

The recovery over the last few years of the work of the Valencian artist Fernando Almela (1943-2009) has been possible thanks to the Foundation, which was founded by the artist himself to preserve the legacy of Alberto Solsona as well as his own. The impeccable work that has been carried out by the Foundation has now made it possible for us to find out more about the work of an artist who, well-positioned at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s amongst the cultivators of the (incorrectly) so-called *return to painting*, did not receive the recognition he deserved. But this has recently changed thanks to the inclusion of Almela's work in important exhibitions and collections, the exhibition at the IVAM being the most outstanding. This exhibition gives the public from the eastern coast of Spain the chance to enjoy a fundamental part of his work, his still life compositions. This genre embodies in an exemplary way the basic principles that would govern his career from the beginning of the 1980s up to the time of his death, which was now six years ago.

Previously, during the 1970s, Almela and Solsona had formed an artistic team with a work in *Pop Art*, bright and uninhibited, tinged with local colour and often criticism towards the Franco regime. They were creations marked by circumstances, but of an exemplary solidity and honesty, and not so far removed from the creations we can see here today: a liking for objects, the recovery of everyday things, the appreciation of craftsmanship, carefully created compositions or a lack of interest in artistic dogmas are just some of the aspects to which our artist remained loyal throughout his career. With the end of the dictatorship, like so many other critical artists, Almela had to find a new horizon for his work. The times brought a postmodern style which, as far as art was concerned, advocated (both within and beyond our borders) a return to painting (which had really never been abandoned), an end to formal labels (and the age-old debate on abstraction vs. figuration, although the latter ended up in a stronger position) and an unprejudiced examination of historical avant-garde movements. None of this was really new for Almela who, in several texts written jointly with Solsona, already pointed to practically identical principles as the keystone of his work. With things in his favour, but without giving in to the influence of some of the imported formulas that were so successful in Spain (Neo-expressionism and Italian Transvanguard, amongst others), Almela embarked upon a meticulous search for a *raison d'être* for his work, which he found just before the beginning of the 1980s.

The creative freedom that brought about the end of stylistic Darwinism led him to explore his original interests and give great importance once again to his love for simple everyday things: pots and pans, garden plants, landscapes seen from his window. On the other hand, the return to painting also saw the return of values that had been considered anachronistic, if not directly spurious, in the world of art since 1945: the skill of creating compositions, the control of materials, the sensuality of colour, the evocative strength of lyricism and, in short, the intrinsic value of beauty (which, to be perfectly honest, would not take long to be banished once more). Finally, the new way of looking at the origins of modernity from within the world of art made it possible to recover some *heterodox* artists whose work would challenge the implacable artistic dogmatism of the 20th century. From the late- and post-Impressionists up to Hopper or De Chirico, numerous artists have been vindicated by texts and exhibitions that, from the end of the 1970s, embarked upon rewriting the history of art, stripping it of the partiality and Jacobinism that had affected artists, critics and historians alike. In this context, Almela found guides in Cézanne and Morandi, two figures key to understanding his work. From Cézanne he takes the paradoxical relationship between artwork and reality, his constructive precision using brushstrokes and, above all, the essential value of the whiteness of the fabric as a constituent part and, at the same time, a limitation of the painting. From Morandi, he takes the ineffable mystery of the mere existence of things, the subtlety and elegance of the drawing and composition, the infinite delicacy of colours, with limited shades but infinite nuances.

The brilliance and originality with which the Valencian artist assimilates the doctrines of both artists is clear in this selection of still life compositions. It is no surprise that, together

with landscapes, this is one of Almela's favourite genres. Considered "inferior" until the end of the 19th century, both genres were to become the favourites of historical avant-garde artists in their systematic task of "observing the world once more" in a different way, starting precisely with what is closest at hand: nature and objects around us. In the same way, Almela shows us his particular poetry of shapes in works where his interest in everyday things becomes a rigorous exercise of composition and colour, while poetical and cognitive at the same time.

This is evident in the first –chronologically speaking– of the works exhibited, **Ventana cuadrada nº 2/Square window No.2** (1983). It is, however, a most mature work of art, where the chromatic inversion of the background/figure duality particularly stands out. This is one of the distinguishing traits of Almela's art: he gives the former colour so that the latter "is cut out" as a negative image in dazzling white. The interplay of presence and absence created in this way evokes the mystery of the existence of a physical world conceivable by the senses, but at the same time evading (as Cézanne was well aware) its two-dimensional form. The thin liquid of the paint suggests a world of plants with perfectly toning secondary colours, evidently influenced by Solsona and the *Grupo de Cuenca*, so similar to the artist both personally and artistically speaking, especially as far as the colours and geometric precision are concerned. The same principle governs **Frutas y hoja/Fruit and leaf** (1983) and its **boceto/sketch** (1986) with very delicate brushstrokes and colours, as well as **Sin título/Untitled** (1991), although this work is more vigorous in both aspects.

As a natural step in his investigations on the role of the silhouette in the structure of the figure, just like the late works of Matisse, Almela began to experiment with *collage*. This technique enabled him to perfect even more the interplay of tension between the different planes of his work, wisely taking advantage of the nuances provided by the different pieces of paper that are sometimes cut, sometimes torn, as we can see in **Plato blanco/White plate** (1991). In later works, these compositional resources are combined with more daring brushstrokes and colours, such as **Círculo blanco con violeta/White circle with violet**, **Bodegón azul/Blue still life (boceto/sketch)**, **Cosas chinas/Chinese objects** and **Bodegón Amarillo/Yellow still life (boceto/sketch)**, painted in 1993. The doctrines of *papier collé*, in turn, redound to the painting. Two magnificent canvases from 1995 (**Bodegón del 95/Still life from 95 (libros/books)** and **Sin título/Untitled**) show the skill acquired by the artist when it comes to suggesting the ever evanescent physicality of objects that seem to dissolve into space by the minute. The transparency of a bottle or the hollow of shapes are constructed from a kind of palimpsest, in which the delicacy of colour and the scratching of the pictorial crust remind us of Morandi in permanent (de)construction.

At this point, the spectator will not be surprised by Almela's fascination for the Orient. The delicacy –both plastic and conceptual– of Chinese art when it comes to evoking the transitory character and ultimate unfathomableness of nature were always of great interest to the Valencian artist, who visited on numerous occasions the famous work *Seis caquis/Six persimmons* by Mu Qi, the 13th century Zen Buddhist monk famous for the delicacy of his paintings. The risky colour gradients of the monotype brilliantly recreate mountains and fruit in **Sin título/Untitled**, and skilfully evoke space in the distance in **Paisaje, caquis y mesa/Landscape, persimmons and table**, both painted in the year 2000. The combination of Almela's compositions with the oriental spirit is reflected in the acrylics **Sin título/Untitled** (2000), where the persimmons transmute into houses in a landscape, and **Variación Zaragoza/Zaragoza variation** (2001), where they reappear with an almost ghostly quality. The last canvases in the exhibition, two pieces of work **Sin título/Untitled** from 2005 and 2007, return to the background/figure debate structured through discreet negatives that let the white primed surface or even the fabric itself be seen, in comparison with a strong contrasted brushstroke, almost like Tachisme.

During the last few years of his life, Almela made a series of still life sculptures with old pots and pans, in which his usual concerns coherently became three-dimensional with fascinating results. In a previous work many years before –*Sin título/Untitled* (1991)– he had chosen traditional molten bronze to show spatial dialectics between matter and void, but in *Sin título/Untitled* and *Bagdad/Baghdad* (both from 2007) the everyday objects themselves, chipped and rusty, reflect the passing of time and the beauty that lies within. Two sculptures from 2008 in wood and brass round off the exhibition, both *Sin título/Untitled*. These sculptures embody the knowledge that was accumulated by the artist in creations of poignant simplicity: pitchers shelter two humble cups in a motherly way. The magnificence of modest materials, the simple but meditated colour, shapes that change under a gaze that is always in motion, the irregular geometry of life, the slow but tireless rhythm of daily life: in short, the mystery of life, of the presence of the world as we see it, and of the time in which everything, including ourselves, will end up dissolving.

That is the ultimate essence of Almela's work, in each and every one of his variants and techniques. And confusion in the face of the miracle of existence is the result.

Daniel A. Verdú Schumann