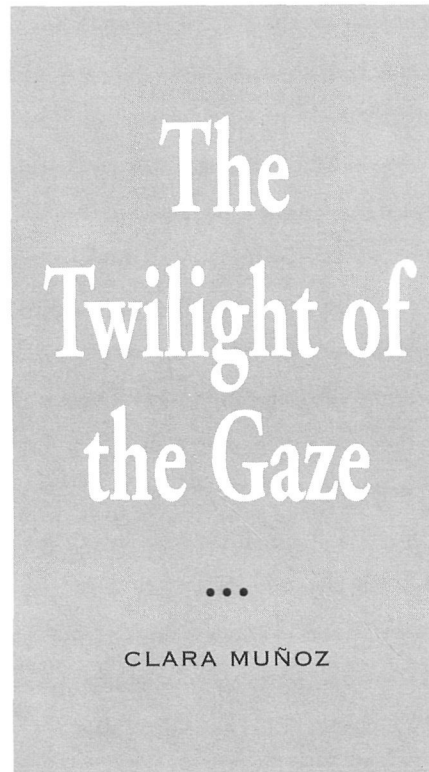


We are faced with a crisis of ideology and with what is commonly referred to as the end of modernity: revolution is at this point unthinkable; we co-exist with production systems that we know are polluting and degrading the environment: all this has combined to produce a condition of emptiness. In response, and as a consequence of the need for change, a parallel series of attitudes have arisen that are characterized by the lack of a common world view. Nevertheless, an observably large portion of society needs to put its faith in something, and thus sets its sights on the search for an identity that might be classified as regional or local (in contrast to the universality advocated since the advent of “modernism”).

On the other hand, the sector with more critical aspirations has been equally incapable of providing a *response to this contradictory situation*, a situation that to some degree resembles a crossroads. In this sector a resurgence of ironic attitudes can be noted, yet it is a form of irony that does not venture beyond the new repository refuges of collective faith: for instance, the body itself as the only remaining certainty and the recipient of all kinds of narcissistic treatment under the guise of personal expression (if not cultural phenomena); the news media, information systems and means of expression in which the act of



communicating takes precedence over that which is communicated; family and tradition as the trustees of a yearned-for identity; consumption, even of existence and information; indifference to the propagandistic power wielded by the increasingly distant and inaccessible communications media.

Néstor Torrens is an artist capable of offering a critical response to this situation, capable of putting the crisis in crisis and of adopting an irreverent attitude in the face of these new depositories of values and beliefs; yet he does not fail to provide an alternative. The aesthetic and ethical results thus acquire a raw power rarely found in the work of other artists; they are remote from all redemptive mysticism and

outline a situation that is unprotected, uprooted and — why not say it? — desperate.

The subjects taken on by Néstor Torrens’s work fashion a diagram of an approach to man and to man’s relation to society. They range from shy intimacy (primarily located in the sexual organs) to the family and religious traditions at their peak; they even extend to the paradoxical relation established between man as a component of society and individualized, jagged man as a component of power. Mankind — and in particular the body — is the constant here, revealed by presence as well as by absence, by means of objects or the simple act of photographing and framing. The body as prisoner of desire and suffering and rejection, the body adorned for seduction and for the manipulation of other bodies intended for the satisfaction of those who find the object of all vanity — i.e., power — in this corporeal control.

The void of content that affects traditional religions (which are increasingly reclaimed by social groups in search of a redeeming identity) converts these “cultural” manifestations into plastic, decontextualized spectacles of the social, economic and political conditions which created it. In the 1991 work *Alfombras para pecadoras* (“Carpets for Sinful Women”) Néstor Torrens furnishes this religious manifestation with perverse and

masochistic content; he links the schizophrenia of our society, where sordidness has been accepted as an inherent value, with our own species of double life that is fostered by the mass-media.

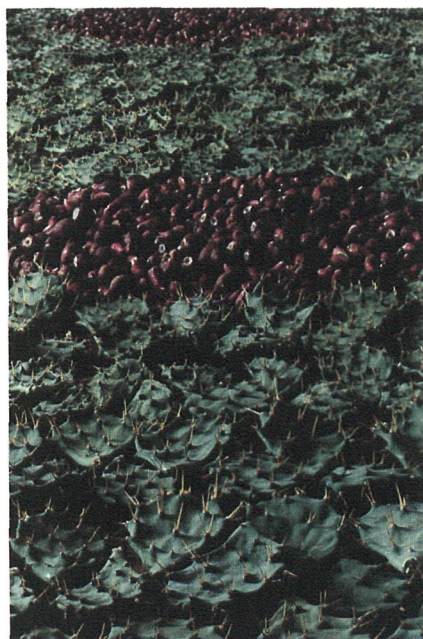
The work is a carpet similar to those fabricated from flowers for the Corpus Christi processions of the holy images in places such as La Orotava, Tacoronte and La Laguna on the island of Tenerife. In this case, however, it is fabricated from fleshy cactus leaves, complete with needles and spines; any fetishist would be filled with satisfaction watching the bloody feet of women who had succumbed to the pleasures of the flesh as they pass over this carpet.

Subjects relating to suffering, pleasure, enjoyment or delight are linked to the body and its organs. Far from being identified with machinery, the body at this point designates our identity. It can be exhibited nude at the beach or on television without anyone blushing. We can see it fragmented or enlarged now that popular, quotidian culture has incorporated liberation, pleasure and sex itself.

“After seeing an exhibition of Thomas Ruff — the one with the large portraits — I had the idea of doing the same thing with the pricks of my friends, as if they were portraits taken in a photo-booth,” Néstor Torrens said about his exhibition *La mirada incómoda* (“The Uncomfortable Look”), which was held in 1992 at the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Santa Cruz de Tenerife.

“Pornography ordinarily

represents sex and turns it into an immobile object (i.e. a fetish), laden with incense like a god that remains in its vaulted niche” [1]. The act of examining a hyperrealist sexual image has always (or almost always) aimed at the consubstantial sensations of



Néstor Torrens, *Alfombras para pecadoras*, 1991.

excitation, pleasure or mere curiosity. Seeing the close-up penises of Néstor Torrens’s series *La mirada incómoda* produces every type of reaction except the usual one; we are accustomed to dealing with the subject complacently, as in the communications media, advertising and even in the work of some artists. This has reached such a degree that our current society even takes the display of a virile penis in “hard-core sex” as something less than scandalous. The iconic representation of the phallus has been treated as a practice that provides liberation from socio-cultural prejudices. But what

becomes shameful in this type of work is showing a naked man who is normal, who is not physically attractive, who is understood to be incapable of offering sexual stimulation through mere contemplation.

On this occasion Torrens has chosen to work with the body as the base of a system of signs and representational schemes related to the masculine sexual condition, ironically commenting on relationships, love and his own identity. In an age such as our own, where “your body is yourself, and you exist to care for it, to love it and to exhibit it” [2], Néstor Torrens presents us with a vision of the body which ceases to be a source of hedonistic gratification, in order to thus recognize its authentic painful nature. There is an attitude of provocation in exhibiting this unpopular anatomical parcel, knowing at the same time that he is wounding male narcissism. Given that ours is an age of body worship, the humiliation is increased by the fact that the spectator has been encouraged to look on a selection of the most visually erogenous zones without any intention of arousing the spectator’s libido.

“The principle teledetecting sexual activity is exercised through the sense of sight, which is keenly sensitized to erotic functions” [3]. Néstor Torrens is interested in photographic voyeurism because it powerfully implicates the watcher into a compromising relation with the act of watching. The semi-obstructed images of masculine sex incite the spectator to discover what is

being hidden. Néstor himself tells us that “in order to add irony to the taboos and secrets that surround sex (and the image of masculine sex), obstacles were positioned so as to impede a clear vision of the photos”.

The analytic selectivity used in the staging allows him to guide the spectator’s sightlines, inciting him to participate but blocking his fantasy, “subjected to the imposition of what has been imagined and visualized beforehand by others” [4]. The obstructive techniques are indeed effective, keeping in mind that his public is favorably disposed toward examining the works. Torrens maintains his tactic of implicating the will and the senses, such as the sense of smell, which has atrophied in our society but still serves as a prime resource in reinforcing this determined demythification process. Human sex (as is the case with other mammals) releases a special odor. The ironic and metaphorical character of the work is evidenced by the similarity it draws between virility and the smell of fish. We could not be further from the mass-media advertisements for cologne in which majestic, Mapplethorpe-style bodies serve up a “lite” sexuality that releases the aroma of flowers.

Néstor Torrens uses the body not only to show the less pleasant side of virility and masculine sexuality, but also as a territory where doubts arise and displeasure, impulse and desire flourish. A body that falls ill, suffers, argues, discusses and enters into relations with other bodies. But the man who is

incapable of living alone with his own body feels the need to belong to groups that shelter him, such as the family, the neighborhood, work, school, the city, the political party, the club...Octavio Paz tells us that “the sense of belonging to this or that collective reality predates the name and the idea: first we belong to a family, later we know that family’s name. Later still we arrive at a vague understanding of what family means and what a family is” [5]. In *Círculo Familiar* (“Familiar Circle”) Néstor Torrens speaks of this institution, this nucleus that is the origin of the clan, of the tribe, of the nation and of society itself. He exhibited the work in the second Bienal Fotonoviembre in Tenerife in 1993, showing family photos and photos taken of friends during parties and trips.

We might think that the people who make up this circle possess certain things in common, rules or behavioral patterns or values that identify them and even serve as a secret code that they all know without having to give it a name. His family (or our own, or any family) represents the primary unit of power, the site where power is born and is transmitted; power on the small scale, the transmitter of sexual and social roles, of religious beliefs, of social conduct. Néstor situates all this, photographed and perfectly framed, in a circular island of earth, thus accentuating the isolation of someone in search of his own identity based not only on internal affinities but also on the differences, the pluralism. This insistent

questioning as to who we are is carried out by the exposure of a few portraits whose subjects are unknown to us — we do not even know if they are alive or dead. They are simultaneously together and separate. The bonds of affection do not prevent them from feeling lonely and listless; this closed, iron-forged circle is so strong that it is nearly impossible to escape. And if they attempt to do so, where would they turn to flee from the fortress in which Néstor has crammed all his ancestors?

In *Círculo Familiar* we are presented with something similar to the act of paging through a family photo album. “By means of photography, each family constructs a chronicle of itself, a portable collection of images that testifies to the strength of its bonds” [6]. These photos synthesize the entire life of a family into a momentary apparition: the boy’s appearance when he took his first communion; his adorable mother, who was especially seductive at that time; his brothers and friends acting silly or showing off their penises. “Looking at an old photograph is to be suddenly at home, independent of the eventual difficulties one may have in specifically identifying any of the images themselves” [7]. But in this case the action is tainted by immodesty, since the photos shown to us shape memories of his own family and in the end will be all that remain of it. We might feel that we are profaning the intimacy of his lineage when looking at so many photographs containing private and testimonial images proceeding from Néstor Torrens’s



Néstor Torrens. *La mirada incómoda*, 1992.

private world. These photos, which reaffirm the artist's personal past, are shown to the public without the slightest modesty, providing information and indications about many of the questions that have shaped the personal stock of his ancestry.

Proust, in looking at a photograph of a person, complained that his memory functioned better when he limited himself to mere unaided recollection. Our own familiarity with Torrens will now increase with the memories left by these family photos. We can work out a composite of his origins, his social class, his anxieties and his moral values. These images spur our imagination and concentration in making out the similarities or common features among them, or in entering the family in order to dissect it or judge it or even to love it.

These portraits are full of people

posing; people who look at the camera for a few seconds; who think, feel or interrelate in intimacy and privacy. None of them employ the haughtiness or arrogance with which famous and powerful personages look back at us, yet they affect us nonetheless. "To photograph people is to violate them, since they are seen as they never see themselves and known as they never know themselves. It transforms people into objects that might be symbolically possessed." [8]. The majority of public figures around the world pose for perfectly-studied portraits so that we might keep them near, so that we might adore and desire them, know them and need them; they even intend that we might make a bit of space for them in our own family circles. This is one of the basic strategies for making the existence and maintenance of monarchies,

governments-for-life and dictatorships seem like something perfectly natural and familiar to the people.

The image of Hassan, the pompous power of Morocco, has been utilized by Néstor Torrens in *Hassanes*, the work presented at the Tenerife Bienal Fotográfica of 1995. In this installation he combined photographs with objects — shoes — that created a brilliant sense of rhythm. If we dare to delve into this piece, we should imagine or remember being in Morocco: the ever-present photograph of the dictator, the narrow, zig-zagging streets of the zoco, the intense odors — which in this case are heightened by the large number of used shoes strung from the roof which also, in its absence, speaks to us of the urban throng.

Hassan's portraits are exhibited in every public space without modesty. There is not an inkling of nervousness in the firm gaze that fears no reproach from the camera. Various photos of the king give us faith in his personality. We see him in military garb, seated on a red and gold chair; or in the typical white Moroccan robe known as a chilaba; or in a Western-style suit. All of these paternalistic photographs are framed in the classic gilt frame that reaffirm his noble lineage. Hassan and his public image consultants know that each photograph derives its meaning from its use. The entire life and many faces of the dictator have been synthesized in these propaganda photographs, which can be obtained in any Moroccan consulate.



Néstor Torrens. *Hassanes*. 1995.

In the work of Néstor Torrens, the people who stroll the alleys and back streets are represented by their footwear without being present themselves. The representation of the masses is carried out in their absence by means of objects that speak of their bodies, in contrast to the monarch's insistent presence. Hassan displays himself with the audacity and arrogance of his blue-blooded social status, a man favored by the gods who have lent him the gift of leading the other mortals of his nation. He poses before the camera with such shamelessness that the rest of the photograph is impregnated by a tone of absurdity. The people barely exist. They fall in love, fall out of love, intermingle among themselves — and it all means nothing. Lives cross by chance and are diluted in the busy multitude that sees, smells, touches, makes noise, moves: it is represented by those many-colored shoes that have lost their functional character

and now symbolically populate the installation.

The situation that surrounds us is not so different from that of other nations; the mechanisms of power function similarly everywhere. The omnipotent, hedonistic monarchy does not belong to Morocco alone. We in the West fall into the same clichés, but ours are more sophisticated and more carefully prepared by the mass media. Current-day idols (kings, singers, politicians, actors and actresses, etc.) are as ridiculous as Hassan, incapable of convincing or stirring the people other than ingenuous adolescents. For, as Lipovetsky states, “now no political ideology is capable of moving the masses: post-modern society has neither idol nor taboo nor even a glorious image of itself, no mobilizing historical project; we are ruled by emptiness. But it is an emptiness that bears nothing, neither tragedy nor apocalypse” [9].

In this brief overview of Néstor Torrens's work we can appreciate the existence of a dominating gaze that completely distorts reality, obstructing our perception of the world and, as a consequence, our imagination. His gaze is directed by power. Photography, however, despite being considered the artistic discipline that comes closest to detailed objectivity, has failed to transmit an image of a world without transference. Néstor Torrens resorts to the border zone between photography and sculpture in order to develop his work, for in dealing with a territory still free from the control of the mass media, he avoids producing the habitual, already-classified gaze. He sparks an interest and curiosity in all that is new, and therefore a distinct reflection on some aspects of the body, the family, power, religion, tradition — and even art itself.

-
- [1] Barthes, Roland. *La cámara lúcida*. Paidós Comunicación, 1990, p. 108
 [2] Lipovetsky, Gilles. *La era del vacío*. Ed. Anagrama, 1995, p. 30.
 [3] Gubern, Roman. *La imagen pornográfica y otras perversiones ópticas*. Akal/Comunicación, 1989, p. 9.
 [4] Idem.
 [5] Paz, Octavio. *Convergencias*. Seix Barral, 1991, p. 95.
 [6] Sontag, Susan. *Sobre fotografía*. Edhasa, 1981, p. 18-19.
 [7] Schaeffer, Jean Marie. *La imagen precaria del dispositivo fotográfico*. Ed. Cátedra, 1990, p. 65.
 [8] Sontag, Susan. *Sobre fotografía*. Edhasa, 1981, p. 24.
 [9] Lipovetsky, Gilles. *La era del vacío*. Ed. Anagrama, 1995, p. 11.