

Josep M. Cabané: *Project Memory and Blindness: K. L. Ebensee and Other Paintings*

H Associació per a les Arts Contemporànies

Sala H, Vic

24th March to 7th May 2006

Within the cycle *When Ends Meet* curated by Jeffrey Swartz, the Sala H in Vic presented the exhibition “K.L. Ebensee and Other Paintings”, which forms part of the project *Memory and Blindness* by the artist Josep Maria Cabané on the memory of Nazi extermination and its depiction. Cabané has been working for some years on the issue of memory based on a major 20th century event that constitutes a turning point in the manifestation of evil in the human condition. He addresses the different essential aspects of this fundamental episode: its place in time, and the treatment and relevance of its remembrance as a document and monument necessary to approach it morally and politically today. We expressly use the word monument because if genocide needed spaces and architectures for its achievement, assimilation, denunciation and appropriation by victims and humankind, it also requires an architecture of memory which is legitimate and subtle and yet determined and persistent in order to dismantle that ominous cruelty not only physically but also symbolically.

Cabané’s visit to the site of Ebensee camp (a satellite camp of Mauthausen, in Austria) was a key experience for him. He had a shocking realisation there: almost all traces of the camp had vanished and the area had been developed into a comfortable suburb. Based on this manifestation of erasing and negation, Cabané radically changed his pictorial work, orienting it towards a profound and difficult search, in which silence must be overcome without falling into the dangers of aestheticism and sentimentalism. The issue on which Cabané focuses is intense and complex, with the risky ambition which contemporary art often lacks, facing fundamental problems of the human condition and also a very precise and specific event, which has been and must be addressed from many perspectives other than art. However, here, he coincides with other experiences that have marked an interesting evolution in some fields of art, with concerns that go far beyond a certain easy and apparently critical yet inoperative sociologism, and in which history, in the strict sense of the term, is the core of reflection. We are thinking, of course, of the great work developed by Francesc Abad with the Camp de la Bota, the site of Francoist summary executions. The success of the recently held conference on art and memory at Can Xalant are further evidence of this trend.

The singularity and value of Cabanés’ work lies in the use and analysis of the expressive principles – i.e. to explain, to represent – faced with an extreme episode of history: finding a way of expressing what seems to be beyond the reach of language, while denouncing and emphasising the process of erasing the physical and the imaginary which, deliberately or carelessly, can occur in a scenario such as Ebensee. Thus, visually Cabané studies the idea of absence and permanence, of dissolution and persistence, of annihilation and strange survival, a void, a negative, of the pain of the living, like something that exists and that the conscience can and must recover just by listening or seeing through apparently evanescent strokes but where some traces remain with poignant irrelevance.

Cabané had already presented the installation *Anamnesis*, at La Interior Bodega (an exhibition space in the district of El Raval, Barcelona), with a piece that recalled Boltanski because of the use of heaps of clothes as a reference to absent bodies. However, the effect was quite different and sought, with both modesty and efficacy, a dramatic, emotional and symbolic effect. To a certain extent, Cabané seeks to make memory emerge, surface, through what it possesses of the concrete and universal. The pieces exhibited in Vic mainly deal with this ambivalence between erasing and persistence. The map of the Warsaw ghetto, which 270,000 Jews left to go to Treblinka, appears through subtraction, as a white shadow (*The Warsaw Ghetto*, 2005). Deceptively, it may seem to be a formalist abstract structure or any town development map, but something disturbs us, asks to be explained and exposed, creating a tension that will lend the image real strength when it is mentally revealed to us, like a photograph being developed. The cracking of the plaster, prepared according to the most traditional priming techniques of medieval and Renaissance painting, which was the basis for all images, evokes the wound and the ruin.

Cabané is searching, with a paradoxical use of the visual resources of destruction and dissolution, the manifestation and establishment of archetypical images. The 186 steps of the staircase in the Mauthausen quarry, constructed by the Spanish Republican prisoners and up which prisoners of all kinds carried the stones on their backs, according to the cruellest version of the absurdity of Sisyphus' punishment, become graphically emblematic (*Todesstiege I*, 2005). The *Caput Mortuum* (2005) series is the representation of death based on the head of a corpse and the funereal connotations of the name given to the purple colour of iron oxide. Death takes on a generic presence here. These works are in some cases disturbing and in others disconcerting and almost lyrical. Memory is an ideological construct involving emotion. Cabané knows this, takes sides and acts.

Àlex Mitrani