

# Heriberto Nieves 2010: Challenge and rebirth of the plastic arts in the Twenty-First Century - Return to the Beginning of Form

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Heriberto Nieves' work is recognized by his innovative conceptual juxtaposition of geometric images, cosmic inspiration, aesthetic consciousness, and the integration of high-tech media in his plastic creation. I met the artist in the summer of 2000, when he had just returned from Helsinki, Finland. The Nordic country of lakes and forests, where the artist's soul was captured by the magic winters of deep darkness, the midnight sun in the summer and the immense mystery of Mother Nature captured in the phenomenon of the aurora borealis, undoubtedly contributed to a newly found inspiration. Shortly after, as Executive Director of the Ponce Art Museum in Puerto Rico, I had the pleasure to present his legendary exhibition "Pendulum of the White Moon: from the Beginning to the Beginning". Through that show, Nieves experimented an artistic transformation in which, for example, he replaced part of his tropical and vibrant colors for the whiteness of the Full Moon of the North and the darkness of the eternal nights of cold winter, stepping into a new and deeply spiritual creative language.

During the next decade, Nieves developed a fruitful and impressive professional career as sculptor and public artist, recognized with important merits such as: the winner of the Silver Medal in the International Biennial of Contemporary Art of Florence, Italy, 2005; invited artist in the International Symposium of Sculpture in South Korea, 2007; invited artist in the Olympic Games of Beijing, 2008; and inspiring pieces of public art located in Dominican Republic, France, Venezuela as well as different cities of Puerto Rico such as: Caguas, Guaynabo, Vega Baja, Bayamon, Ponce and Carolina. Now in 2010, Nieves presents his new individual exhibition entitled *Concurrence and Colinearity*, in Las Américas Museum in San Juan. His most recent works demonstrate the artist's unflagging effort to perfect his own aesthetic and abstract language, with all the energy and consistency characterized by an intense and enthusiastic personality. A profound respect for each piece created is clearly discernible, and make this exhibition stand out as the most mature and complete of his artistic career.

Through a mathematical-geometric inspiration, the artist impels his passion towards a richness of aesthetic appreciation and purity of the form to integrate multiple themes in his works. Nieves, a master plastic artist, successfully synthesizes in his works the cosmic imagination and mathematical rigor, in search of the most complete plastic expression. Each work in the exhibition also stands out, because of their distinguished and incomparable beauty, the masterfully plastered texture, the enriched surface of oxide, and even the almond smells that emanate amidst the wax porous surfaces.

Different "geometric theorems" evolve into these works of art adding to an even more surprising perfection of the human experience. The artist recreates in this exhibition the sensation of an outer universe in calm, harmonious and eternal movement, applying a dynamic composition,

and stressing visual tension with a strong alignment on the metallic-pictorial surface of the combined iron and stainless steel plates that serve as support.

In other words, these works introduce a distinctive conception of space and time, and bring back the collective memory through the interpretation of a masterful visual symphony. When we face each piece, we instinctively hear a “Greek ode” which narrates the human history, from our origins to the contemporary era and ends prophesying a future opening to the Universe.

It is the culmination of Nieves’ holistic world, outstanding, and incomparable because of its immaculate aesthetic that always lies behind an unfettered composition and cosmic inspiration, created by his inexhaustible plastic imagination. In *Concurrence and Colinearity*, the artist Nieves explores a new vocabulary to interpret a contemporary mysticism in the age of continuing globalization of time and space. His recent works evoke the essence of the Japanese aesthetics in XVII Century, the Japanese golden age, when they reached the most powerful manifestation of its symbolism. The closing of Japan which lasted about 250 years, contributed to the development of genuine Japanese aesthetic values. One of the elements developed in this period was the tendency that German Bazan would call “Japanese Barroquism”. This Far Eastern variation of the “Baroque Art”, mainly picturesque and essentially urban, was applied to sculpture, architecture and public monuments, and is often recognized by the frequent use of “gold” leaves and “circle” forms, which are meant to represent the Universe. Japanese “Barroquism” integrated the passion and artistic exigency to recreate a visual and dynamic microcosm, in a mystical and mythical atmosphere, which encompassed high aesthetic values.

We encounter several common elements between the essence of the Nieves’ Caribbean world and the Far East Japanese’s aesthetics. It’s not surprising that Nieves recreates an “inter cultural” and “inter temporal” parallelism, as a great Puerto Rican art master who prophesizes a world of rapid globalization. For example, his art embodies a series of traditional Japanese aesthetic values, such as: an admiration for the grandeur of the Nature that surrounds us; the capacity to interpret the highest level of artistic creation through symbolism and abstract expression, the frequent use of the “circular form” and the application of “gold” to represent the Universe.

On the other hand, it is evident that Heriberto Nieves is the authentic product of a solid Western formation, initiated in Puerto Rico and Mexico, and refined later in several metropolis such as Paris, Helsinki, Venezuela and others. His intellectual background is reflected in his recent works, for example, *Theorem of Desargues*, that are part of this exhibition.

This piece is made up of two triangles in the superior level and a quadrilateral in the inferior. The shining axis of stainless steel draws up the two parts, creating an artistic interpretation of the Theorem of Gérard Desargues, architect and French geometrician of the XVII Century. The theorem, considered as the basis of projective geometry, affirms in a concise manner that “two triangles stand in central perspective if and only if they stand in axial perspective”. The basic model of visual perspective uses a vanishing point where the lines of sight concur, as observed in this work on the top side. The other model of perspective refers to an axis where the extension of the corresponding sides of the triangles intercept, as observed on the piece in the diagonal of the inferior quadrilateral. Projective geometry synthesizes the practical concepts of Renaissance

architecture and painting of geometric perspective, described by artists and theorists such as Leon Battista Alberti. Alberti is recognized in the history of art of the XV Century in Italy, by his idea of viewing painting as an “opened window”, a concept that contributed to the development of the Renaissance humanist thought, as well as to the birth of modern physics.

We also appreciate his erudition in the piece *Concurrences*, which is part of the title of the exhibition. This piece seems to be a great metaphor of the phenomenon of an eclipse of the moon, a splendid celestial ceremony where the three larger heavenly bodies of our sky: Sun, Earth and Moon, concur in time and space, exactly aligning themselves. The rusted dark steel alludes to the Moon, while the brilliant disk of stainless steel resembles the Sun. In fact the Sun, during the eclipse of the moon is not visible to us, since it is aligned in the other side of the Earth.

Here, the artist plays with the dual sense of the word “concurrency”, the spatial and the temporary, when these transcendental events happen simultaneously. The rupture and union between ideas and forms become an intense intellectual and logical puzzle that greatly stimulates our senses and the mind. The same mental challenge is also repeated in the following pieces: *External Concurrence*, *Circumcenter* and *The Three Points of Concurrence (Euler Line)*. The first one represents the “Theorem of Concurrence of External Tangents” of Geometry. Again, we find here the metaphor of an eclipse where the red circle alludes to the Sun, that touches a tenuously drawn circle, an allusion to the Moon, interposed between the first circle and a vanishing point at the left hand. The external tangents to both circles, the red one and the drawn one, are concurrent with the horizontal drawn line that cuts through the center of the two circles, stressing a visual movement to the left side. Nieves added the sense of smell in this piece by applying red wax with almonds scent, as well as the yellow wax applied to *Circumcenter*.

The “circumcenter” of a triangle is the point where the three perpendicular bisectors meet. This point of concurrence is also the center of the circle that circumscribes the triangle. This piece shows a radiant yellow semicircle contrasting with the dark rusted background. The triangle and its center are insinuated by the drawing of several lines that concur to the point above mentioned, creating the illusion of tridimensional space coordinates. The rich texture of oxide also helps to stress the optical effect of depth. *Circumcenter* is a piece which extends itself far from the real physical surface and impels us to utilize our visual imagination to complete the interpretation.

The third work mentioned: *The Three Points of Concurrence (Euler Line)* consists of an installation with 7 triangles, each one circumscribed by a red hoop. Euler, the genius mathematician of the XVIII century in Switzerland, discovered a line where three points lie: the “centroid”, the intersection point of the three medians of a triangle, the previously mentioned “circumcenter”, and the “orthocenter”, the intersection point of the heights. This theorem led to astonishing implications, because of these convincing coincidences. The line became known as the “Euler line”. Nieves develops the third dimension in this installation, by hanging bronze pendulums, like plummets from the ceiling of the room, pointing towards the center of each triangle laid out on the floor, stressing the visually fantastic vertical movement. In the last triangle, three plummets have been placed aiming towards the three centers of this piece.

Finally, I would like to mention two remarkable triptychs in this exhibition. The first, titled *Circumference of nine points*, is made of rusted dark steel and stainless steel. Again, though the title alludes to a well known geometric theorem, the artist intends to extract an imaginary and mysterious scientific concept to create his art. "The Nine Points Theorem", means nine points in a triangle that lie in the same circumference. These points are the middle points of the sides, the bases of the heights and the middle points of the segments from the "orthocenter" to the vertices. However we do not find a triangle in the piece, in the background of the scene we only find various lines drawn in colored pencil, insinuating the presence of triangles. The triptych measures 144 inches wide altogether, and the rhythmic movements of the multiple round plates of stainless steel transform themselves into hypnotic lights that slowly sweep us into a trance. We are invited to step into this singular universe created by the cosmic-mathematical inspiration of the artist, and which transport us into this single world of plastic imagination without limits.

The second triptych, and not less important, is titled *Concurrence of the medians, point of balance*. The piece is composed of dark rusted steel panels, oxigraphies with circular forms on steel and a brilliant stainless steel panel. The red circle is diagonally falling down from left to right, while its brightness is gradually extinguishing and confusing itself with shadows in darkness. It resembles a metaphor of a mysterious sunset landscape in the tropics. In the third panel, the color, form and the idea rest in silence. With this work the artist says farewell to the audience, announcing that the banquet of magical sensations and the frenzy of emotions has concluded. It closes the intrigue and the mental curiosities caused by the skillful and powerful works of the Puerto Rican artist, Heriberto Nieves, the holistic alchemist, and a true renaissance man of the XXI Century.