

## The Sensitivity of Memory

Intuitions without concepts are blind,  
concepts without intuitions are empty.

(Kant, posthumous writings)

The work of Josep Maria Cabané exhibited in *Paintings against Oblivion* forms part of a long pictorial project related to the Nazi extermination and the Spanish Civil War. As the title of the exhibition indicates, the artist's commitment in terms of these major events from our past takes on the attitude of resistance, resistance to oblivion.

Let us examine some works. We will see that two recurrent and complementary actions come into conflict: the representation and the violation of signs. In *Erasure* (2005), the outline of the map of the Warsaw ghetto, delimited with chalk on a blackboard, has been blurred by the artist's hand. In the polyptychs of ghettos such as *Krakow*, *Minsk*, *Riga* or *Vilnius* (all from 2008), which demarcate the inside of these detention centres in black on a white background, the surface is completely cracked by punching, which has lifted off fragments of paint, slightly exposing the canvas. In *The Front*, a long sinuous split in the sackcloth marks the topographic outline of the two enemy fronts in the Battle of the Ebro.

If we look at the first of these actions, the representation of signs, we cannot but notice that the opaque quality of the maps and of the proper names that mediate between the historical events and their recovery exudes the artist's respect and honesty. Respect, because he consciously avoids the presumed transparency of the mimetic representation, thereby eluding its spectacular effects and sentimentalism. Possible misunderstandings are averted related with the trivialisation of evil and the aestheticisation of horror, which could be pertinent in other contexts but that here would rather betray a mythologizing attitude towards the Holocaust or an unsustainable aesthetic Puritanism. Honesty, because this mediation, this insuperable distance, recalls that Cabané's access to the historical events is specifically through the sign, whether topographic or linguistic, rather than personal experience.

This initial obtuse nature of the sign provides the necessary thematic and inevitable twist to the work of an artist who cannot call on his personal experience of barbarism. It makes it possible to overcome the problem of creating and disseminating an image of pain – a theme which would become doubly impertinent in this context – and force an approach to the equally urgent problem of confronting oblivion. This confrontation, this open cause, is conducted in the first place by the signs represented, which generate a new work while obliging us to recover testimonies of the events. Herein lies the struggle against amnesia: obliging ourselves, if we wish to go beyond the density of the signs, to reconstruct those early testimonies, those original and painful experiences that give meaning to the maps, to the outlines of the ghettos, the names, the border lines. Only by using historiography and memory of the individuals is it possible to identify the specific background of each work. Thus, as images with diverse levels,

when they activate our memory they become cultural resistance to the, all too often deliberate and institutionalised, forgetfulness of our society.

However, Cabané's work is an artistic work against oblivion because memory is mainly activated artistically. The evolution that has led the artist to the works exhibited involves the rejection of figurative pictorial techniques, aware that all refined gestures are closely related to the assimilation of knowledge, and all knowledge is determined by an ideology. Awareness, therefore, of misusing the techniques that the painter has mastered has led him to take risks, to seek out his own specific gestures for this project. These gestures are manifested in the pounding of the canvas, the smudging of the oil, the tearing of the sackcloth and the battering of the wood, making the meaning of the work fly off in diverse directions.

*Lager III* (2006) outlines the map of the now vanished Ebensee concentration camp. The topographic signs of the map, such as elevation marks, buildings, boundaries and roads have not been drawn but scratched with an engraver's punch on the black background. The map, rather than the place, is asserted here as the only material of memory, which attempts to resist the black invasion of an amnesiac present that seeks to move on. Moreover, the work has been pounded and scratched, its points skimmed, the paint cracked. These are the effects of a decanted anger transmitting an inner subjective pain that, far from showing individual horror, produces an empathy with the pain inflicted on humanity by the barbarity in Nazi camps such as Ebensee.

The work *The Names of Oblivion II* (2007) offers a glimpse of the names of Republicans who were victims of Nazism, names that have been crossed out, erased, rewritten and then smudged, or which have vanished under the cracking caused by punches. Here too the violation of the sign gives way to diverse meanings: it can make us deepen our awareness of these people's pain, it can denounce the repression of the past that is still imposed in the Spanish state or it can make us feel the impotence of the individuals in recovering memory.

When an image – artistic or otherwise – illustrates an idea or events that we know about, the content takes on a sensitive form. Moreover, naturally for us, the image becomes a good tool for remembering or even for a better understanding of the concepts it represents – given that all knowledge is blind without sensitivity. But when an image does not use the conventional paths of artistic languages, neither does it illustrate the conventional paths of thought. The aesthetic strength of the work thus leads the viewer from sensitivity to understanding and enriches the intelligible contents with new nuances and new ideas; and the intellectual enrichment returns the viewer to the sensitive image, which now appears with even more qualities and more vigour. Kant calls this virtuous circle of experience aesthetic reflection and the image it generates, aesthetic idea, which consists of “a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking, though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible” (Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, §49).

Cabané's painting undoubtedly possesses this aesthetic strength through which the painful events of the past he compels us to confront take on new meanings. If we have

quoted Kant in this context it is because the philosopher, in the context of aesthetic reflection, repeats over and over again that, when we achieve an experience such as this, an aesthetic experience, when we enrich our understanding of the world based on sensitivity, a veritable aesthetic pleasure emerges. This pleasure is not recreated in sensations, in colours or forms of the image, but rather emerges from the vivification of the faculties of knowledge and feeling at the same time and, eventually, of an awakening of our moral consciousness. Consequently, the fact that Cabané's work thematises an extreme tragic past not only makes it possible to learn from it but impels us morally to do so.

Thus, those who, after extensively exploring Cabané's pictorial work, have emotionally imbued their knowledge with such devastating chapters as the Nazi extermination and the Spanish Civil War, who have enriched their ideas about human nature and their own past, should not conceal their aesthetic pleasure. In this artistic work, this will be a sign of participating in an act of collective memory. Only when, through our subjectivity, we give heartfelt and renewed voices to the victims and witnesses of barbarity can memory begin to resist oblivion.

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