

Preview: Can small be big? Rocío Rodríguez tests notion in abstract paintings at Sandler Hudson

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In a career spanning three decades, Atlanta artist Rocío Rodríguez has tenaciously explored the limits of abstract painting, invigorating the medium during an era when it had been declared “dead.”

ArtsATL recently paid a visit to her studio to talk about what drives her work; her three-month residency last year at Marfa Contemporary in Marfa, Texas; and her reasons for making small pieces for her upcoming solo show at Sandler Hudson Gallery and opening from 7 to 9 p.m. on November 13. (*Small Works* runs through January 9.)

ArtsATL: *What issues about painting do you consider in the studio?*

Rocío Rodríguez: This work is part of a long series that started in 2011. I was questioning the space inside the paintings in terms of the flatness of abstraction and the illusion of depth. I was seeking a middle ground where the two ideas could be presented at the same time. I want things that are there and not there. I want some form of contradiction on the page. The Sandler Hudson work is part of that conversation. There are many conversations that enter my work.

ArtsATL: *You are known for doing big paintings, but you are showing small paintings at Sandler Hudson. Why?*

Rodríguez: I have been painting large works most of my life. Although I have also made small works, I just didn't focus on them as much. I wanted to bring down the scale. I wanted to see if a small painting could hold the viewer's attention like the big paintings. I wanted to see if I could

make small paintings that felt big.

ArtsATL: *What about the stacked squares? What is their significance?*

Rodríguez: The square signifies a sense of place, a place of containment or a stand-in for a figure. The square, by its placement on the page, demarcates a place and can be a point of reference or not. Putting something on top of a table is “elevating it.” It means “Look here! This shape is as real as you, and it doesn’t have to be anything other than what it is, a big shape of yellow.”

Stacking them is a way to draw attention, to say this is important, this shape of yellow or grey. It becomes something else when it is put on a pedestal. Maybe there is an internal hierarchy that I am working with here, the hierarchy of the language of seeing or making forms.

ArtsATL: *It feels like the squares are in conversation with each other. Is that intentional?*

Rodríguez: The painting is an image that is proposed to you. My paintings are abstract, open-ended, not fixed in any way. I am not a storyteller. But as I question my own assumptions, I try to bring every voice into the picture. Sometimes there are seven Rocíos in the studio. The paintings are about giving voice to opposition. That’s the way I look at my life. When I am trying to solve a problem, I bring things in that I am not accustomed to thinking about, to get to the answer. You can’t get to the answer if you only think one way. The work echoes these conversations and my place in the world.

ArtsATL: *Tell me about one of the works and how it materializes as a painting.*



Rocío Rodríguez: Sept. 29, 2015, oil on wood panel, 16 x 20 inches

Rodríguez: In the painting *September 29, 2015*, there is a field of white that envelops the area from the bottom to midway through. I thought, “There, I am standing in a field of white.” The field feels dimensional but also just a flat, white shape. So it has this duality. It can become a flat, white shape or an illusionistic form with a column on it. It is that shift when you are looking at something and it changes. Those shifts through time and light that I perceive are transferred to my work.

ArtsATL: *How did the Marfa Contemporary residency affect your thinking about your painting?*

Rodríguez: The physical space in Marfa is very different from Atlanta. Atlanta is humid, a forest where we only see pieces of the sky. Marfa is a desert, very open so the spatial context is very different. I was aware of standing in a space that seemed very still and unmoving, yet moved and changed with the light. The light changes how you perceive things near and far. Things appear very dimensional and then they are lost on the horizon. So all these things affected how I was thinking about space in my work. When I went to Marfa, the concerns about light came back into my painting.

ArtsATL: *Some of the works in your show are very quiet, reminding me of Giorgio Morandi's paintings. Any connection there?*



Rocío Rodríguez: July 30, 2015, oil on wood panel, 16 x 20 inches

Rodríguez: Well, here's the deal! Gray is a very important color because gray next to orange or red makes the conversation pop. I admire Morandi for two reasons: I could never paint bottles my whole life. And I love his work because abstraction seems to rise out of his work in this quiet way.

ArtsATL: *What about Philip Guston? The stacking reminds me of his work.*

Rodríguez: Guston did a courageous thing when he went from abstraction to figurative work. I admire that, but I think that there is also his sense of humor. There is humor in this work of mine, too. I struggle with painting and sometimes hate it, so sometimes I make fun of it, like a private joke between me and painting. So I paint these oversized exaggerated shapes, objectifying "painting," sort of saying, "painting thinks it is so important" ... and in the end it is, at least to me. It's the way I work. It's my creative energy.

A promotional banner for the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra's performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 9. The banner features a blue background with a photograph of the orchestra members. The text includes the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra logo, "BEETHOVEN SYMPHONY No. 9", the dates "APR 11/13/14", and a "BUY NOW" button.