

Cristino de Vera: The flight of purity

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As very few canarian artists have done, Cristino de Vera represents a sober inward looking vision, the construction of a world that isn't ideologically exceptional, yet that possesses a unique aesthetic clarity. Cristino looks out to the castillian horizon, much the same way as did the young Galdós, and we can safely say that he'll never again lose sight of them. He is fascinated from the very first moment by Avila and Toledo, and they become symbolic lands of confluence, places where the interior shape of his painting looks outside; a skull contemplates from the window sill, the neat square design of a medieval city, where mysticism has flourished, in the vicinity of stark natural scenery. The bare essential realism of the *sierra*, despite the mythification of the 98 Generation, connects with something that Cristino already knows. I think that his exquisite sense of order, that the economy of objects and symbols that change places from one painting to another is the outcome of his canarian identity, and that his dominance of space, that becomes progressively luminous in his dramas, isn't mere chance, but the gradual clarification of a metaphysical order that he spontaneously has because he has known poverty, things in their most frugal measures, and that radical continuity of the most simple domestic utensils, such as the table, the stool, earthen jugs and wicker baskets.

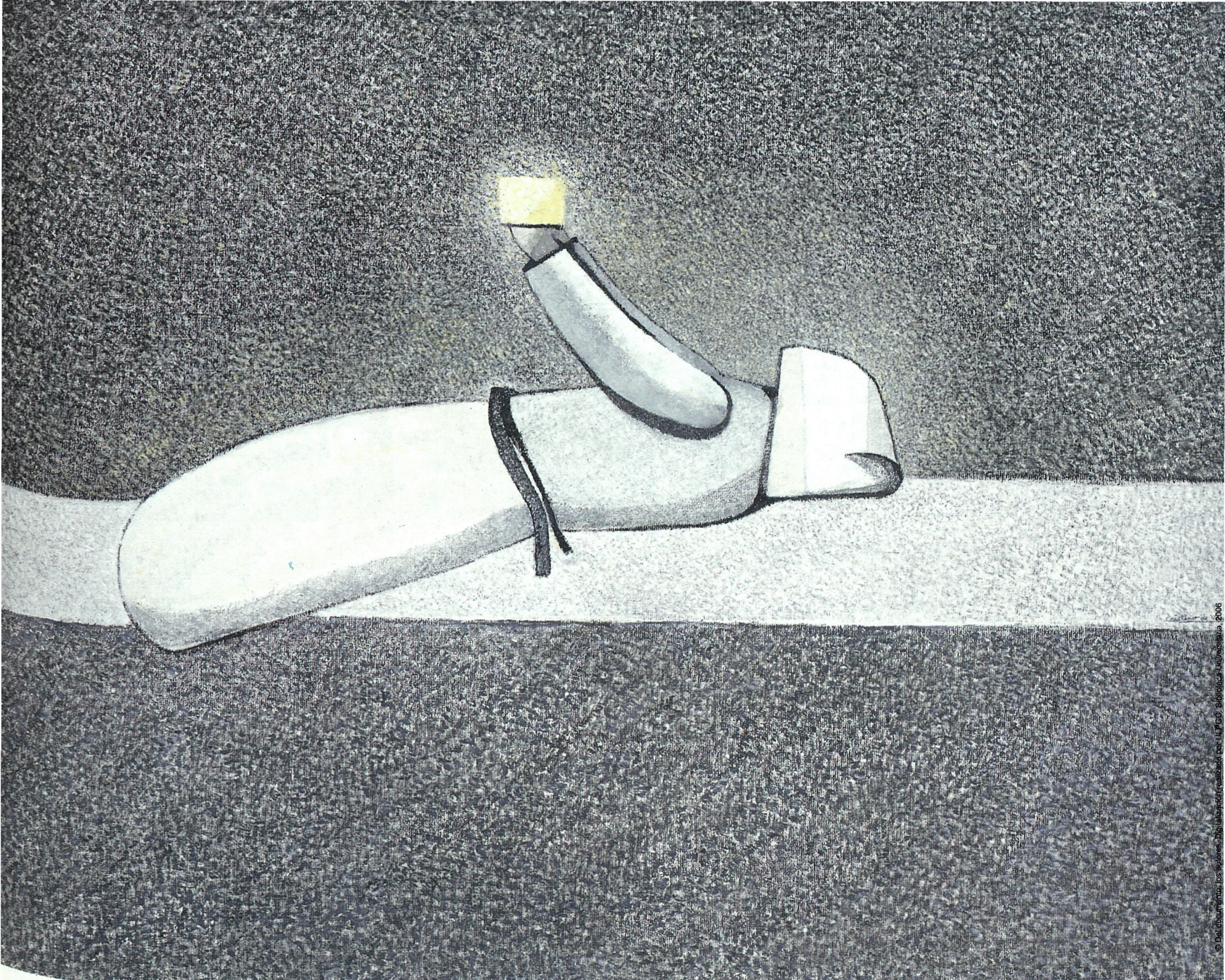
Poverty and precariousness determine his visual world. At the beginning he covered surfaces with ochre, blue grey and brown tones, during the early 50's. Much later, light will enrich, and lighten these initial backgrounds, fragmenting and separating colour that he groups in small strokes. There's some kind of affinity with pointillisme, although I believe Cristino doesn't pretend to ape Seurat's scientific and cold recomposition of vision, his fragmentary perception expresses a nervous faith, a state of suspension that always characterizes his idea, a sense of how things gradually gain shape and become real, imposing their silhouettes on the void.

During the early 50's he explores religious and pious female portraiture. He creates icons of romanian virgins, that evoke the tragic realism of the School of Madrid then extant, and that can also be observed in latin american art of the period.

This frontal pose that he chooses to represent the woman-virgin with, forever guarding an altar, or her private closet that is the world of solitary, unyielding domestic struggle, will never leave his art. The angularity and rigidity of this obscure family, period, with paintings of people standing in straight lines, arms and hands mechanically raised in exclamation, will lead to the softness and undulation of the female body in the 70's and 80's, that in exchange of her facial features, eyes, mouth, nose, is blessed with rhythmical sweetness and spiritual incorporeality.

All of Cristino's *morenetas* from this period create an abstract and semi-cubist division of the body into volumes, that then blends with a preconceived verticality in the concept of pictorial space. Elongated and thin, his virgins seem to remind us of El Greco's bodies that taper upwards in celestial elevation, though in Cristino's case they are at the same time rooted on earth by their totemic immobility that prevents them from flying off to similar heights. This tension between telluric roots and spiritual plight runs through the painter's work, and will only be partially redeemed by the later presence of light. *Imaginería*, 1956, is a somewhat frightening image. The romanian totem, with eyes painfully open, contrasts sharply against a cold blue grey background, inhabited by saint-puppets, tending to abstraction. Yet his religious gloominess doesn't ruin his sensibility, that could easily have stopped dead at such an iconic point. *Mujer con libro*, and *Mujer con Rosa*, both of 1957 (Woman with a book and Woman with rose), characterize the female figure, although the overall sacred stiffness is retained. Yet volume is more generous and relaxed, physical symmetry isn't as starkly perfect, and these portraits reveal psychological attitudes. Woman in introversion, eyes closed, in ecstasy, or carrying the symbolic objects of the metaphysical banquet. The reredos, the vertical monumentality of the church has been replaced by a series of wide, sombre bands. Womankind is the guardian of the interior world, the animal who keeps the house, in a universe singularly lacking masculine gesture and force.

Alongside these exploratory female icons we find the still lives of this period, that are magnificent statements of



Cristino de Vera. *Figura Homenaje a Pepe Espaliu*. 1992. Oleo/Lienzo. 92×73 cms. Cortesía: La Máquina Española. Madrid.

sobriety. Poor *natures mortes*, that seem recently unearthed, and that normally dwell inside the earth, surrounded by a kind of dusty mist. Any still life of the epoch, when european organic abstraction was flourishing, generating geological intensity, perhaps couldn't be painted differently. However, despite historical determinants, that are of secondary importance for him, Cristino essentially depicts a peasant's humble fare on the table. He doesn't covet the palatial wealth that piles up fruit and meat in the classical dutch nature morte of the seventeenth century, that sensual disorder of Abraham van Beyerem or William Kalf, nevertheless still imbued with a contextual realist hardness. The simplicity of Cristino's still life is the quintaessence of the spanish bodegón, the sober kitchen table of Velázquez, suggesting to the observer the act of inner consciousness that accompanies thanksgiving for our daily bread. Here, the intemporality of an attitude informs the painter's hand and colour. Cristino de Vera simultaneously exhibits a powerful symbolic dimension. He lines his objects up on the table, allowing fertile distance to mediate between them. Puvis de Chavannes, who showed us his fisherman

bowing to his futile rod, at the centre of silent, mental nature, hemmed in by uncomfortable, revolutionary pictorial planes, could easily have painted one of Cristino's *natures mortes*.

His humble, primary table, is the prelude to his dramatic manipulation, when he sets loose, always within immobility, the power of symbols that lightly float through all the stages of his art. His economy is thus evidenced in the beautiful containment and interactive force of roses, baskets, or skulls, that travel from one space to another. These elements will later on appear in spring fields, out in the country, resting on nature's bed, and will move towards the horizon, or if they remain indoors, will penetrate successive layers of space.

Giorgio Morandi established a similar clarity in his *naturas mortas* of the 1918-20 period. Each object has its neat, corresponding shadow, its undeniable place, and between them we find that significant distance already mentioned. The backgrounds, the luminous feel of Morandi's still lives are of a



Cristino de Vera. *Triptico*. 1993. Oleo/Lienzo. 243×100 cms. Cortesía: La Máquina Española. Madrid.

clear brown colour. What he then does is to depict the cut half of a mannequin's head, a metaphysical-surrealist action, that anatomy of the absent body, of the statue-automaton.

From the end of the 50's and throughout the 60's, Cristino builds up his symbolical drama, he expands a condensed and scarce metaphysics, through the repetition and iteration of his sacred objects. *Niña dormida*, 1963, (Girl Asleep), is an aesthetic death-setting, one of the painter's culminating symbolic moments. On the edge of a square table, slightly elevated at its furthest end, lies a girl that a flat horizontal perception has peculiarly placed there. She lacks any features or other distinguishing factors, although her attire is old-fashioned, capped and swaddled in tight infantile clothes. There's something archaic about this mannequin, this inanimate object. She is neither real nor living. At the other end, three baskets with three single roses also seem to ascend towards perspective depth. That static, frontal alignment of the poor *bodegones* has given way to a rich associative process in Cristino, to a curious unreal order, that is one of the basic procedures of twentieth century metaphysical painting, and which stems from surrealist juxtaposition and oneiric visuality.

The table is an altar, or a bier, the ancestral slab of death, that also serves for eating and discussion. In *Llanto por el torero*, 1964 (Mourning for the Bull-Fighter), we contemplate another corpse, this time formally deceased, while an undulating woman prays at his feet. This activation of space in the 60's offers us exterior, pastoral visions, like *Mujer bajo el sol en un campo de flores* (Woman in the sun in a field of flowers) where the curving line dominates rhythm and we see a kind of naïf naturalism that reminds us of Henri Rousseau.

Towards the end of the 60's, light becomes a protagonist in his work, insinuating itself through the gaps of his brush strokes, fragmenting and adding extra mobility to vision, bathing his still lives in a clear aura that at first he seemed reticent to paint. We find the skull of the *sic transit gloria mundi* appearing, the skeleton of Valdés Leal, of that Spanish *tenebrismo*, the direct imprint and touch of death. Death will be a steadfast eating partner from now on, it will occupy the place that the roses in the basket once held, and it will usurp

the role of the living eye that stood on the threshold of the house, like Janus. Yet this arrival of biological finality also brings spatial unfolding and depth. The small, inside windows of his rooms now give out onto infinite space in perspective flight, creating a near, domestic distance. It is the plural, rich space of the spirit.

Through the wide window spaces of his walls, Cristino now sees a cemetery that will have different shapes and sizes, until we are able to reach its city, and so be connected with social destiny and history. The skull is a simile of the Janus look, of omniscience that traverses Time, and that man, implicitly possesses. However, he decides to represent the eternal in man, what is constant in him, through death, made sweeter, by the presence of light. Cristino de Vera is heir to an ancient mediterranean tradition, that erects a necropolis as the observation point that leads to knowledge, and uses art to edify the most grandiose tomb. Cristino de Vera, as keeper of christian piety, of western religious sentiment. At times his cranial still life proves asphyxiating.

Towards 1990, the painter wants to synthesize his notions of history, which he achieves in his series *Ventanas a Toledo* (Windows giving on Toledo). The wild landscapes of 1954, with their strong black lines, their explosive skies, and their scraggy arid mountains and vallies, are very distant from these formalistic, geometrical images of Toledo, home town of the Spanish soul, the magic town of Spain, surrounded by its strong walls. Civilization is urban rationalism, this hive of ordered lives, that the skull's hermetic silence seems to criticize. Beautiful is his 1987 window, opening onto Tenerife, that permits us to glimpse a fantastic, blurry city hanging in the air.

Cristino de Vera doesn't keep in step with time. Somehow he turns his back on it. What is unalterable about his painting is the faithful and tranquil use of essential things, that love of his art's vital objects, flowers, baskets, skulls. He is unshakeable, he performs variations on a unitary vision, he is a legendary ideal of stillness, of faith, that in the long run, is self-nourishing.

Cristino de Vera. *Tres tacitas, vaso, vela y pared*. 1992. Oleo/Lienzo. 100×73 cms. Cortesía: La Máquina Española. Madrid.

