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Rainbow XII (detail)
by Costa Vavagiakis



IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME, PENCIL IN HAND

An injury led **Francisco Souto** to rediscover the immediacy and power of drawing, reshaping the artist's explorations of human memory and experience.

BY AUSTIN R. WILLIAMS

SOME ARTISTS ARE CAPABLE OF PRODUCING ENDLESS VARIATIONS ON A SINGLE IMAGE,

tirelessly drawing or painting new interpretations of a favorite model, a cherished landscape, or the same old porcelain vase. For many, an entire career may not be long enough to explore every facet of a chosen subject.

Francisco Souto is not one of these artists. A native of Venezuela who now lives in Nebraska, he is never content to repeat a project. "My biggest fear," he says, "is to realize that I'm copying myself."

Accordingly, it can be difficult at first to find connections between the artist's diverse works. There is no one visual subject or motif that appears in piece after piece. Some depict figures, some objects, some landscapes, and others are abstract. The work is created in an ever-expanding variety of media, including printmaking, drawing, painting, photography, and digital art. The overall style varies from tight realism to gestural abstraction, from classical to cutting-edge.

But upon close inspection, Souto's output is tied together in several ways. Thematically much of his work betrays an interest in the nature of human memory and in notions of place and spatial relationships. Furthermore, the range of subjects, media, and techniques that at first makes Souto's artwork appear so varied also, in a way, unites it, as all his work evinces a passion for seeking new ways

to create images and express ideas visually. The fact that Souto is always changing is one of the most consistent things about him.

SOUTO HAS ALWAYS BEEN DISINCLINED TO REPEAT HIMSELF,

but one of the major changes in his working methods—his shift from printmaking to drawing as his primary mode of art making—didn't happen entirely by choice.

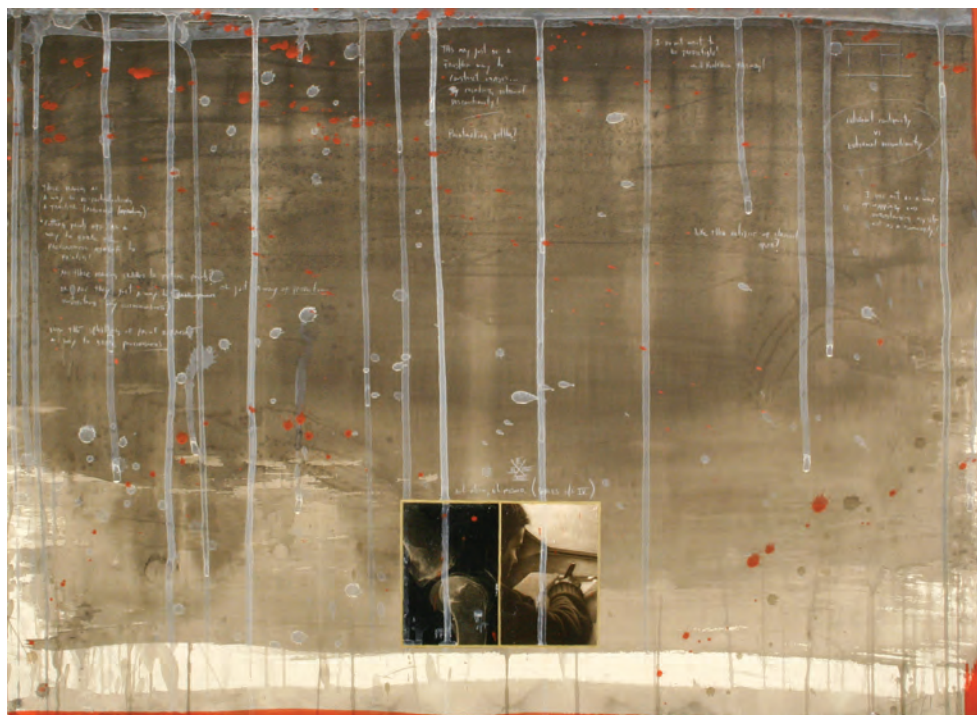
"I received my B.F.A. in 2002 in printmaking, with a personal emphasis in mezzotint," the artist explains. "It's a very physical, labor-intensive printmaking process. It takes hours and hours, but the labor of it can be very meditative." Mezzotint, in its most common form, is a negative image-making process, somewhat like scratchboard. The artist begins with a roughened copper plate that, if printed, would produce an entirely black image. He or she then creates

Cityscape No. 2, Zacatecas, Mexico
2012, graphite, 60 x 23. Collection the artist.
From the series "Ecos de la memoria."



Despues del otro VI (detail)

2008, gouache and ink, 21 x 29. Collection the artist.



El otro, el mismo IV (Series N IV)

2006, ink, gouache, and mezzotint, 21 x 29. Collection the artist.

an image by smoothing sections of the plate; when printed, these areas appear as lights. “I have always been really involved in that process,” says Souto. “You start with the fullest blacks and scrape the lights back into the metal. I was interested in how a piece of copper can be transformed that way into anything.”

The artist was having success with his mezzotint prints, but after a few years, not wanting to repeat himself, he decided to take his work up a notch. “I asked myself, how far—technically and emotionally—can I go with this? I wanted to push myself to the limit. So I made a really intense print that took me six months to finish.” But working on a piece this ambitious—one that required hours upon hours of the forceful, repetitive motions used in mezzotint—took a serious physical toll. “After I finished the piece, my arm fell apart,” he says. “Carpal tunnel, tendinitis on the elbow, and a torn rotator cuff. I couldn’t even hold my toothbrush.”

As his body recovered from the injury, Souto searched for a different way to make art. He first changed his scale, creating the series “Despues del otro” and “El otro, el mismo,” both of which feature small representational images surrounded by expansive backgrounds filled with dripped and splashed paint—a far cry from the tightly controlled process of mezzotint. “I got involved with this primal kind of making an image,” he says. “This new language took over my printmaking.”

Soon, Souto’s newfound interest in direct forms of art-making brought him to drawing. “In the past, drawing for me was only a means; it wasn’t something I was too involved with,” he says. But after spending so long with a technique in which he would spend months working on a plate before he could see what his image looked like on paper, he found the immediacy of drawing appealing. Souto took up drawing as a central component of his process, working mainly in graphite. In 2010, he created “Por el rio del tiempo,” a series of large graphite drawings that

combined the geometrical patterns of floor stones with the legs of figures. The models were Souto’s family, but they appear anonymous to us.

This rediscovery of drawing was not a repudiation of Souto’s earlier practice—quite the opposite. “I’m not choosing either/or,” he says. “I consider myself multilingual. I think printmaking is still my mother tongue, but drawing has become this beautiful language that I can also speak. And once you open yourself like that and accept another language,

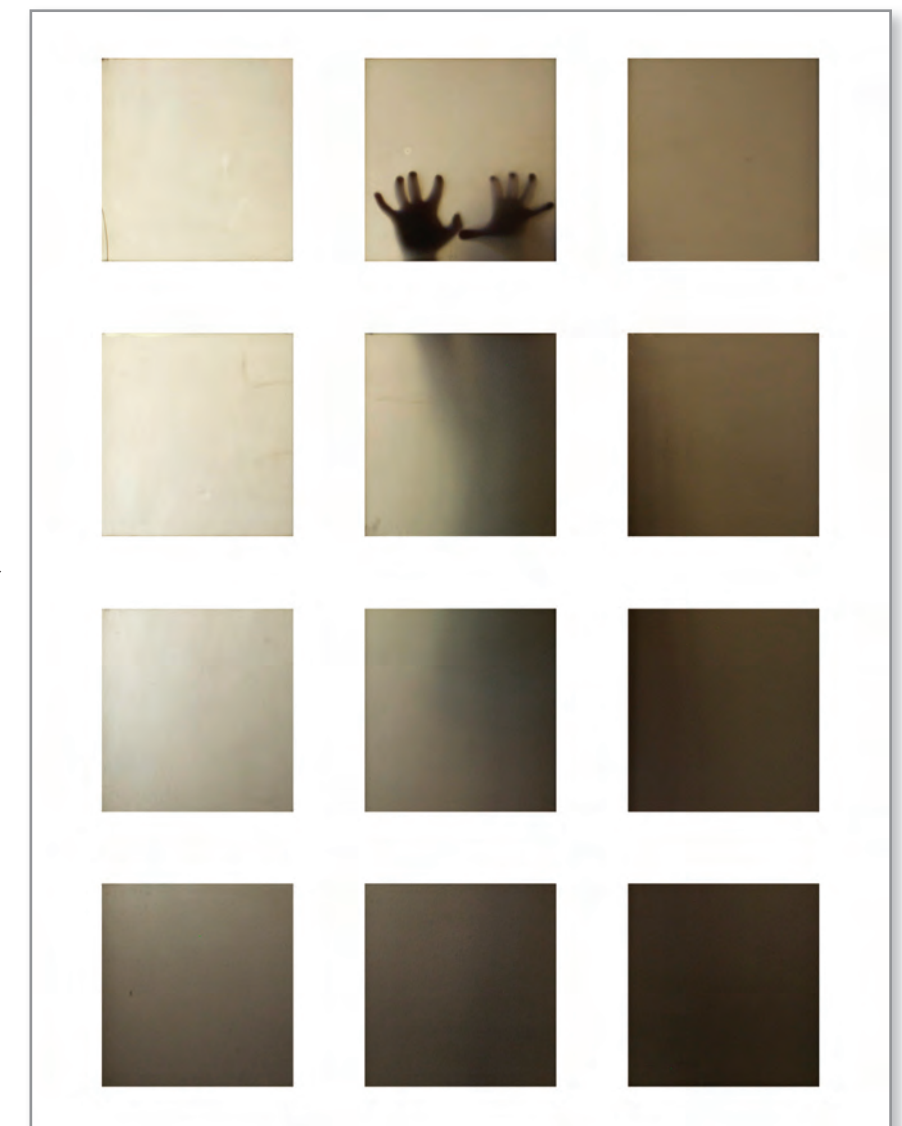
it all opens up. You start thinking about painting, photography—anything. I’m not glad about my injury, but it made this possible.”

SOUTO’S REDISCOVERY OF DRAWING

led to his recent series of monumental graphite landscapes “Ecos de la memoria.” Sky dominates the images. The location of each can only be discerned through the bottom of the image, which might depict a city, a mountain, or an expanse of water. Ninety percent of the drawings

Poetica de la memoria No. 3

2010, archival pigment print, 46 x 33.
Private collection.





TRIVIUM II

2005–2007, mezzotint on copper, 12 x 14½.
Collection the artist.

are minimal and abstract, but the remaining 10 percent anchors them to real places—although those places are filtered through the lens of memory.

The relationship between place and memory has proven fruitful ground for Souto before. In this series, the artist turned to memories of the more mundane variety. “There are so many things you see when you travel, so many different cultures, so many places you cannot forget about,” Souto says. “For years I made art about these big experiences and big memories. But there are also other memories, which I call ‘collateral images.’ They’re smaller moments that stick with you. With ‘Ecos de la memoria,’ I wanted to make a complete show based on these smaller images. I decided to blow them up to a big scale, which is an homage to these small experiences.

“When the drawings are hanging on the wall, the first thing viewers see is just a piece of paper,” Souto continues. “But then they look down and see the

cityscape or whatever is at the bottom, and then they step back to see the whole thing. They have to navigate through it. That way of reading an image, the navigation of space, I think is really interesting.”

“Ecos de la memoria” depicts places all over the world, but Souto’s approach to the series was heavily influenced by one location: his home. “I live in Lincoln, Nebraska,” he says. “I’ve been here for eight years. The skies are extremely big and an unbelievably clean blue. That kind of beautiful emptiness of the sky and plains finds a direct emotional response in these drawings.”

To achieve these expansive, gently gradated fields of sky Souto drew with a combination of traditional pencils, mechanical pencils, and powdered graphite applied with a brush. He smoothed some areas with a rag or scrap of paper and erased where necessary to reclaim white areas. “With graphite, I have the potential to make

erasures, which is important for me,” he says. “It goes back to the principles of mezzotint, where you start with black and then erase the image. In a way, that erasure isn’t a void on a paper but a membrane. Even after an erasure there is a memory surface.”

THE WORD “MEMORY” COMES UP A LOT

when discussing Souto’s work. So does the word “time.” Consider the titles of several of his exhibitions: In addition to “Echoes of Memory,” there is “The Poetry of Memory,” “The Memory of Time,” and “Through the River of Time.” In all these works, the artist investigates the ways that memory shapes our experiences and our enduring impressions of the world.

Souto’s fascination with memory and the past is related to a fascination with art history and historical means of visual expression. “Printmaking is such an old tradition of making images, and I got involved early in

Cityscape No. 1, Venice, Italy

2012, graphite, 60 x 23. Private collection. From the series “Ecos de la memoria.”





Seascape No. 2, Venice, Italy
2012, graphite, 60 x 23. Private collection.
From the series "Ecos de la memoria."



Seascape No. 3, Barcelona, Spain
2012, graphite, 60 x 23. Private collection.
From the series "Ecos de la memoria."

my career in what's really a historical fashion," he says. "You might be making a very contemporary image, but because the process has such a long tradition, it carries this historical sense. I was really interested in these two different worlds—how you can get every detail right in this 19th-century way and how you can then incorporate your own way of living and being and seeing the world. How do you marry those two things?"

The feeling of living or re-living one's experiences through art is central to Souto's practice. "For me, there is no difference between art and life," he says. "When I'm feeling experiences and when I'm making work, I feel the

same amount of passion. If I'm traveling abroad, out in the street, I'm not searching for an image to make; I'm not composing. I'm just letting myself be in this particular context. It's about the experience. Then when I go home, to make an image I re-interpret and re-create that experience. When I'm in the studio I'm living it again, thinking through it. So in a way there is no difference between living and making. I want to incorporate the visual, the sound, the smell, to own that particular moment, this thing I call 'memory.' That's what's exciting when making a drawing—re-creating the context. It's almost like being there again."

The artist's imagination is also

inspired by literature. "I worry that if I look too much at the work of one particular artist, my work might start to look like that artist's. When you read a book, you have to create your own image to re-create the author's world. So I'm intrigued by literature and by how I can come up with the visual part of it and make an image." The artist often finds himself revisiting the work of the 20th-century's great South American writers, such as Argentine authors Jorge Luis Borges, Ernesto Sábato, and Julio Cortázar and Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez. "I'm from South America, so these authors' images come to me with more clarity—the smells and the

Por el rio del tiempo No. 1
2010, graphite, 45 x 45. Collection the artist.



colors,” Souto says. Unsurprisingly, many of these writers share thematic interests with the artist, frequently using their stories to explore the workings of history and memory.

TODAY, SOUTO’S PRACTICE INCORPORATES not only drawing, printmaking, and painting but also photography, digital-image manipulation, and digital artwork. This may seem strange for an artist who previously devoted himself to a print-

making process that has been out of fashion for hundreds of years, but it’s in keeping with Souto’s determination to keep evolving and expanding the possibilities of his artwork. “Early on, I was the opposite of a digital artist, but then I realized it offers something photography and printmaking can’t,” he says. “There is a sense of direct response with a photograph. You can manipulate it in Photoshop—that’s a different kind of language, a dif-

ferent kind of line. You can make beautiful things with it that other media don’t offer. It’s not taking an easy way out; it’s not trying to make a graphite image on a computer. It’s a new language entirely. With it, I’m adding more to my repertoire.” Souto is currently working on a series of drawings depicting prairie landscapes, and true to form, he is pushing himself to use an innovative process. Working on Stonehenge paper affixed to a wood panel,

the artist draws the first layer of the image on his paper in light graphite, then coats the surface with UV-resistant varnish. He buffs the varnished surface with steel wool, and then repeats the process, adding another layer of graphite, varnishing, and buffing it again. The finished drawing is made of five or six layers each of graphite and varnish, giving it a unique surface appearance. “This material manipulation of the surface gives the drawings a more physical and perceptual depth than traditional graphite drawing on paper,” Souto says. “It creates a dramatic, seductive depth I’ve never seen before.” For a final flourish, the artist adds a bit of color at the bottom of each piece. These bold shapes jump out at the viewer and offer an intriguing interplay with the more delicate black-and-white tones of the drawing above. With this new series, Souto is once again demonstrating his simultaneous devotion to traditional processes and his desire to find new ways of expressing his vision. The color bars in these works are simply the latest additions to the artistic vocabulary of an artist who is never content to say the same thing twice. ❖

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Francisco Souto was born in Mérida, Venezuela, and moved to the United States in 1997. He earned a B.F.A. in printmaking at the Herron School of Art, in Indianapolis, and an M.F.A. in printmaking at The Ohio State University, in Columbus. Since 2008 he has been an associate professor of art at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, where he teaches printmaking and drawing. He is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, and his artwork can be found in the collections of museums such as the Indianapolis Museum of Art, in Indiana; the Blanton Museum of Art, in Austin, Texas; the Sheldon Museum of Art, in Lincoln, Nebraska; the National Museum of Art, in Romania; and the National Taiwan Museum of Fine Art. For more information, visit www.franciscosouto.com.

Prairie No. 1

2013, graphite and ink on paper mounted on wood panel, 20 x 20. Private collection.



Mont Blanc No. 3

2012, graphite on paper mounted on wood panel, 24 x 8. Private collection. From the series “Ecos de la memoria.”