

Art and its context

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Although theories such as Hippolyte Taine's may now seem obsolete in the light of newer contributions to aesthetics and the philosophy of art, we cannot ignore his theories on the nature of art, and these prompt us to further thought. Taine's main maxim goes as follows: "To understand a work of art, an artist or a group of artists, they must be viewed within the overall climate of the spirit and customs of their time". In present-day terms, this postulate is reflected in the "Zeitgeist" manifesto, Christos M. Joachimides' "spirit of the times" and in the "Zeitlosigkeit" or timelessness of Harald Szeemann.

Together these reflections underscore the evidence of a common spirit that can be applied to a given time, context and specialization, but they can also be broken down according to the individual traditions and basic roots of a given society. A large number of Catalonia's new generation of painters (all of them born in the late fifties or early sixties) seem to have taken on, with the obsolescence characteristic of our times, the configurations of the early eighties in order to return to earlier approaches in which a pictorial vision, introspection, and a metaphysical immersion in the artist's surroundings shape the work of art. We cannot, at this point, neglect the important role of Antoni Tàpies in the evolution of contemporary art or the significance of artists such as Albert Ràfols--Casamada, Hernández Pijuán and Josep Guinovart in very recent periods. Whether they are moved by obvious influences or by "the spirit of time and place", the seven artists chosen here together achieve a common voice without in any way renouncing their individuality: the search for their own individual repertoire that reflects their own thoughts, the struggle between traditional pictorial techniques and new materials, and the desire to create works of art infused with an absolutely controlled aesthetics.

IN SEARCH OF THE CONTEMPORARY

The eighties have seen substantial changes in the evolution of contemporary art. While the decade started under the sign of an unconditional return to painting and an end to conceptual severity, it soon showed a boundless and unprecedented interest in sculpture. At the same time, the new configuration and expressionism of the early eighties later gave way to a wide range of options and languages. This exuberant sequence of tendencies has infused many young artists with a desire to merge, in their own work, elements distilled from earlier tendencies. American Abstract Expressionism was incorporated in the fields of color, the confrontation between geometry and gesticulation ... The Picture-Picture movement gave validity to painting for painting's sake ... Together this allowed the emergence of an artistic code based on the creation of new images containing tokens of referential forms. These young Catalan artists cannot ignore the weight of recent Catalan tradition that places great value on pictorial materiality, textures, expressions and color ranges, in short, an abstraction that pursues both a certain lyricism as well as the power of a chance gesture of mark. As a result, their aim of achieving contemporaneity is marked by their need to overcome previous approaches which lead them along parallel paths. Their steps toward reaching their own contemporaneity include the appraisal of adapting materials for their potential pictorial qualities along with their own personal approach to nature.

THE MATERIAL

The words of Rosalind E. Krauss are pertinent here: "Painting consists of a surface material and of an interior whose illusions emerge from behind the surface." The corporeal aspect of materials and the attempt to create a dialectic between painting and the pictorial plasticity of industrial materials mark the starting point for many of the works of young Catalan artists.

Their attempts at giving new life to the pictorial object include the use of materials not traditionally associated with the dictates of painting, whether on the canvas itself or as a support for a work of art. Again, Krauss's words are pertinent: "There is an analogy between the artist's psychological interior and the painting's interior illusions that allow us to view the pictorial objects as a metaphor

of human feelings which emerge from the depths of these two parallel interior spaces.”

The use of iron shavings, coal, rubber and asphalt lining has its precedents in Catalanian Informalism and it leads both to a blurring of the concepts of painting and sculpture as traditionally defined, and to a search for new and complementary aspects. To overcome pictorial illusionism through the physical corporeity of materials suggests an attempt to move on the edges of three-dimensionality under the dictates of two-dimensionality.

NATURE AS SUGGESTION

The fusion of feeling and intellect gives rise to a constant allusion to nature, whose shades vary according to the different perspectives that society has of its immediate surroundings. If the approach to nature in the seventies was idealistic and ecological, the eighties gave way to both a realistic and metaphorical approach, with the artist using nature as a pretext for unveiling his own personality. Nature ceased to be a bucolic reference point in order to reaffirm itself as the outlying area of urban and industrial landscapes. With the artist's incorporation in an entirely urban society in the eighties, came new ways of confronting nature that also marked a metaphysical distance.

IMAGE, FORM, AND SIGN

A passage from Michel Tournier's book "The Drop of Gold" serves as a useful metaphorical introduction to the interrelations of image, form, and sign: "The sign is a spirit, the image is material. Calligraphy is the soul's algebra, drawn by the body's most spiritual organ, its right hand. It is the celebration of the invisible through the visible. Its arabesques testify to the presence of the desert in the mosque. Through it, the infinite unfurls in the finite. For the desert is pure space, free from time's vicissitudes." This pure desert space of Tournier can be equated to the empty and unspoiled void of the canvas, and the image, the form or the sign can prompt the celebration of the invisible. Images that represent, signs that signify and forms that refer to themselves constitute the various links of today's plastic code. With traces of figurative art and referentiality, the three stages do not pretend to be a direct reflection of reality, but rather to offer an awareness of it, which through art materializes in images, forms, and signs. If calligraphy betrays the writing that its lines cover, signography reveals another kind of language, the language of images, forms and signs that are reaffirmed in their representation, but at the same time reveal the artist's knowledge of the world, its objects, and ideas.

LORENZO VALVERDE

An underlying feature of the painting of the late eighties is the clear need for young artists to find a plastic language in which the notions of form, image, sign and symbol blend in the creative process. The search for a contemporary voice here seems to be reflected in the artist's need to become a demiurge of forms, taking visual and conceptual information from his immediate reality, whether personal or social. While the image represents the object, the sign signifies it and the form designates itself, there is inevitably a limit to their points of reference. Henri Focillon defined form as "a kind of fissure through which a multitude of images waiting to be born can be introduced in an undefined realm." This definition encompasses artists such as Lorenzo Valverde, whose works fuse the strictly pictorial with occasional incursions into the field of sculpture. From his exclusive use of canvas in 1987, he has gone on to use wood and iron, amongst other materials, giving his work both new pictorial qualities and a certain three-dimensionality.

Here, too, his works underscore a new feature of present-day art, with its rejection of the strict definitions of materials used in painting and sculpture, on the grounds that such definitions are unfeasible. Lorenzo Valverde uses materials and objects in an attempt to find a middle ground that rejects excessive objectivization and industrialization of sculpture while, at the same time, keeps the traces of craftsmanship that allow the artist's hand to be perceived in his work.