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■ Guillermo Kuitca

Hauser & Wirth London

September 24 to November 8

One doesn't expect to encounter the ghost of Lucio Fontana in an exhibition of new paintings by Guillermo Kuitca, the artist who represented Argentina at last year's Venice Biennale. There seems no relation to the cool blue and white 'Neufert Suite', 1998-99 (the fastidious series derived from the spatial and equipment layouts of various sites from a sausage factory to a peep show), nor to the installations of map-wrapped mattresses he has shown since the late 80s. Two large canvases, one powder blue, *Untitled*, 2007, and the other dirty white, *Untitled*, 2007-08, dominate the show with their dramatic simulacra of multiple gashes. It is hard to know what all this elegant energy is for, but on closer inspection, each painting reveals a more layered resonance: the surface of the blue painting, for instance, is sculpted with irregular cut-out shapes sliced into the canvas and painted over. Like windows onto stories that Fontana made visually explicit, these closed outlines suggest the temptation and impossibility of going both beyond the canvas and beyond the history of painting. Three-dimensionality is evoked and retracted – a way of pushing 'originality' back to its earlier meaning – a return to origins, to the flavour of texture and the illusion of a slit, an opening into a new vision of painting.

In many ways this exhibition, dubbed 'a retrospective detour in mid-career' by Robert Storr in the exhibition catalogue, shows Kuitca struggling with a self-consciousness that leaves many of the works seductive but disenchanted. Returning to the map metaphor, he shows a large painting, *Untitled*, 2007-08, of a torn-up and scattered road map of busted routes, fractured highways, disintegrated cities. It's apocalyptic but oddly bloodless and static, as if he knows that this once-rich terrain has outlived his philosophical purpose. The eight small mixed-media works, all *Untitled*, 2007 and 2008, which could be titled 'Something Devastating This Way Has Come', visit the scene of a contained, exploding tower block or apartment, with the poignancy of a magnetic field gone askew, bits of debris floating off the central image like craquelure desiccating on an ancient masterpiece. Quieter and formal in a different manner, these

works sing of the drama of having control – and of its loss – in a strikingly tender voice.

Kuitca's rerun of the crown of thorns image he used so successfully in paintings such as *Coronas de Espinas*, 1994, in which the barbed scrawl on a monochrome ground could act as tangled synapses or the borders of a nation state, is unworkable here. In *Untitled*, 2007 and 2008, he asks the silvered thorn branch to unify or undermine the ground of colour swatches beneath it, but the clash of religious and militaristic iconography and abstraction ends up being clumsy and forced rather than powerfully suggestive.

More effective is Kuitca's reuse of the floorplan motif, which he has described as 'a social cell', a typical urban family dwelling. The smaller paintings work better in general. Drawing on the mucky glaucous palette of Cubism and the sharp-edged triangular forms used by Futurists to suggest machinery, Kuitca achieves a kind of painterly simultaneity in these untitled works of 2007 and 2008. Thin strips of white floorplans jostle for definition amid the dark pressure of geometric abstraction. In two larger works of 2007, both untitled, the speckled creamy materiality of the canvas beneath enjoys a fantastic interplay between the rigid charcoal lines and smoky brushstrokes and the black and red outlines of the rooms, which delivers dappled depth and dynamism, like Mondrian taking Braque for a walk through a 21st-century apartment. The floorplans seem to represent the intellectual plotting we each attempt, only to be engulfed by the chaos of emotional interiority or mechanical multi-faceted exteriority. Architectural form, like our mental landscapes, cannot withstand nature and history's inexorable decay.

Kuitca once spoke of maps and plans as two modalities of order: maps try to define an already established order, while floorplans depict a reality promised by the future. These works recall paintings like Gino Severini's *Argentine Tango*, 1913, but where Severini's central figure wrestles with the robotic nature of a dance machine, Kuitca insists that the dreamlife of a reality to come, signified by the floorplans, is central and must, if not overcome, chip into and interpenetrate the surrounding dense, dim patterning we associate with early Modernism. These works certainly ask interesting questions about what contemporary painting is supposed to do, but don't quite answer them. ■

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Guillermo Kuitca
installation view

