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The Wood and the Trees

There are, indeed, moments in which we cannot see the wood for the trees. This proverb does not just apply to the contemplation of nature, but also to its transformation into art: it is more than pure coincidence that nature has inspired an entire independent pictorial form — that of landscape painting.

As backdrops, landscapes have a long history, but the genre was not able to shake off its subordinate role until well into the seventeenth century (and even then, it was only relatively successful in doing so). The problem lay in that nature itself — and consequently its artistic vision — provoked apprehension and suspicion if it was not humanized in some way. It was only when humanity's horizons broadened to take on not just planetary but cosmic dimensions that we realized the need to clear our view of that which belittled it: our fears and their corresponding legacy of prejudices. In this sense, landscape painting as a genre has only been fully validated in recent times, when it has been possible to contemplate nature without, let's say, being seen. This revelation continues to be a growing challenge even today, with no end in sight.

We must begin with these — tightly synthetic — considerations if we wish to take on the project presented to us by José Manuel Ballester. In the first instance, he seeks to “purge” all human anecdotes from historical landscape painting, but he also wants to alter the established visual order of things, inverting the hierarchy, giving priority to that which has traditionally been considered “background”.

But is that where it ends? In simply switching a figure or the foreground to the back via landscape? Is this the question Ballester poses us? Or could there also be more in the fact that he draws upon examples of historical art chosen, moreover, from amongst the many excellent paintings offered by the Prado Museum? This last point, in any case, complicates things beyond the simple fact of being this or that museum. The complication comes from this new element for us to consider: that of the cultural institution as landscape, as our backdrop, as that which is behind us. In one way or another, the artists of our times have never forgotten this perspective, be it as a support or a hindrance. This is why the so-called historicist or “revivalist” art movement was prevalent in the nineteenth century but also why, from the beginning of the following century, irony set in, marking the starting point of pastiche which was heralded by Duchamp's “masculating” gesture when he painted a moustache on the Mona Lisa. This same irony — albeit with more coldness and critical distance — is present in the work of an abundance of artists of our age, the so-called postmodern period. Thus they seek to approximate art history and with it, its secularized temples, the museums, either in order to reconstruct our old masterpieces in the form of parody with a whole host of intentions, or else to focus attention on those who visit these temples: the public.

Both these cases imply “subversive” points of view on that which is considered the normal or normalized way of relating to a work of art or a museum. This is not merely to question their paralyzing inertia, but also, ultimately, to “re-make” them. This is the principle behind Ballester's “clarifying” analyses of the Prado's famous paintings; in each case his dominant strategy or the script of his investigation has been to clear the canvases of human figures and their impoverished and afflicted actions, leaving us with just the backdrops formed by their respective landscapes.

Has Ballester taken on this task simply to draw our attention to the importance of landscape — which has taken centuries to emancipate itself — and to show us its genuine uninterrupted face? Is it, therefore, the retrospective vindication of that which is “covered” or almost hidden? Although this may be a factor, it is of course not the only

one and, I would venture, it is not the most relevant. Perhaps the key lies in the only painting analyzed by Ballester which is not in the Prado and which does not have a landscape as a background. I'm referring to *The Allegory of Painting* by Johannes Vermeer (Delft, 1632-1675), believed to have been painted around 1665-1666 and which is currently conserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Significantly, the only landscape painted by the Dutch maestro (specialist in interiors) was the now extremely well-known panoramic view of his town of birth, completely devoid of figures which Ballester, in line with his method of inversion, should have populated rather than depopulated. It is not that *The Allegory of Painting* is excessively populated — in fact, it contains only two animate figures: one is a self-portrait of the artist from behind, and the other is a young girl wearing a laurel crown who carries a trumpet in her right hand and a thick book in her left. In spite of her *verista* adolescent appearance as if she were lounging about the house, she is an allegorical figure — that of Clio, the Muse of History. These two figures compose a scene which shows us how the painter strives to represent the effigy of that which was still considered at that time to be the incarnation of a principal theme in painting: History — a theme L. B. Alberti had already identified as being of maximum importance to an artist. In any case, the painting's figurative overflowing trousseau is exhaustive; through the piles of various objects, almost all on a table, we recognize all the other art forms: a plaster mask denotes sculpture; an open book, the printing press; a tapestry, craftsmanship; the trumpet of fame, music; the very interior of the building, architecture... All of which leaves little room for surprise at the fact that the whole painting has been interpreted not just as the representation of all the arts, but also as demonstrating the competition between art forms, a contest which painting wins hands down. Shedding a little more light on the issue, we know that Vermeer painted this composition whilst he happened to be head of the Guild of Saint Luke in his town, the institution to which he subsequently donated the work in homage. Moreover, Vermeer experts never tire of reiterating the irony of his celebrating the superiority of painting with a composition that examines a discipline traditionally considered to be superior — History. The artist does all this in the context of a bourgeois interior, a realist domestic scene in a place full of quotidian implements, whatever their symbolic transcendence might be. In a certain way, all this paraphernalia is subsumed by what was the modest essence of all Vermeer's paintings: silent domestic scenes of Dutch daily life of his era, but above all, animated by what for him was always the substance of the art of painting — light and its effects.

Through these observations on Vermeer's painting we have not simply described and interpreted the work; we have finally reached that which for the Dutch maestro constituted the luminous heart of painting. We must emphasize this for its own sake, but also because it reveals how the "cleaning" operation — here undertaken by Ballester — leaves us with an interior scene whose only protagonist is light. Light, whose "exterior" importance, when considering a landscape, is self-evident. In this way, in order to shed light on the meaning of the exterior, Ballester uses an interior: for that which is distant, examine that which is close; for nature, look to history; for public history, recur to private lives.

Ballester's proposal is, therefore, a complex one — as has been his whole career. A few observations regarding the latter would not go amiss at this point, to illuminate the issues we are examining. Ballester's first steps as an artist were along the path we know as realist art. He won particular critical appreciation in this field, which hailed a bright future. Nevertheless, he soon showed glimpses of challenging himself in the only way one can, that is, by looking for "complications". This is best illustrated through the vast

and dangerous world of graphic art in which an artist can become mired if he contents himself with mere artisan virtuosity. Ballester did not, but rather he set upon exploring other horizons, such as photography. Neither did he bat an eyelid when it came to confronting other physical and anthropological landscapes, like the now dizzyingly metamorphosing China. In brief, and without providing an exhaustive list of Ballester's experiments and investigations, it is clear that he has never stopped questioning both his own personal potential and that of his art. In this sense, I don't believe that Ballester's career to date can be resumed as that of, for example, a painter's transition to photographer, but rather as his determination to give free rein to his artistic concerns through the experiences, media, and techniques he has deemed necessary. In reality, Ballester has not and does not merely jump from one stage to the next, but has voluntarily woven together perspectives and papers in such a way that he thinks of painting via photography, and vice versa. And is there not something here that reminds us of the astute way in which Vermeer proposed his elegy to the art of painting via the subtle negation of that which was traditionally considered its ideal regulation?

In any case, in the light of this clarification of principles, let us return to the "theme" of his current exhibition — the distillation of the Prado Museum's collections, amongst which we find half a dozen famous landscape paintings that have been "interfered with", that is, paintings which were not fully realized until Ballester transformed them. The selection of works he has made to this end is significant in itself; his incisive chronological notes centre on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which were crucial periods precisely in the history of landscape painting as a genre. Neither can we overlook the fact that his artists are all from the Netherlands and Italy, responsible for the modernization of painting and of landscape painting as a genre. The only exception is the inclusion of Claude Lorraine from Lorraine who nonetheless became a painter and spent his entire artistic career in Rome.

If these paintings are analyzed together, comparing each with the others, it is not difficult to see that each one proposes not just all the successive perspectives of depth, but also those of differing composition and height. They offer us a very wide range of formal and symbolic narrative prototypes. Finally, and above all, they show us very different forms of the impact of light. See for example the altarpiece *The Annunciation* by Fra Angelico, tempera on wooden panel, dating from around 1425-1428, in which the central drama — that of the mystery of the Annunciation — unfolds under a portico in the Virgin Mary's rooms, taking up three quarters of the foreground. This leaves the rest of the panel to accommodate the leafy Garden of Paradise, from which Adam and Eva have just been expelled. However, underneath in what is called the predella, there are a succession of five small vignettes that represent in turn Mary's Birth, her Wedding, the Visitation, the Purification, the Epiphany and the Dormition of the Virgin with Christ receiving her soul. So, once all the figures are removed, we discover a rich and varied ensemble of spaces stained with light. And what about *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch, an oil-on-wood triptych dated from around 1500? Its outer wings, when folded shut, show us a grisaille painting of the third day of Creation, contrasting its ashen appearance with the garish chromatism of its three internal panels. If there is a vivid contrast between the grey cover and the three panels of the triptych — as far as colours are concerned, the effect is duplicated not just by the multitude populating the luxurious central garden, but also by the thousand entanglements around the naked crowds in their fraught pursuit of the most sought-after pleasures. It is, indeed a garish, populous and above all deafening composition, as Bosch himself attests. In the scene depicting the infernal drain of the mob who have not lived for anything more than simply seeking sensual pleasure, the artist conceives of

musical noise as the worst of torments. When Ballester clears this congested field he of course reveals the masterful quality and originality of Bosch's landscape. But, more than that, by cleaning and unifying the atmosphere of the whole, we see delicate green, blue and saffron tones, an exclusively organic twilight, whilst in Hell it is barely nightfall in order to create shadowy force. Fra Angelico and Bosch are relatively antithetical, but both come close to Sandro Botticelli's work *The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti*, composition painted in 1483 in four panels. Three of these panels are conserved in the Prado Museum, and they all feature a perfect midday light, timeless light, and consequently light without drama. Botticelli's panels are horizontal in format and they develop, in sequential narrative order, the pivotal moments of the chosen story as recounted in the eighth book of the fifth day of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. The picture, once divested its anecdotal tragedy, reveals itself as a pleasant landscape scene of a Mediterranean pine forest, in which Ballester has only conserved the remains of what looks like a frenzied banquet. In this transformatory operation, the upright trees become the protagonists of the scene, but in such a way as to geometrize the space with crystalline clarity.

But can a real landscape exist without a light barred with shadows, that is, a landscape free from the dictates of Time, free from the sun converted into Nature's watch? Only a few years later (although well into the sixteenth century) the Flemish painter Joachim Patinir gives us a reply in the form of scenes of luminous dramatism in *The Rest on the Flight from Egypt*, a work dated around 1515 and 1519. This painting represents a masterful synthesis of peaceful rural life, hinting at a kind of shadowy vegetation and more than one distant danger which nonetheless do not interrupt the peaceful act taking place in the foreground: the Virgin suckling her divine child. Here, once again, Ballester leaves us with all the elements of this rustic landscape, unjarred by the saddlebag, the pumpkin and the basket carelessly left at the foot of a tree. However, he has not taken the trouble to suppress the only disturbing element, that of a stone sphere upon which rests a golden foot, the only remains of that which must have been a mutilated pagan statue. Of even greater importance is the dramatic effect of the light, which is not just daylight but also seasonal, is offered to us by a painting by Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Younger. He painted *Winter Landscape*, almost certainly inspired by similar work by his father, but from the period when he also followed in the footsteps of other Dutch landscape painters from the seventeenth century. In any case, the sudden absence of ice-skaters on the frozen surface of the river serves to increase the physical sensation of winter cold and desolation.

The landscape painting which rounds off this collection is one which Claude Lorrain painted around 1639-1640, entitled *Landscape with the Embarkment of Saint Paula Romana into Ostia*, with a vertical format of 211 x 145 cm. Its low dawn light, multiplied by aquatic refraction, dazzles us from the background, converting the mouth of the Roman port in an impressively backlit scene — intense with romantic dramatism — which shines with even greater power as it spreads over the painstakingly depicted architectural scene, held up by crystalline blocks of stone.

But ultimately, how should we take on board this chronicle of the temporalization of both landscapes and painting via light, just as Ballester proposes it through his disfiguring manipulation of various historical masterpieces? I believe that we should see it as a meditation on art, whose reflections are still effective today, just as is revealed through Ballester's vision, through the eyes of the man who prints the mysteries of light.