

[Review: An Excess of Quiet, Selected Sketches by Gustavo Ojeda, 1979–1989](#)

written by Guest Contributor | July 15, 2021



An Excess of Quiet: Selected Sketches by Gustavo Ojeda, 1979–1989

Edited by Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué and Erich Kessel Jr.

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An Excess of Quiet presents a unique body of figurative work from the painter Gustavo Ojeda, made in the last ten years of his life. Known for his paintings of atmospheric cityscapes devoid of people, Ojeda expands his urban imaginary in these sketches to include detailed studies of faces seen in passing, sprawled and supine bodies, self-portraits, subway tunnels, and rough outlines of city streets. The sketches have been compiled by his nephew, the poet Gabriel Ojeda-Sagué, and Erich Kessel Jr. from Ojeda's notebooks, where they were interspersed with journal entries, appointments, phone numbers, and self-flagellating Catholic prayers. There is also an informative introduction by Ojeda-Sagué, which offers a reflective account of the artist's biography and reception history.

Born in Cuba in 1958, after his family was exiled, Ojeda lived in Virginia and then moved to New York to study at Parsons in 1975. During the period covered in this book, he publicly exhibited his paintings alongside East Village and SoHo queer artists, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, and David Wojnarowicz, as well as in Latin American-focused exhibitions such as *Six Young Cuban Painters in New York* at the Seventeenth Street Gallery in 1981. Diagnosed with AIDS in 1986, he died in 1989 from AIDS-related complications. At the time, his paintings were noted for their representational conventionality; as gallerist Michael Kohn put it, "Gustavo

Ojeda's work is too well-crafted to be labeled as new." While not polemical, his decisive style was developed in dialectical tension with competing notions of representation—far from both a Pop sensibility and strict realism, his paintings frustrate our attempt to identify a tone: perhaps they are joyous, perhaps they are blasé. Perhaps the absence of people is a marker of ascetic conviction or haunted and melancholic yearning. By showing a wide variety of figures, the sketches fill in a missing piece of Ojeda's repertoire, but this does not uncomplicate things—his closeness to, and distance from, his subject remains enigmatic and compelling.

Many of the figures have downcast eyes, as if weary of seeing, though they may be reading on the train or falling asleep. Exasperated poses, recalling van Gogh's "Worn Out" sketches from the 1880s. Other figures have their eyes wide open, as with the particularly striking sketch of a Mary figure weeping, and several of his self-portraits, have no eyes at all. The tension between weariness and alertness, as it affects sight, plays out in the figures, but also, one imagines, in the drawings themselves—with certain marks seemingly dashed off and others painstakingly overwritten and revised. While his paintings are highly concentrated on capturing a single architectural space, his sketches are just as focused on capturing as many faces as possible in a single timespan (perhaps one train ride). As a result, the book feels crowded with faces. Yet each one is solitary, leading to a sense of the mutually felt strangeness of strangers being held together in close proximity—somewhere between cruising and people-watching.





Ojeda-Sagué writes in the introduction of the artist's "ability to reverse the elucidating capacity of light and the obfuscating capacity of the dark." His work seems to draw from Spanish mysticism, such as *The Dark Night of the Soul* by St. John of the Cross, in which darkness is transvaluated into light through inward struggle. Ojeda wrote, "I find that the evening calls out to me; one can really be alone. The lack of light is a perfect situation. I like to capture that mystery, to hint at the things that are there with the slightest dab of color. . . I see what other people perhaps do not see, and I transform it into a mystical experience." Tonally, the paintings are darker, and the sketches are lighter—but both revel in a chiaroscuro co-constitution of tones. In his painting, dark and light might index the atmosphere of the represented scene, while in the drawings, they indicate gestural pressure, which sometimes conveys shadow and volume and sometimes emphasizes an obsession.

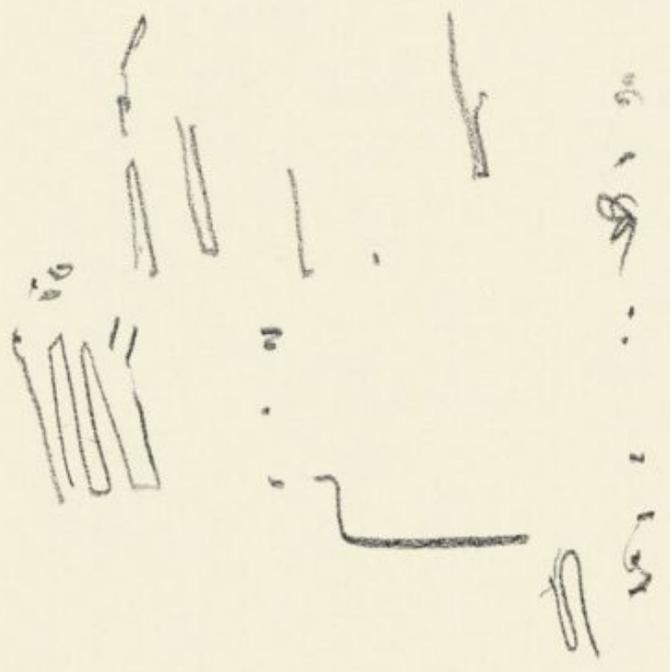




Against type, these are contour drawings which are all about minor detail (a beard, an ankle, a spine) rather than outline—in a manner reminiscent of Egon Schiele and Jean Cocteau but more pared down. Ojeda catches fleeting and exasperated gestures and mimes this very fleetingness through the swift marks he makes with quick hand movements, which trace his deliberation. His sensitivity to minor gesture fleshes out in drawing what Artaud found to be concomitant with 'plague' and theater: "The plague takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures; the theater also takes gestures and pushes them as far as they will go." This symbolization of the unseen and the quiet leads to an intensification of vision.

The book's final chapter is devoted to Ojeda's forte, the landscape, yet, rather than merely rehearsing his paintings, he allows himself to step onto shaky ground. The sparing lines used to demarcate light from dark, and inside from out, necessarily break down into unexpected abstractions—spots of light and time on the verge of clustering together into lush forms not yet determinable. *An Excess of Quiet* incrementally folds these glimpses together into a vivid constellation.

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Felix Bernstein is a writer and artist. His writing has been featured in *Art in America*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Spike Arts Magazine*, *Bomb*, *Mousse*, *May Revue*, *Bookforum* and *Texte Zur Kunst*. His films and performances with Gabe Rubin have been presented at MOCA Los Angeles,

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