

A little over three and a half years ago, Madrid-born artist Alejandro Guijarro saw something extraordinary; an X-ray of a skull that had been pierced by a knife. “It was unreal,” he says. And yet, because of its scientific format, it was immediately deserving of a level of credibility and belief in its authenticity. To Guijarro, this posed a question: what authority does a photographic image deserve in reference to reality and truth?

With an MA in fine art from the Royal College of Art, perhaps it was only natural that his research took him to the libraries of the Prado Museum in Madrid, the Louvre in Paris and The National Gallery in London. There he delved ‘backstage’, searching through the archives of technical and scientific images used for the restoration of paintings and major artworks, trying to deconstruct the space between art and science. The result is his new series, *Lead*, showing at the Tristan Hoare gallery in London until 28 April 2017. It takes its name from the metal which Old Masters of the 17th and 18th century, such as Uccello, van Dyck, Rubens, Delacroix, Goya and Velázquez, mixed with pigment to make their paints dry faster. These metallic traces in the paint are illuminated when surrendered under an X-ray, literally highlighting certain techniques and aspects of the work that are invisible to the naked eye – just like the skeletal bone structure of a body in a medical context. However, Guijarro was not concerned with the 90 percent of images that simply produced black-and-white imitations. He was most interested in the scans that produced images that were barely recognisable in connection with the original painting. “I was looking for obstruction, for all the contrary,” he says. “What I needed was that you don’t see anything from the painting.”

His final edit, then, is a collection of seemingly abstract marks that conceal the artworks’ true likeness. In some, a clue of a familiar shape or silhouette teases the viewer into engaging with its history. “The idea is to put the viewer in the role of the archaeologist, of the historian,

when you find some pieces of a puzzle and you have to see what happened before. You have to put the pieces together,” he says.

“It becomes more like a paradox. They are not just one thing, they are in the middle. I like to call them hybrids,” he continues. “To be ‘in between’ is something important in my work. Obviously they’ve been printed on photographic paper and the process has been of photography, but the quality of it is like a painting, like an artwork.” This exploration of the emerging paradox is a thread that runs consistently throughout Guijarro’s practice. His previous series, *Momentum* (BJP, October 2013), saw him travel to educational institutions of quantum mechanics, from UC Berkeley in the US to CERN in Switzerland, to photograph blackboards, layered with complex equations and chalk residue, which he then printed life-size.

The same will be true of the exhibition of these works. The scans will be reproduced 1:1, but the original paintings will not be named. “I wanted to change the context so they become new artworks and have a new life. I give them the name of the archive that I take them from, so they are the original names that these images already have.” Guijarro explains that he is also playing with the idea of documentation. The reason for the creation of these scans was to aid the restoration and conservation departments of the museums with their research, and yet some of them look nothing alike. “They are documents, and they hold proof of something,” he says. “But if you look at them you see nothing, just layers of paint. I was interested in showing this contradiction of what is a document, or what something needs to be a document.”

Although the date is set for the 25-image series to be shown, Guijarro is adamant that he will continue to delve into more museums’ archives, despite admitting that securing their cooperation was the most challenging part of the project. “It’s a way to see history through the eyes of science,” he says. “It’s a way to see history in a more objective way, if that’s possible. I put these things together, and then you decide what is true for you.” BJP

alejandroguijarro.com

[Opposite] RX15088 (*Mona Lisa*), 2016 © C2RMF.

[Over left] RX3000 (*Michelangelo, Painter, Sculptor and Architect*), 2016 © C2RMF.

[Over right] 20769 (*Descent From the Cross*), 2016 © C2RMF.

Images © Alejandro Guijarro, courtesy of Tristan Hoare gallery.

ART MEETS SCIENCE IN ALEJANDRO GUIJARRO'S INVESTIGATION OF THE SECRET LIVES OF THE OLD MASTERS





