

PERTINENT GUESTS

At the end of the 1990s, when the gallery that bears his name had not even opened, Pérez Hernando met Joan Hernández Pijuan and, in 2002, took him to visit the Monastery of Santa María de Bujedo. After experiencing the impressive space of the church, the artist suggested, rather than organizing an exhibition there, the creation of a specific painting project for the place: three large-dimension canvases about which he did not specify anything else.

Unfortunately, first the painter's illness, and then, after being ill for some time, his death in December 2005, frustrated that project, and for years and years despite having received several proposals, Rafael Pérez Hernando felt unable to replace what had not been possible with something different. In 2020 he was planning to organize an activity in the Monastery, but the COVID19 pandemic, lockdowns and travel difficulties prevented it.

What matters most to him about Bujedo is the singularity of the space, its emptiness, the characteristic bareness of the Cistercian order, which inspired many of the montages he has made in other places and which led him to conceive this installation project.

His experience as a gallery owner, his knowledge of the work of his artists and the fact that he had brought them together first in 2019 in the group show that marked the gallery's fifteenth anniversary and then paired them up at different international fairs, where they matched perfectly, led him to conceive the artistic coupling there of Susana Solano and Simon Callery. To the works of these two would be added a canvas by Francisco de Zurbarán, dedicated to the veil of Saint Veronica.

Solano is taking part with a specific project designed for the place. Callery with two of his “flat paintings”.

Certain biographical details connect Susana Solano and Simon Callery. Their sculptural training and relatively early success.

Their origins are curiously inverse: Solano began as a painter, moving almost immediately to sculpture. Callery, although also starting in painting, had a

training that was fundamentally sculptural, which, after graduating, he immediately transferred to painting.

Callery exhibited, in the early 90s, alongside the Young British Artists at the Saatchi Gallery and in *Sensation* at the Royal Academy of Arts, in 1997.

The positive reception of Solano's work was evident in events such as documenta VIII and IX (1987 and 1992) in Kassel, and the São Paulo (1987) and Venice (1988 and 1993) biennials.

For the English painter, who visited the Monastery during his first exhibition in Spain, in September 2021, the aspect of the project which appealed most is the coming together in a specific architectural space of an installation by a sculptor, a painting from the 17th century and other paintings by a current artist, which takes him back to past times, to the Middle Ages, Byzantium, Romanesque and Gothic periods, when architecture, sculpture and painting were conceived as a whole. Architects, sculptors and painters thought out a sacred space together. However, from the Renaissance the works became more independent.

“It seems to me very important to once again unite, in the same space, works which as in the Middle Ages present a joint vision for a spiritual project”, he affirms.

“In this context I don't want my paintings to be hung in a part of the building where we expect to find a work with a religious function, for example, in the chancel behind the altar. By placing my paintings in the two transepts, they will play supporting roles. I try to limit, as far as possible, the excess of religious aura.”

For her part, Susana Solano remembers that she visited Bujedo long before she was invited to take part.

“It was interesting” – she says – “because it allowed me a free and complete observation, without any end in view. So I held onto that inside, as part of an experience, added to so many other moments with similar characteristics.”

“When Rafael put the proposal to me, I didn't visit the place again, and only worked with the record in my memory. I had to recover the space I had

experienced with another intention, to maintain it as a priority with a certain passion, dynamism, seduction, obsession... I don't know if the correct term is make a record, perhaps as happens with the words of a thought when they are ordered, they take on a form, the order is changed, the content is simplified and altered - well, the process that I have followed has been close to other works, an unconscious zig zag.”

“Thus, there is nothing new, everything is known. The collective spaces; the great heights of religious places, the entry of light filtered by distance, the stone, somewhat fortified, the archaeological remains, the history.”

Susana Solano's installation is made up of a first section of eight 160 x 45 cm galvanized buckets. raised 10 cm above the floor, which contain rough earth from the vicinity of the Monastery, mixed up and not levelled, into which have been set numerous candles of a length calculated so that they burn for the length of time that the church can be visited.

At the end of this section, there is a 194 x 45 cm platform on which are placed two light branches collected at the time of tree pruning and cast in bronze. One from an olive tree, found in a rubbish container, which the artist has shaped with another pruning. The other from a mulberry, on which the buds have sprouted and that Solano likens to a rod, a whip or a cane.

“I immediately remembered” – recalls the artist – “that I had the handle of a prayer stick from Lalibela, a monastic city in northern Ethiopia, the second most important holy city in the country and a major focus of pilgrimage. My idea was to attach it to the mulberry branch. These are fresh, rapid associations: generosity, offering...”

“The first section is an intervention for a space with a wide, general view. It is an acknowledgement made with respect (not because it was for an abbey), it could have been the same for a beach, a square, a subway... An immediate experience of the space of the body itself, a sign of a common memory.”

“On the contrary, the choice and incorporation of the branches in bronze constitutes a final enigmatic element where the individual is forced to think.”

“The line, or path of light, traced by the candles is off-centre (as a prior step, a prelude or prologue) and in the last section (the branches) the platform that supports them is offered as a closing result. This is not a spectacle!”

The paintings of Simon Callery have a special nature. They are the result of a complex making process both in the landscape and in the city, although the works on display are from the first location, the landscape, something that combines perfectly with the place of the Monastery.

“The three works” – he explains – “are related to archaeological sites. *Red Mantle* and *Flat Painting Bodfari 14/15 Ferrous* come from the excavation of an Iron Age hillfort at Bodfari, in North Wales, and *Nesscliffe Upright* is from Nesscliffe Hill in Shropshire. The canvas has been coloured, marked and cut by its contact with the archaeological surfaces of these sites and the colour is related to the colour of the local soil. In both places, the geology was rich in iron, so I worked predominantly with Mars Red and Caput Mortuum, which are traditional iron-based earth pigments with rabbit-skin glue as a binder. At the end of the dig, I took the canvas elements, cut and coloured, back to my London studio, where some of them were washed again in a domestic washing machine and more pigment was applied while they were still wet. I began the process of building the paintings by defining the dimensions of the interior void, through sewing a plywood spacer into a fold of canvas and stitching the canvas parts together using an industrial sewing machine. A large part of the work took place on the floor, and only at a critical point did I hang the painting vertically on the wall to make important decisions regarding physical depth, height, and width. *Red Mantle* has a front face that covers the support elements, while the other two paintings have surfaces that are completely adhered. Once the paintings were hanging on the wall, I gave attention to the details of the front faces, placing more canvas pieces or trimming parts. All of these paintings took shape over a long period. *Red Mantle*, in particular, was completed in 2020 from a canvas produced in the 2014 excavation at Bodfari. These paintings are not the result of a systematic approach to the painting based in the studio. They are the result of a

painting process carried out both in the landscape and in the studio, in different geographical locations and with changes suggested during the making process.”

“It was in the late 1990s when I was first invited to work alongside archaeologists from the School of Archaeology as they excavated an Iron Age fort called Segsbury Camp at Ridgeway in Oxfordshire. It was an initiative of the University of Oxford to create interdisciplinary collaborations. At the time I was a young painter working in the East End of London and this gave me the opportunity to approach landscape as a subject for contemporary painting through archaeology. I have continued to work with them for many years. I now perceive the dig site as an emphatically physical and constantly changing sculptural environment. I am conscious that this is an erroneous interpretation of the role of the excavation and that I am reformulating the purpose of archaeological fieldwork with creative ends.”

“Archaeological sites are rich in forms, colours and materials, and the excavation processes, field drawings and recording methods are fascinating for an artist. They are places where time and material (central concerns for the painter) combine most convincingly with past and present human activity, and they are places to which we respond with all our senses. I now see that during the time I spent on these excavations I received an education of the senses. I learned to understand and respond to the urban landscape/environment as an experience based more on the physical rather than the image”.

Susana Solano comments that instead of candles she could have chosen any other material. “I could have used any element, object or language material if I had dared. It is a creative challenge and the occupation of a space like the Abbey gives liberty due to the bareness of the place. Out of habit, my first idea is where I begin and even after modification, it always remains as a starting or initial point”.

However, candles or lamps have been present several times in the composition of her works, fundamentally in some of the *Meditaciones* (Meditations) series from 1993, and in other poetic titles such as *Diálogo con los muros* (Dialogue with the walls) and *Puerta del olvido* (Door of oblivion). With

regard to *Meditaciones n° 9*, which in my eyes is closely related to the project, Marta Llorente writes: “The idea of a multitude of burning flames relates to the memory of death, and we have become accustomed to these images, very recently perhaps. [...] In this case, the artist recalled the impression of a rural enclosure, a demarcation of space for stock typical of the rural landscape that she had photographed on the island of El Hierro, whose photos had disappeared. A memory, a loss, a small crease in reality that came back to life in an ephemeral work”.

“For me, a candle has many meanings” - says Solano - “although it is true that it is an object related to or used in many religions, but I associate the candle and its light with darkness, encounter, intimacy, the power to communicate, distribute and be seen. Summers with my grandparents, for example. When a storm hit, they switched off the electricity and if it was night, they replaced the darkness with candles, everything and everyone in twilight.”

“In my painting there is an emphasis on materiality” - says Callery - “I am deeply involved in the development of physicality as a central quality instead of working with the image. I am a painter and everything I do is within the context of painting, even when I am far removed from what is conventionally understood as painting. The volume and spatial qualities of my works are there to give the painting a physical body and move it away from the flatness that we associate with images.”

“When I started working outdoors in the landscape (or the urban environment)” - he continues - “I stopped using conventional canvases, stretched on wooden stretchers. Now I use long loose canvases that I can roll up, sling over my shoulder and work on as I move from place to place. I sew these canvases to build paintings with an internal or void space, giving the work a 'body'. I equate this body with the open body of the excavated landscape and its function is to seek a connection with the body of the viewer of the work. I have replaced many of the traditional processes of making marks that are found in painting with a physical equivalent; for a line, I make a cut or sew a line; to create the illusion of depth, I build a real space, and, to give narrative, I leave a record of how the

work has been made. The function of all these contrasts is to establish a language for the painting based on materiality. The works do not function from a single, static point of view. I encourage the viewer to move around, from the external front face of the painting to one side and then the other side to investigate the internal space of the work, moving smoothly from the outside to the inside. Working in the landscape taught me that all of our senses are alert and balanced when we are in motion.”

The chromatic range of Simon Callery's paintings evokes, in the eyes of Pérez Hernando, the habits of the monks and the clothing of the Spanish baroque of the 17th century. The bareness of those threadbare canvases refers to the mendicant orders.

The face of Christ is imprinted on the veil of Veronica in the same way that the face of the excavated earth, the archaeological trench and its colour end up configuring the material image of Simon Callery's painting.

His paintings have a certain desire for volume. Solano's proposal has light as its central axis. A path of light that guides the visitor towards the small painting by Zurbarán which, unexpectedly, is found in the lateral arms with Callery's paintings.

The presence of the Holy Face does not invest the final result with Catholic religiosity nor does it subtract one iota from the secular spirituality, fully human and humanistic, that the entirety evokes. Ultimately what we see is not the face of Christ, but a cloth with the impression of a portrait. An impregnated parallel to what Callery uses in the making of his works.

The works do not invade the space, but rather, are there as pertinent guests. A place of silence and for silence, in which the pieces of art are as stripped back and austere as the site itself.

Transience and permanence. Permanence of the building and its fabric. Transience of the invited pieces.

In the entirety, a syncretism of different spiritualities is revealed.

Susana Solano's spirituality can only be understood in its proper measure if we take into account her background of travel to some Asian countries and, in even greater depth, to others in Africa.

“I had a tidy up of my living space,” - she says. “I found some folders of press clippings, magazines from about 40 years ago, I realized that a large majority, if not all, referred to Japanese art and African art, not only works or objects but also the people who inhabit them. There were images of the Zen, the rites, the simplification, the essence, the purity of lines, the silence; and of the African, the colour, the boldness, the creative resources, the brutalism, the unknown.”

“Spirituality and silences are present, among many other things. The spiritual aspect of day-to-day life is hidden, because I have to defend myself. Often spirituality and silences are understood as weakness”.

“I hope that my painting helps the viewer to have a slower experience” - concludes Callery. “I have removed all traces of the making of images from my painting to engage the viewer in an experience that has both a physical and a visual dimension. This creates a space for a contemplation of painting that implies an awareness of time completely different from the rapid daily consumption of images so characteristic of our contemporary life. This will be an exhibition with a single image. I am intrigued to see how the exhibition will be interpreted: if it will be entirely through the religious image or if the combination of material relationships between works of art and the architecture will reveal another story”.

Mariano Navarro
May 2022

Santa María de Bujedo

In the early university days of the current gallery owner Rafael Pérez Hernando, at the beginning of the seventies, his father, Rafael Pérez Escolar, learned of the existence, twenty-five kilometres from Burgos, of the ruins of the monastery of Santa María de Bujedo de Juarros, a monumental complex from the 12th century, belonging to the Cistercian order, expropriated in 1835, declared an historical-artistic monument in

1931, which over time had deteriorated severely, and Pérez Escolar, in the words of his son, "fell in love with that place".

Rafael Pérez Hernando, at the request of his father, also visited it in the early seventies, and still remembers both the fascination which that place produced in him, as well as the sound of the rooks taking flight from the roof of the church that seemed like a forest, since at that time it was completely abandoned and covered in vegetation.

Having resolved a thousand and one difficulties for its acquisition, due to the fragmentation of the property, in July 1976 the restoration of the church began, followed in years to come, by the rest of the monastery spaces.

Of the original complex, all that remains are the late Romanesque church - whose construction dates from the end of the 12th and beginning of the 13th centuries and is considered one of the most beautiful of the existing Cistercian churches in the province - as well as the chapter house, the sacristy and the prior's hall or parlour. The church is of very generous dimensions. The chapter house, relatively small, indicates that there were not many monks gathered together there. In 1981 the complex received an award from the Fundación Hispania Nostra, and at the beginning of 1983 the works were considered completed.

Rafael Pérez Escolar also created the Fundación Santa María de Bujedo, dedicated to the study and dissemination of the history of Castile, which collaborated with the publisher La Olmeda in different publications.