

The dream of the shadows

Juan Agustín Mancebo Roca

el sueño de las sombras

La primera impresión que se tiene al observar los cuadros de Almudena es un profundo malestar. Algo te inquieto, se incomoda, no deja lugar a la respiración. No es una obra de fácil acceso, puesto que es una pintura difícil, comprometida, que no permite la indiferencia. Tiene poco de complaciente. Su impacto visual es brutal, creado desde la violencia y la agresividad; el tiempo se convierte en un campo de batalla donde aparecen y se difuminan sucesivamente imágenes, donde lo gestual e inmediato conviven con construcciones artísticas. Un trabajo tremendamente sincero, trascendente, construido desde la experiencia personal. Oira y artista son indisolubles, no hay distancia entre ellas. Su vivencia es fundamental, se desahoga y se materializa en sus cuadros.

No nos encontramos ante una creadora al uso. La disolución de tópicos comienza en su propio estudio. Para ella su verdadero hábitat está en su taller. Lo considera como el único espacio donde realmente se encuentra cómoda. Queriendo por la artificialidad de otros espacios, su espacio de reflexión y trabajo tiene más que ver con un lugar de vigilancia que con un universo creativo. A pesar de la primera impresión de frialdad, su taller es a la vez íntimo, extraordinariamente cálido, omeado humano. Cuando se accede a él, es la impresión de estar violando un lugar tan personal que se convierte en extraño. La sensación de desasosiego, de entidad ajena ya en el taller, la privacidad y la tensión del mismo se trasladan a su obra. Es tan difícil ponerse delante de sus cuadros como acceder a su mundo creativo.



La pintura ha sido definitivamente desplazada en un mundo dominado por la imagen. Y ese mundo no ha concedido ni un sólo resquicio a su predecesora durante siglos. Ha sido arrasado por ruidos y a certezas, por antipatías. Almudena trabaja desde ese punto de resistencia, que a la vez es una posición de resistencia ante la avalancha mediática que nos sepulta. Malraux decía: "no es un hombre cuando se sabe decir no". Almudena niega esta sociedad polimórfica en una batalla que se entiza como un progreso en el tiempo.

El humanismo ha desaparecido. La tecnología y los medios, con su proliferación de mensajes icónicos y la cultura de la imagen salvaje instantáneamente perdurable, no ofrecen ninguna respuesta, pero son los verdaderos dominantes de la esfera social que configuran la cultura contemporánea. "El preciso momento de la técnica a través de la televisión y de los ordenadores, parece capaz de hacer que todos los saberes penetren en todos los hogares, la lógica del consumo destruye la cultura. La palabra persiste pero vaciada de cualquier tipo de formación, de apertura al mundo y de cuidado del alma. Actualmente lo que dirige la vida espiritual es el principio del placer, forma postmoderna del interés privado (...). El individuo postmoderno ha olvidado que la libertad era otra cosa que la potestad de cambiar cadenas, y la propia cultura algo más que una pulsión satisfactoria". Solamente significa una progreza absurda, en la que el espacio y el tiempo han sido completados en el fin de lo humano.

lateral 21x (extraño), 2000
técnica mixed y lana sobre tela. 160x130 cm.

The first impression one has when viewing Almudena's paintings is a deep feeling of discomfort. There is something that disturbs and upsets the viewer, not leaving any room for breathing. The works are not easily accessible, themselves constituting a difficult and committed type of painting which does not allow for indifference. There is little complacency in them. Their visual impact is brutal. These paintings are created from violence and aggressiveness, and the canvass becomes a battlefield on which images successively appear and dissipate, where gestures and readily-available features coexist with short-lived constructions. The work bears extreme sincerity, transcendence, and is built from personal experiences. The works and the artist are inextricably linked; there is no distance between them. Her experiences are fundamental and they flow and materialize in her paintings.

This is not about an ordinary artist. The dissolution of clichés starts in her studio proper. To her, the real habitat is in her workshop. She regards it as the one space where she really feels at ease. Her studio is dominated by the artificial light of neon lamps and looks more like a surveillance post than a creative universe. But despite this first impression of coldness, her studio is at the same time personal and close, tremendously warm and far too humane. When one goes there, one gets the impression of having infringed the privacy of an utmost personal place and becoming a stranger. The feeling of uneasiness, of anxiety appears already in the studio, whose privacy and tension are depicted in her works. Standing in front of her paintings is as difficult as accessing her creative world.

Painting has been completely removed in a world which is dominated by images. And this world of images has not granted a single space to its predecessor for centuries. It has finally reduced it to ashes and destroyed it. Almudena works from that minimization point, which is at the same time a position of resistance against the media flood which buries us. As Malraux said, "one is a man when one knows how to say no". Almudena is in denial of this *polymorphic society*¹ in a battle which she figures out as making progress in the midst of failure.

Humanism has disappeared. Technology and the media, with their proliferation of iconic messages and the culture of wild images which instantaneously last through time, do not offer any answers, but are the ones that really dominate the social sphere and themselves give shape to contemporary culture: "at the very moment in which technology, through television and computers, seems capable of allowing all knowledge to enter our homes, culture is destroyed by the logic of consumption. Words linger, but they have been deprived of any ideas about learning, being open to the world and caring for the soul.

What leads spiritual life these days is the principle of pleasure – a post-modern form of private interest (...). Post-modern individuals have forgotten that freedom was in the past something different from the capability of changing our chains, and that our own culture was something more than a satisfied impulse²". They just mean an absolute time extension, in which space and time have been frozen at the end of the human era.

Chaos then comes. There is not a single small space left. The white fabric has finally been rooted out; the canvas has disappeared. All the supporting materials have been industrially created: camouflage materials, blankets, scraps of fabric, insulating materials, towels, etc., or objects which have been part of someone´s life, which have had a purpose and been used. Through them there emerges a series of images which, just at first sight, seem unconnected with each other – out of context, but which in fact follow a compelling logic.

The iconic elements which Almudena uses are clearly recognizable: tattoos, comics, traditional or media symbols, cinema and advertising images. There is a proliferation of images from the Disney world. An illusory, tender, childlike world which, as such, does not fear or recognize death. Disney´s images develop in a permanent state of hibernation, like the creator´s state itself, which permanently rests at minus 180 degrees. But this frozen world, this perpetuation of inert beings, has to do with the media manipulation itself. Jean Baudrillard wrote "Disneyland is a perfect model for all simulated orders, all intertwined". The Real has disappeared and given way to an infinite presence of phantasmagorias: "the downfall of the physical presence for the benefit of an immaterial and phantasmagoric one³". A world which has degenerated into something imaginary and has become the measure of the Real: "Disneyland shows that the Real and the Imaginary die of the same Death⁴".

Maternity appears in Almudena´s works as something latent and terrible, a feeling, as Pessoa acknowledges, "*of the unbreathable darkness which is laid on us / of the imposed dark sand / deferred corpses which procreate*". Birth is the origin, but at the same time the expulsion into the world, into the transit of existence. Newborns are not more fragile; they are the representation of a vulnerability which is with us for the whole of our existence. It is the beginning of the parenthesis "*in man´s final destination, which already during the flow of his life anticipates infallible death*⁵".

Through the mundane images of the tattoos, Almudena rebuilds an itinerary in which the body is the representation space. Tattoos are markings on the skin, made by means of the piercing of the body with the aim of embellishing, of drawing a symbol, of writing a story on it. It is necessary to do that through the suffering. Elements appear on the paintings which are not drawn but sewn on it, by which strategy she reinforces this reference in which creation also means suffering. Its peculiar nature is inserted in the poetry or the marking, of the cleft, of the piercing of the fabric. The needle becomes the brush, and it marks as it would mark a body.

Physical pain serves to Almudena as an excuse to deepen into topics which she acknowledges as hot ones: sex, disease and death. Pain distinguishes us as mortals, and it

dwells on the vulnerability of the human condition. Suffering, pain and death are part of life, but that is a thought which has been abolished from our cold *post-modern* condition. Death, in those paintings, is regarded as something as sacred as life.

Death appears as the dominating topic in all of Almudena's production. Its presence is sometimes suffocating. Reference is brutal. Skulls and skeletons refer us to a classical *vanitas*, which is directly rooted in the black romanticism. But it appears altered, hidden amidst hundreds recognizable images. Death is the gate to our obsessions. Fears and desires arise from our finiteness, from our Terminal consciousness. We try to build a story, a myth, in order to escape the terrible feeling that one day we will *be finished*, that our destination is already posthumous. We are just *fragments* of time, two dates: our birth and our disappearance. A tiny lapse in the void of two eternal nights.

In her works there are constant historic references to the cultures, the religions, the beliefs and the myths: the book of the dead, the Christian representations, the religious iconography. The degree of perverseness of her images is so great that she rebuilds the foot in Jesus Christ's skeleton. Jesus is of interest as a human being, and not as a crucified deity. She challenges the dogma of resurrection, thereby challenging all of the paraphernalia of the catholic religion, irretrievably destroyed if Jesus' ossuary were discovered (if it has not yet been discovered).

Religion and beliefs are just myths without any basis. They have been invented in order to avoid having to combat the distress of the eternal life without anything to cling to. A lie, a vane illusion is better than a truth which is in every way terrible.

Human beings have become a shadow: *I feel I am no one but a shadow / and I exist like cold darkness in nothingness*. There is no paradise. All existence is earthly. And human life is a transit through the valley of shadows, living among presences that are minimal, trivial, deemed to disappear.

But there is not just an interest for the physical disappearance, but also an interest for the elimination of consciousness. In this way, one of her paintings, which appears as marked by *Any Name*, is one of the most sincere and devastating works. It refers us to the destruction of the personality, the mental extermination. In sum, the passage to the abyss of insanity, but, isn't insanity a form of anticipated death, an annihilation of memory? *Sleep in the shadow, uncertain heart*⁶.

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¹ Finkeldraut, A.: *La derrota del pensamiento*. Anagrama, Barcelona, 1990, p. 116.

² Ibid. P. 128.

³ Virilio, P.: *El cibernundo, la política de lo peor*. Cátedra, Madrid, 1997, p. 9.

⁴ Baudrillard, J.: *Cultura y simulacro*. Cairos, Barcelona, pp. 29-31.

⁵ Ayala, F.: Prólogo a *Muerte en Venecia*. Edhasa, Barcelona, 1997, p. 9.

⁶ Pessoa, F.: *Poesía. Antología mínima*. Río Nuevo, Barcelona, 1996