

Bugallo and Painting as Humanistic Expression

The experience of the sublime, according to the romantic ideas of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, was obtained by man through the confrontation of the primary forces that go beyond the limits of nature; also in emotionally extreme situations, in natural phenomenon related to the notion of excess and infinity. The sublime, in Raymon Bayer's interpretation, "...is shown when we are in the face of certain powers that totally exceed our own strength; we feel humiliated, we are aware of our impotence (...) but we have a brain, which is absolute power of the noumeno and of the practice, and our moral conscience can oppose that oppressing natural force, even when it knows that it will be defeated; we are aware that the effort is in vain, here we will encounter the sublime. It is an instinct of self-preservation entirely different from the perceptible one; it wants to keep humanity: it is moral self-preservation in the middle of events."¹

In romantic painting, mainly in landscapes, we often find works that explore the concept of fear, of the terror man feels before the uncontrollable power of nature: characters looking out of steep cliffs, travelers in desolate, abandoned landscapes, landslides in the mountains, visions of terrible shipwrecks...Man's strife for survival against the dreadful forces of the rough sea is precisely the theme of many outstanding works by William Turner, and the tragic ending of this strife has been described by Caspar David Friedrich. However, there hasn't been an artist interested in the shipwreck theme who was able to express the notions that define the romantic spirit like Théodore Géricault did in his composition Raft of the Medusa.

Raft of the Medusa is probably the most genuine embodiment of the revolutionary spirit of French romantic painting. More acclaimed than rejected in its own time, this painting, representing an episode of real life that occurred in the time of its making², has reached today the category of a great master's work and is an artistic icon so widely known that doesn't need further introduction. However, we should mention here the eloquent and illustrating comments Hough Honour made about it: "In this painting the 'grand style' and the heroic scale reserved until then for great and heroic themes –stories from the Bible, the deeds of Greek and Roman heroes, military feats-, are used for the same time to represent the suffering of the common man. It is symptomatic that Géricault selected this particular episode of the shipwreck. He started by studying the different possible scenes: a riot on board, the survivors feeding themselves on the bodies of their dead mates, apart from very obvious moments like when the raft is left

adrift or the final rescue. But he discarded them all in favor of a theme of greater psychological tension and surprising ambiguity: the birth of false hopes when the survivors made out a distant vessel, unite their efforts to make signals, and are plunged in the deepest discouragement when it goes away (...) As the published reports about the shipwrecked show, the men in the raft were not heroes in any of the usual senses of the word. None of them showed Spartan courage or stoic cold blood: they all reacted as men do too often in moments of crisis, and if some survived it was because of a primitive and animal yearning for life. They suffered terribly, but not for a good or noble cause; they were the victims of corruption and incompetence, not of human or divine spite. By painting them that way, Géricault raised the episode of the shipwreck to a level of universal significance, making the viewers revise their ideas about eternal problems such as heroism, hope, despair and suffering, to which the artist provides an upsettingly ambiguous solution."³

This ambiguity is precisely what determines that the reading of the painting becomes imprecise, many-sided and plural. Géricault did not want to moralize or teach any value or principle in his work. But by choosing to represent the moment in which a number of human beings (anonymous, moreover) who see their lives compromised when they find themselves in an extreme situation, the painter managed to create, to give it a name, the most moving and disturbing allegory in the history of art of humanity defeated by the feeling of uncertainty before a tragic destiny.

Hieronymus Bosch, in *The Hay Cart*, creates also a symbol of humanity as something went astray, blind, conceited and set off to its own destruction; and Michelangelo (whose work influenced Géricault's and particularly his "Raft"), in his *Last Judgement* he present us with a humanity that is spiritually shocked for its inexorable encounter with an apocalyptic end. But both works, when dealing with the issue of human fate, carry within a teaching purpose of Christian content. *Raft of the Medusa*, on the other hand, doesn't have a moral purpose and leaves rhetoric aside to show us in realistic terms the representation of a humanity whose values, shattered by the self-preservation instinct have blown away to leave an empire of emotions and contradictory human manifestations: hope, despair; strength, weakness; life, death. The most primitive emotion, fear, is the guiding line that leads Géricault's characters to the barest exhibition of a devastating feeling of fragility, of abandonment, of doubt, that may evolve the most intense artistic expression known of what we could call existential "vertigo".

It is not surprising that Francisco Bugallo has felt particularly attracted by this work, to make it the object of his recreation in a work that, sustained in the pictorial expression, exceeds its discourse possibilities. This artist's plastic work has been always uplifted with a firm humanistic will that leads him to ask himself questions in an accentuated existentialist vein. This is already noticeable in the set of pieces presented in the Caracas Museum of Fine Arts (1985), where characters and objects from famous paintings from the past were seen out of their context, suspended in a neutral space, as if ghostly appearances about to hurl themselves to an abyss; and it is also clearly seen in the set of canvas of the exhibition in the Sofía Imber Museum of Contemporary Art in Caracas (1993), a painting exhibition whose theme, symbolic expression and plastic treatment, alluded to the issue of human anxiety generated by the idea of the end of our earthly existence. Like no other artistic creation, *Raft of the Medusa* offers Bugallo the ideal referential model that allows him to give a powerful expressive dimension to his own plastic discourse, that is, his most deep-rooted and important aesthetic concerns.

Francisco Bugallo, based on Géricault's work, conceived a pictorial installation made up by a series of significant elements that have among themselves a complex and intimate relation. The first is a set of boards where the "Raft" is recreated in different directions (this work's deeply spiritualized sense is announced by the very origin of these boards, made out of an enormous tree –symbol of life- dead long ago and recovered by the artist). The second is a great canvas in which he has recreated the painting of the French master in its original dimensions (491 x 717cm); and the third is a big board where he has reinterpreted Hans Holbein's *Dead Christ*.

The reading of the installation is opened by the set made of thirty-six boards; in these, Bugallo has recreated in oils and in the original scale, the characters of Géricault's "Raft" on boards arranged in two directions (horizontal and vertical) complemented by other pieces of wood painted with a mixed orientation. In these, the artist intensifies the dramatic expression and the exalted intention of the painting, creating a work of innovative spirit and really extraordinary visual impact and conceptual power. To achieve this, he resorts to the strategy of fragmentation, by virtue of which the human figures, as if pieces in a huge puzzle, appear segmented or divided on the surface with irregular edges offered by the boards. These have been mixed, separated and arranged in an unconventional way: by being placed on the floor of a big room, the images looking up and projected in different directions, the boards act as the distressing and disturbing metaphor of a

shipwreck, a horrific spectacle to which the spectator attends by walking through the floating remains of the ship and the people in it, that is, through pieces of wood and mutilated bodies. And by being placed vertically against the walls, or superposed on top of others, the boards look like gravestones and become an allegoric vision of humanity whose existential vertigo is conveyed by the images of men and their fragments that (like the condemned in Michelangelo's Last Judgement), describing vertiginous movements, look as if hurling themselves into an abyss. Because there no place to hold to in these images, which as a whole offer a symbolic representation of chaos, where the absence of a center, space dislocation and the subversion of all order in the composition, seem to mean the loss of unity and certainty for man (which opens a new relation between the works of Bugallo and Géricault, an artist, the latter, whose fascination for morbidity led him to paint still-lives made with amputated body parts)⁴.

In the next room, the raft with its helpless occupants (re-established now the image dispersed before) is seen in Bugallo's big canvas in monochrome dark shades with failing tints; the unit, a compact mass, is separated from its context –the sea bottom and the horizon-. As if it was a ghost ship, it floats adrift in a neutral plane, in an empty space, immeasurable and limitless, that can be associated with the experience of the sublime formulated by Kant. The agitated characters address their desperate gestures calling for attention to the void, putting their hopes in something of immaterial and invisible nature.

In the adjoining room, at the exact same height as the distant ship seen by the shipwrecked men in Géricault's painting should be, Bugallo has hung the board that recreates Holbein's Dead Christ. In it, Christ's effigy appears secularized, stripped of mystic connotations, a pitiful reclining image of the corpse of a common man. An image that, evoking what is called memento mortis, seems to warn as about the imminence of death, but without offering any hope or promise of redemption.

In this installation, the great human questions about the self, in regard of the ultimate meaning of existence and the wish for transcendence, seem to get nothing but doubt and uncertainty as an answer, the doubt and uncertainty felt in the disturbing contemplation of death. But by selecting the image of Christ as an icon of death and placing it in the space that corresponded to hope, Bugallo strengthens the connection between his work and another side of romantic aesthetics (we are talking about German painting) and opens a breach in the association of his work with that of

Caspar David Friedrich. In fact, in the canvas *Glacial Sea* (1823-24), also called *The shipwreck of the Hope*, Friedrich depicts the stranding of the ship called "Hope" in some glacial coasts. The great blocks of ice, spread out by the ship's impact (almost invisible) against the frozen waters, form, like the characters in *Raft of the Medusa*, a clearly recognizable pyramid. In the dramatic and devastating loneliness of Friedrich's snow landscape, an ice spire, at the top of the pyramid points to clearing a in a darkened sky: this bright space has been interpreted by some scholars⁵ as the symbol of the divine providence's manifestation in the middle of human distress (this idea is more clearly seen in many of this German artist's painting, especially in wild landscapes of steep mountains crowned by crosses). However, these ideas, like the reward of faith or the triumph of hope, are dealt, in the works of both artists, with enough ambiguity so that its definition turns out vague, ample and opened to all sorts of interpretations.

These interpretations, then, are left open in Francisco Bugallo's work, within the field of the great concerns inherent of man and his need to puzzle out the nature of his destiny. Thus, the artist has been able to build a bridge between the existentialist explorations of romanticism and contemporary plastic expression, proving that the great human questions, beyond trends and independently of time, will always offer valid material for artistic creation. And he has managed to prove also that a true artist, even if he is consistent in the use of a traditional means, can produce a work of experimental and renewing spirit and effective communicative effect, expanding the discourse possibilities of the language used and generating a plastic experience that is multiple, ambitious and complete, but, above all, genuine and exceptionally moving: conditions that are more than enough to confirm Francisco Bugallo as one of our most talented, clever and genuine contemporary artists.

Adolfo Wilson

1. Raymond Bayer, *Historia de la estética*, Fondo de Cultura Económica, México D.F., 1965, p.212.

2. The painting, made between 1818 and 1819, represents the raft with the only fifteen survivors left of the shipwreck of the frigate *La Méduse*, who suffered the terrible consequences of revolts, assassinations and even cannibalism before being rescued, in an event that caused great scandal since the government was accused to make an incompetent man captain of the ship, because of political loyalty to the Bourbons.

3. Hugh Honour, *El romanticismo*, Alianza Editorial S.A., Madrid, 1981, pp.42 y 43.

4. Charles Rosen and Henry Zerner, *Romanticismo y Realismo*, Hermann Blume, Madrid, 1988, pp. 56 and 58.

5. Caspar David Friedrich, (Catalog), Museo del Prado, Madrid, p.216.