

Engagement and Visual Intelligence in the Work of Josep Maria Cabané

In recent years, Josep Maria Cabané has focussed his pictorial practice, complemented by installation work, on the extremes of human barbarity. Through his focus on the scientific industrialization of death, which found its maximum expression in fascism, Cabané has strived not so much to offer a new version of the facts, but to concentrate on questions such as violence, suffering and forgetfulness through the painting surface. In effect, his contribution to the question of the representation of systematized death is grounded on the will to reflect on tragedy and destruction through the language of painting. These are paintings, not essays or proclamations; they are intelligent paintings. The results are moving, and of extraordinary beauty, something that is made even sharper and more painfully poignant in contrast to the horrors they refer to.

What Cabané has taken on cannot be considered an easy task. It is not simply a question of overcoming the difficulties of an ethical nature in having art coincide with tragic facts (ethics requires expressions that are not frivolous or vulgar when in proximity to a tomb, for example). The qualms about poeticizing horror that were articulated after the Second World War still mark our path, in part due to the difficulty of being up to the facts when striving to reflect upon them (aesthetics demands being a good artist when faced with facts that require good art, a simple yet necessary requirement that is at the same time rather absurd in its obviousness). Yet ethics has another face, since it also involves giving voice and visibility to the forgotten, so as to resist the loss of memory and battle against ideological perversion from the field of representation.

J. M. Cabané negotiates this slippery terrain with skill and security. Without thinking in heroic terms, I place great value on his ambition and daring as a creator, and his insistence on dealing via his creative reality with subjects the majority of creators would prefer to avoid.

With the great number of works he has produced since his visit to the Mauthausen concentration camp a few years ago, it is interesting to observe how Cabané tenses the cord between the portrayal of a specific face – his artistic background is firmly set in portraiture – and the visualization of suffering from a distance, which does not for that reason end up being less appropriate. There is a clearly pictorial sense that could be derived from this bird's eye cartography, given that it recalls for us the two-dimensional reality of the canvas. Painting or map, canvas or cartographic guide. The camps and ghettos (which are essentially urban concentration camps that prefigure death) emerge as monochromatic emblems, as tonally differentiated works that aid us in distinguishing between what is inside and out, what is closed up and free, between “us” and “them”, between those who have been designated for death and others who have not. The series on the Warsaw ghetto, with a form denoting its borders that he repeats insistently, like a hammering memory, and the new series of almost “suprematist” works (a very appropriate term) that represent the cartographic limits of other ghettos created by the Nazis, stand out for their visual impact, for the virtually abstract contrast of tone and shape,

and for the intriguing paradoxes they set up between a distant gaze and the horror they refer to.

This is a body of work of extraordinary merit, as I have insisted, certainly one of the most outstanding artistic projects I have come across in recent years. J. M. Cabané's art is a necessary point of reference for present-day pictorial practice, and a fundamental lesson in the engagement of the contemporary artist with the tragedies, inflicted by humans on other humans, that have left their indelible mark on our time.

Jeffrey Swartz, 2009