

## From Resemblance to Resemblance

It can be said that Paco Bugallo –maybe Michael Foucault would put it this way- “builds his art with the archives.” An archive is usually an accumulation of dead things, but it can also be of things like the works of art in the museums, that thanks to the archives, manage to be saved from oblivion, and in a certain way be still alive. This “being alive” depends on human beings’ will, it depends on their wish, but not only: it has also something to do with the capability of certain objects to survive, to stand out among their neighbors in the archives, objects that have within themselves that mysterious power, as André Malraux would say, to have “ in our life, something that should belong to death.”

File images that are set up as treasures of the collective memory are the ones Bugallo chooses, to offer them to a contemporary vision and, layer upon layer, add other images to these, somewhat similar and somewhat different. But if rescue were the only reason for his work, it would not have a chance before massive reproduction.

The thorough search the artist undertakes has other meanings, although its seems intimately marked by failure, or maybe because it is doomed to a defeat that is always postponed, and this fate that seems to accompany the artist is what gives him his greatness. The undertaking could consist in formulating a question –if not the answer- that is very important for an artist: what is painting? Even though it has pigments and texture and colors and shapes, painting is not just that. And although it has themes and moral or philosophical or simply descriptive purposes it is none of that. And though it has a tangible corpus, it is not that tangible corpus; and though it has ideas (that “mental thing” Leonardo spoke about), it is not ideas.

From the concealed image and from the veils that cover the image; from the putting and rubbing off coats of paint; from the fragmentation and the enlargement, the question becomes a compelling and even obsessive one. It acquires the existential and in the end tragic dimension that Bugallo’s work has, by wanting to unveil painting from the painting itself. Because painting is unwilling to. The artist has created an imaginary museum with Leonardo, Raphael, Botticelli, Uccello, Velazquez, Ribera, Goya, David, Ingres, Gericault ... that is, today, Bugallo’s real work. He celebrates “the great art” that keeps moving us regardless of time and distances. It continues to be valid, it has reached perpetuity due to its power to provoke emotions and to remain in our memories and in our sensibility. Why and how this “great art” is

achieved is something we don't know and Bugallo doesn't say either. His is a spirited and talented attempt but it itself eliminates any possibility of success.

The artist's technical and formal procedure is a metaphor of the question he makes and for its lack of answer. As well as the painful fragmentation recurrent in his work speaks of a relentless questioning to painting so that, finally defeated, hands him his secret. The icon emerges clear and sharp and later, through the process, it fades and nearly disappears. There is only paint left, paint as a matter that is verifiable by sight and touch, the visibility that is the mystery of artistic creation. And at the same time, meaning springs out of this visibility. But Bugallo's painting doesn't end in the "interpictorial" (as we speak, in literature, of the "intertextual"). He also questions himself about divinity through its image. And just as painting is not the painted picture, divinity is not the religious image. Bugallo paints Christ, Virgin Mary, the Saints and the martyrs like the artists from the past painted them. He looks for the most dramatic moments, the paroxysm of pain, of sacrifice, of God's death for men: the Crucifixion, the Descent, the Pietá, as Luis Caballero did. But by being represented, the mystery of divinity does not become less mysterious. One must believe in God without having seen; in art, only after having seen.

For the last few years, Paco Bugallo has devoted himself to the creation of a vast pictorial installation based on Gericault's *The Raft of the Medusa*, a paradigmatic work of 19th century romanticism. This gigantic and overwhelming canvas surpasses the terrible episode of the shipwreck and the concealed intention of reporting corruption in the French government of the time for allowing an inexperienced sailor to guide the ship. Even when the circumstances and the details are forgotten, as well as the scandal; this work keeps all its expressive force, its dramatic dimension, since there is only tragedy left, tragedy in its pure state, without time or place, humankind's struggle for survival, their desperation and hope, Thanatos and Eros.

Gericault is one of those artists that take other paintings as a reference. We can say, just for the record, that he used to go to the morgue to study the corpses of drowned men, or that he made in his workshop a setting for his future painting (he had a raft made and asked his friends to pose as models in the positions he wanted). Apart from the realism achieved, we find in this painting, and in its atmosphere, the culture of painting: the bodies inspired by Michelangelo, the baroque movement of the composition, the wish to grant a profane scene, a terrible event with a total lack of heroism,

the dignity and the nobility of great religious art. Gericault is heir to the painting of the past, he gives new meanings to old forms, and thus he gives new life to them at the same time as he makes them perpetual. In this sense there are great similarities between Gericault and Bugallo, and between them and all the artists that approach themselves to painting through painting itself (more than through nature), and that save images from the archives and hand them to the present and sometimes to posterity.

Here, it is striking that Bugallo transforms into an installation a painting that, before it was a painting, was an "installation" avant la lettre in Gericault's shop. And although it may seem a bit farfetched, because of the differences in their style and their intentions, we could compare Bugallo's "Raft" with a crude and hyper-realistic reproduction of Gericault's painting, three-dimensional and containing waxworks, that is found in the Musée Grévin in Paris. In the latter, since only the topic was kept and that thing added to reality, that is, art, has disappeared, the horrific side of the event is what stands out, just as it would appear in a tabloid. On the other hand, in Bugallo's plastic reinterpretation this aspect has been eliminated from the painting, where all the circumstantial elements have been erased and substituted by the contrast between the black shapes and the green background, re-taking abstract painting. It is not about some shipwrecked people from the Medusa, but about humanity looking for its destiny. And at the same time, the gist of Bugallo's work is formulated again, that effort to define the added reality. Through these two different versions of Gericault's painting there has been a split between its anecdotal and its existential aspect, its documentary side and its artistic side. Bugallo is only interested in the existential and the artistic. And suffering cannot be absent: it is embodied in the hurtful fragmentation of the bodies on the wooden boards, boards that reminds us of those of a raft.

Gericault had developed a profane theme from the archetypal foundations of religious painting tradition. Now Bugallo gives the humanism of Gericault's work an aura of spirituality. Just as he takes some wooden board out of a dead tree to celebrate art's life, he makes of his installation a sort of diptych between desperation and hope. Behind the version of The Raft of the Medusa, where he has eliminated the brig that the rafters glimpsed as the symbol of their salvation, he puts an interpretation of Holbein's Dead Christ, going from the detail to the general. The metaphor seems clear: Christ is the true salvation. However, it is a Christ that has not resurrected yet, an inaccessible figure in its Byzantine golden halo, a piece of painted

wood in the end. The light of hope is also surrounded by the shadows of doubt.

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