

“All that we can hope for is to put some order into ourselves...”

Willem de Kooning

THE WAY OUT

At an exhibition in the museum at Havre in June 1969 titled “*La peinture en question*” Vincent Bioulès, Louis Cane, Marc Devade, Daniel Dezeuze, Noël Dolla, Jean-Pierre Pincemin, Patrick Saytour, André Valensi and Claude Viallat stated: “*The objective of painting is painting itself, and the exhibited pictures are only in benefit of themselves. They do not appeal to any “other party” (the personality of the artist, their biography, the history of art, for example) [...] Painting is a fact in itself and it is on the terrain of painting where problems should be put forward. It is not about returning to sources, nor the search for original pureness, but rather a simple bare staging of pictorial elements that comprise pictorial facts...*”

These words, uttered at one of the most representative exhibitions of that group of French painters, that grouped together in the sixties under the name of *Supports-Surfaces*, fit like a ring (textually) on my finger (conceptually) to start to outline an analysis of Xavier Grau’s (Barcelona, 1951) pictorial work, who, from his beginnings at the outset of the seventies, has kept a high degree of coherence and perseverance (two words that indefectibly rhyme with sapience...), largely based on some of the premises already coined by members of that movement – which in Spain would be called “painting – painting” (*pintura-pintura*), and which arose as a “pictorial – pictorial” reaction to the strategies of a conceptual nature, prevalent in Barcelona at that time. I shall come back to discuss this shortly.

In his *20th Century Art in Spain*, Valeriano Bozal stated “...along with all this painting that does not move away from figuration, even though it has many degrees, it is necessary to remember what José Manuel Broto, Xavier Grau, Gonzalo Tena and Carlos León do, a group of artists who, between 1974 and 1976, developed a growing activity through exhibitions and writing in which they approached the theoretical proposals of the *Supports – Surfaces* group [...] In 1976 Broto, Grau and Tena held an exhibition called “*Per una crítica de la pintura*” (Barcelona, Maeght Gallery), while collaborating in the magazine “*Trama*”, directed by Broto, of which only two issues were published, the first in Barcelona (1976) and the second in Saragossa (1977)...”

Without a shadow of a doubt Xavier Grau is one of the most significant figures of Spanish contemporary painting within the abstract discipline. His abstraction which, because of age and conviction, takes him close to the parameters of expressive intensity and emotional strength of American abstract expressionism, fundamentally that of the New York school, where we are able to identify the clearest and most determining influences thereof as painters such as De Kooning, Gorky and Guston.

As is true for the premises of *Supports – Surfaces*, the objective of his painting is painting itself, a fact in itself, the staging of the elements comprising the pictorial fact. Painting – Painting. Not long ago, at an exhibition by another painter at this Gallery, I was reminded of some words by Gerhard Richter, one of the most difficult painters to label, and one of the most independently minded painters I know, about the capacity of visualising abstract painting, to give shape (and also background) to another reality, not referential, that can also exist, and about its – almost magical – ability to explain things that at first would appear to be inexplicable.

Nevertheless, and this is surely where the greatness lies, and the need for this language, it does continue to explain what can apparently not be seen or understood, but which through it we do end up seeing comprehending... It is stimulating to see how, in spite of the swinging and driving of new technological processes (which in some cases lead to splendid results), and the icy purring of certain cold and distancing strategies, there are still “seekers of the inexplicable” who still delve in the age old water of painting, casting their nets in pursuit of new artistic findings, those golden, abyssal fish that still inhabit them...

I think this is the case of Xavier Grau, a battle worn artist immersed in a hundred pictorial battles, over 35 years of work, one of those creators – a species in ever-increasing danger of extinction, and of distinction – who, in my opinion still “creates” in the demiurgic and healing power of painting. Gestures, expressionism, rigour, coherence, energy, chance, passion, physicality... Painting which, in spite of its undeniable formal and conceptual unity, makes him tackle each new painting in a way that leads him to make their surfaces a landscape of a new pacific battle, in a new problem to find the answer to.

Because I will not tire of repeating it, I understand that a painting, more than the studio itself, should be the natural habitat of a painter. No, do not accuse of any more (or less) than incurable tautology. The *locus* in which the serious game of painting is played (in which the author, his life and also his death is at risk, i.e. the absence of eternity) has, by default, to be the space of representation of the painting. A locus which frequently ends up making its creator go practically mad..., or more still, I would say making its first and foremost inhabitant go mad. Because painters inhabit – almost literally – that exact and precious habitat, and therefore they walk (or kneel, or crawl) its vast, fertile territory. They stake their profession on it, the benefit of their illusion, and their energy, they step on it with the dense passage of history and the intangible weight of the future. Canvas thus becomes, once and for all, the arena where great exploits are settled (and

great gestures, expenses and tastes of painting). That is where painters risk it all. A game of the heat of fire and colour.

Even though at the start I referred to the fact that, as a painter of abstract, our artist does not need to turn to elements or shapes of a figurative nature, nor does he need to refer to any type or model of reference, which increasingly move away from those allusions to figuration that appeared on his paintings at the start of his career, it is true that as a painter of abstract, he more or less pays evident homage to nature and to landscapes as fountains from which all abstract painting drinks and nourishes itself. Nietzsche said in *“he who completely entrenches himself against boredom also entrenches himself against himself: he will never get to drink the strongest refreshing draught from his own innermost fountain...”*

I am sure that he has decided to drink from that cup and does so while looking towards the more or less remote fountain of the landscape, within that scope of observation and meditation (two words that also inevitably end up rhyming) of the type Cicero spoke about.

Nevertheless, all reflections on nature entail a subjective position, interior, a closer look to the sublime than mere exterior reproduction of its physicality. *“The sublime”* Kant said in his Critique of Judgement *“is not contained in any object of nature, since we can become aware of our superiority over exterior nature in that we have been superior over our inner nature...”*

This subjective look, which is really the only possible look, takes him to arrange a painting in a composition which, at first sight, could appear disorganised, dense, and Baroque, that is structured (or de-structured) by applying different layers of formal, chromatic elements, that create tension between colour and drawing (a key work in his work) without any apparent connection, a bit like a linear forest, animated, difficult to transit because of the tangle of lines and shapes, undulating, frayed, un(woven), or a sea of painted seaweed, of written and scribbled signs, on top of each other, equally complicated for visual navigation. Nevertheless, the more lost we appear to be, when our eyes (and our sensibility) have nearly strayed within that labyrinth of shapes and colours, is when we find our bearings, that lead us to the way out. As Guillermo Solana pointed out: *“The longer we look at those pictures (and they are not pictures that allow a fleeting glance), the more the first impression of something chaotic disappears and the more we are able to appreciate the impeccable coherence the pictorial surface is arranged with...”*

Yes, finally and liberatingly, we end up finding the way out. The way out to understanding and feeling.

Francisco Carpio