

## To awaken the birds

By Andrés Isaac Santana

*“Painting should not be said, but however, or maybe because of this, one of the most exciting things that you can do in front of a painting is to talk, talk for hours, not so much to get to know the painting as to tune the faculties that enable us to enjoy its flavour”*

Carlos Matallana is a great illusionist, which, therefore, makes him an intelligent and audacious guy. He seems to be very clear about something when he is postulating his visual statements and his drawings, those that act as screens or self-reflexive laminas, and that is that no spectator is innocent, which drives you to think that no visual spectacle – of whatever kind – is ingenuous by nature or by ontology. He knows, and knows well, that any *significance* that comes out of the contemporary visual universe, collapsed in the name of saturation and of the most visceral apotheosis, is due to an arduous and complex co-operation between *rhetorical devices* and *metaphorical locutions* that measure the state of permanent seduction of painting, and of culture too. That is partially why his work, apparently calm and subject only to the enjoyment of the senses, to that rare and ambiguous *restitution of the retinal paradigm of art*, holds below the *density of the surface*, a sophisticated allegory about the world, culture and the ferocious concert of paradoxes that encourage life and turn it into a genuine ballad. His work, to put it in a specific rather than authoritarian manner, is a *speculative game* of certain dramatic intensity that affirms and

denies in a parallel time, to the same extent that it represents and advises – quickly – about the fallacy of that same representation as a utopian ideal or truth that is subject to and deployed at the order of suspicion and irony. The work thus becomes a text that announces what has not been said, at least what has not been said literally.

In this sense, all that perspective of bucolic accents over which a large number of references to the very history of art, and more specifically the history of painting overlap and copulate, is merely a reactive and quite efficient response to the hysteria and the opacity of the modern world. There is no ingenuousness in his work, neither is there an abundance of *tropology* as an end for it, but there is however, as a means that helps to construct his language rather than the other way around. Carlos transfers the dimension of the rhetorical weight beyond the canvass as such in an attempt to insert an order of conscience in which anaemia or bulimia wreaks havoc with the interpretation of the essentially visual. He then orchestrates a way of expression in which it is not the evidence that matters, but rather its reverse.

While other Canary Island artists, with just as lucid works but with a very different tone from his, such as Carlos Rivero, Santiago Palenzuela, Martín and Sicilia or Pipo Hernández, for example, emphasise that sordid part of the world and of its usual axiology from the emphasis of a visceral and tearing palette that almost wounds and bites your eye, the work of Matallana operates with a dramatic procedure of very different visual resources, perhaps more subtle, although the palette of the eyes remains so. In the place where some make the wound obvious and the rub it in with a certain degree of exultant sadism; Carlos Matallana, on the other hand, allows himself a hedonism that is as misleading as it is cynical, as sterile as it is provocative, as short-sighted as it is lucid. And he does so as a

warning, as an emphatic sign-posting, as a silent scream, but a scream all the same. As critic and writer Fernando Castro states, “in both his abstract and in his figurative work, consecrated mainly to the representation of landscape, the images attempt to please the viewer, but with a subtle touch of melancholy, like someone throwing away Mozart’s music. There is a need for qualification, thus, this idea of happiness associated with images of nature proposed by the artists. His is not ingenuous painting. In his landscapes, the light takes on a clear utopian dimension in response to the opacity of the world that we live in. The artist lays claim to *joie de vivre* in the knowledge that it is a distant, unreachable ideal. Some people are content with the ugliness of the world. This is not the case of Carlos Matallana (...)” He, as the critic underscores, appeals to beauty, he reconstructs it and he invents it, discourses about it, he speculates about its limits with every degree of complacency and sarcasm. He is not interested in documenting the horror or the pain with the grammar that usually identifies him, which explains the subtlety of his procedure, although the convalescence of the contemporary world and the overwhelming twilight of his most expensive utopias are diagnosed by an image that reminds us – by way of paradoxical cynicism – that happiness and welfare are possible, at least in their theatrical forms and in their puppet moments. It is for this reason that his work moves between illusion and blind parody, guided by a terribly mental and factual retinal pulse. Something that becomes more intense because of that sensation of silence that runs through the representation and crushes it in the face of the phallic power of the gaze. What comes into play – therefore – is a game of possession and control that is subject to the most basic tools of the seduction and vassalage of the senses. An erotic gymnastics that demands everybody’s gaze for itself without revealing the trap that is laid in its different textural dimensions and graduations. What can be recognised from a certain point of view as

the semiotic dimension or function of the painting is something that Matallana – apparently – knows all too eloquently, given that his formulations pay lip service to that glaring sense of reading, in comparison with the elusive matter of painting, which reduces it and treats it as merely a framework for the representation, instead of as a universe of narrative digression and speculation. Thus the pictures of Matallana become texts that provide patterns, propositional clues for possible readings; but these never advise as a thesis to corroborate or refute, as a closed epistemological field that asphyxiates other discursive and rhetorical possibilities that may be pertinent. The clarity with which Carlos's painting specifies and shows its co-ordinates or elements that form it is at the same time a degree of opacity in the dissection of its final meaning. What *you see* is not what *it is*. This seems to be one of his maxims, even if – by impulse – you could believe otherwise. I believe that it is precisely in this play, in this strategy of digression and absent mindedness, that one of the most notable keys to his work lies. The expressive matter of the visual sign is thus not fragmented, but the global unity of its meaning does become flexible, outside, as I have said, of that opacity that the artist seems to use in order to demand a more audacious exegesis, less subject to common places. The artist himself, referring to one of the series that is now on show in this exhibition, said to me (by e-mail): “with the images that I represent and the titles that I give them, what I normally intend with this form of acting and of composing the image, it to create multiple symbolic and ironic references, while granting the possibility of somewhat free, parallel interpretations. As you will see, the oil paintings are made up of two images, whose visual representation is not in a single temporal narrative. The idea is to confront two images by abolishing the time of representation, making the viewer reconsider his gaze. In short, what I intend with this work is to talk about the concepts of isolation and communication”. These

are issues that are undoubtedly a constant in art and in cultural discourses. Issues that art and artists return to over and over again without this becoming an obtuse recurrence or a deficit that speaks to the exhaustion of the drinking troughs of the senses.

In any event, I think that, both in these pieces that really act as *tableaux* that record the paradox of the world and the reverse of its architecture, and in his previous landscapes helped by that misleading halo that constructs itself in copying the word, the work of Matallana speaks from the very purest *subjectivity*, from *another* time that has a lot of the island in it, of barren land. A time that slows its own course to allow itself the erotic of doing where pornography and its possessive dimension of the obvious saturate all strata of culture. The vision about *the real* that channels the artist and his later followings in the framework of representation are – in my opinion – due to a humanist perspective that he substantially identifies with. So much has been said about the death of the *subject*, of that subject that looks, explores and writes history and culture. It is not the warning of a death that denies the existence of a subjectivity that is both lush and wicked, but of a certain *operational model of subjectivity* that manifested its own weariness sculpted in the brutality of the sterile and in the shadow of the excluding right angles.

I do not know the artist well enough to make claims that may seem uncalled for and hormonal in their absolute terms, the fruitful expression of my passion and my alleged lack of prudence; but I believe (I refer to the nature and double natures of the work without resorting to other, equally legitimate resources) that Carlos Matallana is well aware of something that many artists do not know; the *aesthetic predictions* and the *discursive dominants* of an age, almost always – by force and because of the irrefutable logic of history itself – end up turning into the *repugnance* and

*excrecence* of the next age. Such acute and audacious understanding allows him to see a speculative course of his own insofar as it allows him to select a time *of realisation* and *of poetry* that is exempted (it distances itself) of the impertinent (and also hyper-real) anxiety that most contemporary creators seem to be headed for. *Time, silence* and *light*, are three important moments in the work of this artist that prove the gravity of his world and bear witness to the instant in which the *pictoric matter* is translated into a written support. The dissection of his poetry has to undergo tedium, rather than parody, and also rather than ferocious and insipid *hyper-textual and tropological consummation* if you want a truly timely reading of it. Just as one should ignore (or at least question) that *gracious admission* of the *Kitsch*, that projection of painting – taken as serious – when it is a quote, indiscreet intromission in the fabric of history, or its salutary lesson. The idea of *the conceptual* as the vanguard and flagship of the best in art has to be overvalued given that we now know, from the post-modern experience of culture and its ages, that an aged vanguard is sadder than a long-established academe. That is why I would never engage in an exercise of rhetoric, but rather a *statement* that sinks its voice in the most orthodox of history, nor would I address speculative writing concerning those transgressor gestures that – obtuse and repellent – become a mere pose, in a distorted and fallacious grimace of what was wanted as a face.

In this particular sense, the work of Matallana dispenses a tranquil gaze over its medium and over its time. It does not shout; it does not need to. It prefers to opt for the whisper where other creators delight in redundant and speculative histrionics of noise. His arsenal of resources does not compete with that thirsty archaeology that is *acritical* concerning its own heritage and its reference. How much painting is out there, displayed in the main

shows and in the sacred places of art, which feeds its body on the *archaeological invasion* or on debunking canonical models that are exhausted because of so many revisions and de-constructions. Carlos, accepts the condition that embraces him, he celebrates the avoidance of the consecrations and the conceptual scaffoldings that have so often tested the intelligent in detriment to eloquence. Soon, quicker than you would think, history became perplexed by the scandalous celerity with which counter-cultures, the rebels against standards and one-time punishers, adapted to the *system* of art and culture. Hence proving, beyond all elusive and lateral possibility, the cynicism and the absorbent efficiency of that system that, at that time, was the target of insults and beatings that were more virtual than real. When an artist has learned/understood this, then you know that the more personal his voice, rather than the more subversive his impertinence, the more timely any kind of aesthetic operational device (of whatever kind) on the unfathomable perimeter of culture will be. It remains to be seen to what extent the liveliness of the scandal, of the voices and the arrogant discourses themselves had always considered that the *utopia* was not attained but it is comforting insofar as it reserves the right to the illusion. Thus, culture would have to be interrogated to realise the absurdity of understanding *the work* or *the voice* that whispers to him, as alternatives that distance themselves from the logic of the system. The odd recent scandal that came about from the rejection of the National Arts Prize, by an artist who was as cynical as he was vehement in his stances, stimulated understanding of the very ironies of the system and its projective caricatures, including that of the artist himself, who played God and, in that leisurely attempt at distension and ego, legitimated the voracity of the structures of consecration, although the pusillanimous or redeeming gesture also tested art's capacity of negotiation, its unquestionable possibility to establish social networks of communication and subversion, however much

the cyclic metaphysics institutionalises him, consecrates him and embargoes him in the long run in its attempt.

Carlos Matallana, unlike these revolutionary barricades, places himself in the space emanating from observation to distance. He knows the humour and the fallacy of repetitive stereotypes and nonetheless prefers the magnetisation of his work in the regular time of its own history, its history, not the history of somebody else, not the history of what we call contemporary, all too readily, without specifying the frequency of its enormous permutations and axiological madness. He seems to know, or at least his tranquillity shows him, that the negativity towards emancipating projects, the vehemence of the scandals or the terrible failure of modern utopias, no longer reveal anything to us. It no longer represents a place of finding for knowledge, but a place for the redundancy and egomaniacal bulimia of the artist that believes that he or she is above history. I do not think I am mistaken when I think that the *reactive gesture* is now one of the great blemishes or pathologies that intervene and determine the re-writing of history. In one sense, the opportunist reactions, the times of the Marseillaise and hippy boastfulness that found no efficient correlation in the order of consciences, make it impossible to determine the lewdness of a *Gnostic space*, with the accent of Lezam in which the language of art is realised as inventive and avidness. This would help us to think the aesthetic discourse in a less momentary way, perhaps a little less of a hypochondriac.

This, partially, seems to the desire of this artist who is not interested in the more or less articulated joke that describes the conversion of the real into a simulation. If art becomes clinical or abdicates in the face of the strength of an extreme sociologism seeking to discredit the document; Matallana, against the current of that dialectic and symptomatic optimism, prefers to try a whistle that may help to awaken the birds.

