

In this small space there lies a great proof. Interview with Santiago Talavera.
By Iván López Munuera.

The works of Santiago Talavera (Albacete, 1979) tend to abound in objects, figures, situations and atmospheres that recall the Diogenes syndrome, the behaviour disorder in which those affected compulsively hoard possessions in their homes. Overflowing spaces that go beyond the visual quality of their images extending toward atmospheres that suggest a different temporal order. Places marked by the asynchrony, or rather the simultaneity of chronological categories summarised by means of one sole image that is chaotic and porous, unstable and absorbing. All at the same time in the same place. The homes and circumstances of those suffering from this disorder indirectly disrupt the hegemonic temporal regime in Western society, based on –as Geogre Kubler pointed out in 1962 – both biological time (marking our life cycle) and chronological (determined by the movement of the hands of the clock), giving rise to multiple perspectives, which, in spite of being all feasible and valid, are impossible to establish. This aspect of his works is can also be perceived in his studio, an old garage shared with other artists, where different pieces, both finished or in progress, mix with reproductions of others that interest him, as well as novels that he is reading or rereading, essays, background music, photographs from varied media sources and work tools. Speaking about these atmospheres makes for a good starting point for an interview concerning his artistic production.

There is an aspect present in many of your works that I find very suggestive and very striking, which is the certain simultaneity of situations and images spreading across a landscape in such a way that they appear to be flashes of different moments and places gathered together in the same setting. Works such as *Desde el vomitorio* (From the Vomitorium) (2011), *Core* (2009), *La isla de los voraces* (The Island of the Voracious) (2008) or *Dónde viví y para qué* (Where and What I lived for) (2010) illustrate a stratified world, without chronological or situational hierarchies that indicate a rather crazy and dreamy atmosphere in which certain conventions, such as geographical and temporal ones, have been abolished. Would you mind responding to these considerations?

The approach to these works, however naive it may sound, is not the result of a preestablished idea, but stems quite naturally from a multiplicity of reflections and a desire to add continually. We live in a world of replicas of replicas, in a vertiginous multi-referential context that is prone to accumulation. I believe that this vision produces uncertainty which is derived from very basic questions: what comes after this, or rather what is behind these images and this overproduction. And I raise these questions again from an aesthetic approach. The simultaneity you mention greatly interests me and I always perceive it in seeing how the work progresses. Above all, when seeing the pieces finished. There is a sort of nostalgia for the future, a desire to live at the same time in both a past moment and one that is still to come. In a way it is nostalgia for a past period that has been imagined, but to me is very near.

Melancholic perhaps, that's to say, melancholy defined as nostalgia for a moment or period not lived, desired or defiant.

Yes. I realise that I possess this nostalgic view through images of the future, scenes from science fiction that are just as close to me as any other reality. They are also very vague interests in questions of quantum physics, in precepts or beliefs that we can be in several places at the same time. This is something which fascinates me.

It is a very cinematographic view, above all of films by David Lynch, a director that especially interests you. I'm referring to films such as *Lost Highway* (1997), where the present and the future are continually mixed, confusing some characters who end up invoking certain situations (including very extremes ones such as murder) while sunk into a state of almost narcotic perturbation.

That's right. For me it's the same sensation one experiences when looking at rubbish dump, a place where the remains of remains end up, objects which had a use, whatever it might have been, and which are suddenly mixed together and whose origin is forgotten. Or like looking at everything through a rear-view mirror, while driving you see everything that has been left behind. The sensation is one of great velocity. One thing succeeds the next: films, photos of films, articles about films... contrasting sensations that are continually stored and passed on.

Continuing with the film references and another of your obsessions, Andrei Tarkovsky, you have created a series of fictions closely related to the context surrounding them, to the world that envelopes them, where it isn't very clear what the argument is, but it seems that something has occurred or that something is about to happen and that, said rather straightforwardly, we have missed it. That's to say, that something terrible may have occurred and yet the camera becomes held up in a certain aesthetic enjoyment, as if certain seemingly idyllic settings could invoke the most dramatic of acts, something that is seen in the succession of images, stills, that compose *La vida anterior* (*The Previous Life*) (2011). Exactly. I really enjoy working in an unconscious way with the nice catastrophes, such as in the *Tsunami rosa* (*Pink Tsunami*) (2006). It may seem perverse because of the situation: a moment of death and destruction advances on an island's inhabitants. Yet, it is so beautiful... an enormous wave tinged pink. It's a brutal image that we often see in the media, where impacting images continually repulse us and attract us at the same time. We ourselves seek these scenes. However, more than a sordid desire, I would say that it is something inevitable -something that arouses suspicion around the image. And this has something to do with the landscape itself. I'm obsessed with a sentence that Oscar Wilde once wrote which reads: "life imitates arts far more than art imitates life". From this point of view, we realise that the impact that art has on the way we conceive what is natural or the environment in which we move is so strong that we are not able to think of a neutral, aseptic view that is free of previous contents.

That's to say, that there is no "out there" that is contemplated or observed, rather it is connected with other more elaborate views and perceptions. It is something that is found in readings that you cite such as those of Thoreau and his view on nature or in Hiroshige and his constructions of the landscape. In every landscape there is a distancing, there is suspicion, you become involved, you imagine. Every landscape artist is a person who doesn't stop looking from a window and this position is very suspicious. In what direction does he or she look and from where? It is a complex task constructed of multiple factors.

And how do you approach these constructions of subjectivity?

I have a very visual approach and one that is also very experimental. I use nature as an enormous testing ground. For example, what you said before about Hiroshige, someone who fascinates me and whom I consider to be very thought-provoking. I think about the 36 views he created of Mount Fuji and the extent to which he is able to iconize an element of the landscape, a mountain, which is suddenly converted into something almost edible. This way of playing with shapes and colours as a means of creating other things inside a landscape obsesses me. Once again, voracity and edibility are present. There is a desire to grasp something incredibly immense such is nature and transform it into something two-dimensional in order to alter all its elements in such a way that it renders the concept as visual as possible. This anxiety to add objects, to stick them, to see their different possibilities and convert them into accumulations that have nothing to do with one another... I feel this need to re-create, I must see it.

In this game that is played the titles that you choose exercise a very important role. They are evocative, cryptic, insinuating. We have spoken about a few of them but there are more, such as *Del sentimiento de no estar del todo* (*On Feeling not All There*) (2010), *Ceremonia disimulada* (*Concealed Ceremony*) (2008) or *La guarida de los amos ocultos III* (*The Hideout of the Hidden Masters*) (2009). How did you come up with these titles?

I normally choose them in the same voracious manner in which the different parts appear in the work: in an accumulative way, until the moment that I abandon the work and decide upon its name. They are often whimsical: song lyrics, book titles, film dialogues, continual relations that catch me. I try to choose something that produces a kaleidoscope of interpretations. I don't intend for them to be analytical or decisive, but rather influential, meaningful. The title should contribute to but not establish the work's meaning. I make a list with many titles over a period of time and then eliminate them.

In your works there are continuous and simultaneous changes of scale: from a shoe to a football stadium, from a flower which holds a city to a tsunami. They are scales that you also apply to the formats, with a very clear difference between very large works and much smaller works that acquire very diverse implications.

For the larger sizes I imagine the spectator living inside them, allowing his or her gaze to float in their interior. If it were possible to find paper of an immense size, I would make them even larger. On the

other hand, I like the small format for being something different, albeit closely linked to the former. Yes, I want the spectator to enter inside the piece, but trying to create a life around what is small. For this reason, it bores me so much to show in certain galleries or museums where the exhibition space tends to render the perception of the piece somewhat unpleasant. I prefer other spaces.

Could you explain yourself a bit better?

I have an image, a desire that I haven't been able to fulfil, which is to be able to move the whole studio to another place because I'm interested in the studio itself as a landscape. I believe that it constitutes a kind of breeding ground that produces much serendipity, many encounters with the material itself that reveal a great deal about the work. The "white cubes" aseptinize artwork too much, which is why I would like to be able to produce works that dissociate them from these kinds of spaces. Sometimes I make 4 by 8 centimetre canvasses with the aim of forcing the spectators to focus their gaze in a radical way, so that they feel that they have to get very close to the wall and forget for a short while about all the rest.

At the same time, the way you approach one or the other varies with regards to the content. In the larger works there is a certain attention to detail, to what is small, with a propensity to meticulousness. You seem to use a hyperzoom that converts any surface into a decorative motif, into a pattern that stirs all the contents.

Once again I return to the theme of suspicion. Since I was small I have been fascinated by the scene from Blade Runner (Ridley Scott, 1982) in which the detective Deckard uses a machine to enter inside a photograph, transforming the two-dimensionality of the image into a three-dimensional space in order to move from right to left. Finally, once inside the room, he discovers a crucial piece of evidence. I would love to be able to do this. The sensation that certain images conceal essential details and that we can't see them because they are hidden behind something excites me. Something is hiding there. In this small space there lies a great proof.

Speaking of proof and of the studio's importance in relation to your work, I find it curious that you frequently take photographs of your studio with the chair in front of a half-finished piece, with everything ready and where apparently nothing is missing except one thing: yourself.

Yes. The painting has swallowed me up. There is photograph by Ilya Kabakov that I really like in which an empty chair appears in front of an enormous drawing void of content which seems to have eaten him.

You are also experimenting with reverse processes: instead of you being absorbed by the painting, you make it so that it's the painting which spreads all throughout the room. That is, you have several sketches of installations that complement your pieces with mountains of paper, for example, advancing from the painting into the space.

Many of us creators who work with two-dimensionality inevitably dream of expanding our world throughout the space. There is something excessive in many of my creative scenes, a need to bring them out, to try to enable the spectator to cover a work, to be there, to enter them. I'm very keen on the spectator being able to live inside my works. The places must come out inside the imagination.

To a certain effect you already achieve this by creating an all-enveloping atmosphere with music that you yourself compose for some of your works or separately.

Yes, in fact, in this latest exhibition my idea is for Desde el vomitorio (From the Vomitorium) (2011) to contain a microphone that records the sound track of this piece. I imagine how these places that are usually uninhabited may sound. Normally, there are no people in them, just remains, but I would like to know what those who live there eat, what kind of art they buy, what sounds are emitted by the people or objects that reside in them.

Something closely related to the architectures that you depict: empty stadiums, large deserted nineteenth-century buildings, gobbled up villages.

I really like perverting or transforming the use, above all the use made by humans, of these places, of these architectures. In a work from 2009, Las buenas noticias se dicen en voz baja (The Good News are Told in a Whisper) I convert a mountain village into something miniaturised, almost as if they were small chocolate houses, above which fireworks explode. Something amazing is happening while

they're sleeping. Or something that is seemingly astonishing doesn't arouse the interest of others, something which is occurring right above their heads. On the contrary, in *Desde el vomitorio* (From the Vomitorium) I wanted to see what would happen with buildings such as football stadiums, which we are accustomed to seeing full of people, when there was nothing left in them. To see what happens after a World Cup, what these places that housed thousands of people over the course of three months are like when suddenly they become empty. It seems that anything could happen, or at least this is what I imagine. Generally, in painting there comes a moment when I start to lose interest in the human figure and become more interested in what affects the figure, in which case, I tend to divert from the subject with the aim of carrying out a more in-depth approach. Here, there is an implicit interest in the environment. Here is where the set designs from David Lynch's films with their red material, black and white floors, strange sculptures that affect the spectator in such an emotional and brutal way, come into play. There is also an interest in music without vocals, background music, imagining what the places where these figures live sound like.

What do music and sounds mean to you and how do you approach this field in your production?

The music comes before even the physical work of art. I remember when I was around 16 or 17 years old that I bought a multitrack cassette recorder and I remember recording two tracks on one side and another two on the other side, thus creating small compositions. I'm interested in the layers of the composition, the additions, the repetition, the stratification in the music by Steve Reich or Philip Glass. How they produce depth, forms and geometries starting from sounds, such as in Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians* (1974-1976), creating structures that are slowly added and that, naturally, are intrinsically related to the rest of my production. Music is a powerful medium for producing emotions different from those provoked by a visual work of art.

And do you feel more comfortable in one field of production or the other?

Generally, the work that makes me feel most uncomfortable is that which brings me most joy, which is the work on paper. Its execution is rather difficult, being a very cerebral and contained task that requires many hours of work and slow processes. There is always the anxiety to see them finished. Entering the studio, seeing a work still unfinished after 6 months of work is quite hard. Such long periods end up causing a lot of personal themes to be poured into the work. On the contrary, I find painting to be very comfortable, and the smells alone of the materials, of the turpentine, of the linseed oil, are enough get me hooked. And to go back to it is wonderful.

I wouldn't like to finish this conversation without asking you about the future, since in your works what is coming and what is happening are always connected and it even seems that they have already gone by, so, where do you see yourself in ten years time?

Probably in Madrid, in a studio with natural light, in a context not much different from that in which I currently find myself. To still be surrounded by the artists that I love and admire and to expand my network of both professional and human relations. And to keep on expanding my landscapes.

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