes, perhaps you are right, and there is this common aspect of the work of the archeologist and the visual artist as people who reveal something or bring something to the surface. And of course there is something similar with the forms in within the installation and the pre-Columbian architecture that can be found in Guatemala. But I am more interested in the way a person can navigate these elements with their body in a given space, and how he or she can create a map of all the traces of paint. This type of experience, where the connection with time and space is enhanced, is what's site-specific. The knowledge that this awareness represents is what's valuable to me.



Installation view  
Federico Herrero: *Cataratas*, 2011  
Proyectos Ultravioleta, Guatemala City



Federico Herrero  
Landscape (diptych), 2004  
21st Century Art Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa

**And where does gravity do its work? What is grounding in this respect?**

Perhaps gravity is what grounds this time-space crossing, through the experience of navigating the painting.

**For sure, the volumetric pyramid- and block-shapes in your *Cataratas* installation is one of the aspects that motivated me to go back to look at your paintings with more detail. I noticed that in your most recent works on canvas, a large trapezoidal shape—painted in black, to be precise—has suddenly become prominent.**

**I connect this shape to both your *Catarata* installation, and no less to the so-called Martian beings that have for over a decade appeared in your paintings. Can you speak about this now-enlarged shape, about these once smaller beings, these graphic figures described by Paulo Herkenhoff as graphic occurrences that have a paratactic relationship within the worlds you paint?**

This somehow relates to what I said earlier inspired me about Matta's paintings, as being the metaphysical image of elements, or to what his son or other artists like Orozco were doing in space. I think painting has the potential to convey this type of immateriality or activity. It's at least what I like to think I am doing. Some years ago, I painted a mountain, which I named *Pan de Azucar*, like the famous one in Rio de Janeiro. When I was painting it, I was thinking of its sound and its volume. And I was thinking not to paint a linear portrait, but rather to depict its energy. I feel connected to both the notion of landscape and the elements of the natural world, and also to working with architecture itself as a support, so these forms that have recently appeared in my canvases evoke either one world or the other. I relate the trapezoid to a building, for example. The smaller graphic figures that appeared in my work sometimes are, for me, part of a narrative that tells a story, like characters that populate a given place. These kinds of drawings, however, have also gradually disappeared from my work, sometimes completely.



Installation view,  
*UBS MAP Global Art Initiative: Under the Same Sun - Art from Latin America Today*  
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 2014  
© Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation

**Maybe the progressive disappearance of these graphic marks from your canvas—many of these figures with eyes, no less—relates in some way also to the notions of absence that you are considering in *Despacio's* program? Let me re-phrase this. More prominent shapes are now replacing these character-like beings that used to appear here and there in your landscapes, counter-intuitively taking shape, so to say, while emoticons have substituted words to express emotions in short text messaging exchanges. While these amorphous or geometric shapes with soft edges populating your canvases are no less characters in the work, they are there without being anthropocentric. Perhaps we have yet to understand their language, their universe, what they're doing or intending to communicate, if anything.**

It would be interesting to link what you are pointing out with the notion that the human condition is going to face a critical time in the next hundred years, if global warming continues as is. It's possible to imagine a landscape without humans. While landscape may always be there as a witness to humankind, it seems humanity may have a rather temporal place on this planet.

**Yes, thinking of the larger ecosystem is certainly pressing. There are many ideas that you've presented here to continue thinking about.**

**In the meantime, one last question, one that is less about disappearances or unknowing than about what is appearing and may possibly be expected in your work to come: What are new forms or expressions that have begun trickling into your canvases and installations in public space?**

Recently, I have been interested in telepathy and how paintings could manifest or expand through this method. For now, I've been playing around with these ideas in a public swimming pool that I frequently visit. The people there keep painting the place, as if by instruction. I am wondering if this could possibly be developed; thinking of this itself as a form of expression. I've also been thinking about how pigment may jump from place to place in the course of exchanges occurring between the private and public



Federico Herrero painting a site-specific installation at Sies + Höke, Düsseldorf, 2017

realms. The ways we communicate in general, but especially how we communicate our emotions and feelings, has changed drastically in the last couple of decades. I can see how this may relate in some way to how I will be developing my own work, for example, in gradually slowing down or in being more attuned to the rhythm of when I began making art. As I mentioned in the beginning of our conversation, as a child I experienced art making as constant flows of energy. I would like to explore more fluidly these fields of action.