

An Oasis amid Stillness

Notes on the Work of Antonio Espinosa

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Zero

In the contemporary Cuban visual panorama, the landscape almost always has been regarded with a sweetening touch, an idyllic sense that escapes the surrounding reality. Said tradition receives the influences of our well-known nineteenth century landscapists or of one of the painters with the greatest international recognition and prosperity in foreign markets: Tomás Sánchez. But when a landscapist maintains his creative perseverance and explores it with dissimilar meanings and evocations, said trend ceases to be an end in itself to become a pretext that not only aims at relaxing the glance but also at creating a much greater order of associations.

Since he began to paint, Antonio Espinosa (Manzanillo, 1974), has been catalogued as an artist with the already mentioned influences, but his arrival at the landscape is not precisely an esthetic search that pretends to document an environment in its entirety. Having studied engraving, he began his career in art in the early 1990s, entering almost unconsciously into the world of the landscape, which opened to him like a range of possibilities. Thus, during this first period the creator adopted a varied methodology that has established a style of his own and has distanced his compositions from a merely analogical urge.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that Antonio is a heterodox individual with solid intellectual education and knowledge of the international visual space that has influenced and developed a technical and compositional criterion that is evident in his works. The above-mentioned, together with his interest in diverse themes such as History and its variations, the loss or reevaluation of the meanings of the symbols of power and nationality, and the taste for orienting the spectator toward new interpretations, have made his work develop from the landscape – without abandoning it as sophisticated means of communication – toward topics and methodologies where existential questionings and queries about the political pertinence of a nation or the expiration of an ideology are priority issues. Thus, each piece is conceived as a study, not only immersed in the visual values, but also in the changing and convulse environment surrounding it.

One

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) conceives the landscape as a space of fantasy¹ determined by a vastness that activates a feeling of nostalgia and evocation in the spectator. Hence the sensorial connotations present in the series and the fact that they intend to unleash a *state* in the face of the exuberance of portraying a wide plane; achieving a predisposition in the receiver by using the harmony in the retina as starting point.

In this sense, Espinosa's landscapes are true calls to emotion, since the artist, in his searches, discovered that color was not the trigger for the sentimental apprehension, but the sense of *amplitude* that the work of art acquires and its possibility to communicate a message in which the glance reposes inside the painting itself, where it may be possible to move through a magnanimous documentation.

From the start Espinosa excluded the human figure from his recreations, since the artist conceives that nature also hides a psychological complexity similar to that of the being; that is why we will never find a person in his landscapes, and in very few cases we will be able to see a house, as happens in the pieces *Caserío, hierbas y bosque* (1998) or *Reflejos en el lago apacible* (2013). In any case, these constructions seem to be abandoned, lost in the peaceful thickness that covers them; there is not even an anthropomorphic feature in those spaces suitable for dreams. That is why his creation is inserted in a tradition that was also adopted again by some photographers from the early 20th century, since Espinosa evidences that nature's power and exuberance contribute a superhuman *load*.

From the above-said one deducts another one of the values contained in his landscapes: a lack of temporality that makes them propitious to any perception, since the circumstantial marks are absent in them. The artist is the owner of the external dispositions and handles them carefully, hiding the secrets that would place his works in a time-theme framework; only the actor-receiver who lies behind the act of conceiving knows his cartography. To Espinosa, the spectator must fulfill his role of meddling and penetrating the creative universe, captivated by the power of communication of the work itself.

One of the distinctive features of his paintings is the selection of the composition, which originates a dual survival in the documentation because of the meaning that almost all of them enclose when reflecting trees on the sea, and making use of lights and shadows as true protagonists – one of the conceptual axes ruling the series *Contraluz* (View against the Light). It is notable that almost all landscapes are surrounded by rivers or water, which contributes to create a sort of *mirage*, a duplicity that grants the works a different feeling through the wide range of grays creating these reflexes, these intimate dialogues that cause delight in his landscapes.

On the other hand, the will to isolate the elements inside the pieces is one of the noticeable determinations. The artist places his motifs with total independence; in that way, the islands and flat-topped hillocks that disappear amid rivers and lakes connect with a “psychology of the landscape” with the purpose of extrapolating human states of mind to nature.

Worthy of being highlighted in these works is the influence of other artists such as Tomás Sánchez, who holds the first place in his associations (one of the works, *Paisaje en un día después de T.S.* (Landscape A Day After T.S.) (2005), in its honesty goes as far as to mention the reference), since both creators start from a common motif. But the nature conceived by Tomás is an environment of communion where the witness is the central figure. In Antonio Espinosa's case, the landscapes have a taste for remembrance; in addition to moving, they pretend to create a suggestion, an intensification of the senses. If in the first we find a *bucolic communion*, a coexistence and an organic relation of great liturgical connotations between landscape and human being, in the second we witness a *bucolic evocation* that starts from a fictional, subconscious elaboration. The influence of other international creators like On Kawara and Mark Tansey is also evident in Espinosa's works, having imbued him in the elaboration of the piece as construction and in the presence of design in the compositions, respectively. Landscapes as gears that unite as articulated mechanisms – so are these works; undoubtedly, challenges in which the artist documenting them makes it possible to have his work understood with universal glance.

Two

Another work line of the artist aims at focusing on social events based on the ideological and contextual manipulation, employing resources such as the personality of historical leaders of Cuban social processes and toning down their actions and words. But beyond going deep into the personality of the figures of power, Espinosa articulates the political discourses and draws them from their circumstance, evidencing the fragility of ideologies and their susceptibility to misunderstanding. These topics are not necessarily a change in the corpus of his work, since the creator inserts them into his production, which oddly indulges in evading reality and at the same time aims at a macro context he manipulates alternatively, whether as a resource of irony or with a will to maximize the weakness of the governmental pyramid.

One of the issues questioned by Espinosa is how those apologies of the reigning order have an echo in public spaces and affect or determine their urban nature. In this regard the series *Paisajes ideológicos cubanos* is one of the first approaches to the theme. Said ensemble dates back to 1995 and was conceived as thesis for the artist's graduation from the Higher Institute of Art. With this work Espinosa recycles and compiles the poster esthetics, urging to reduce the harangue to the regime contained in it and point out its commercial potentials, which were predominant in its original use. He thus places the poster in an urban environment, where its function is put in context and brought to the masses, but the creator reduces its solemnity by including color rectangles in the pieces, which do away with a monochromatic horizontality and grant them certain humor. In the effort to show the nullity and to ridicule the stately aspect of these *landscapes* one perceives a certain pop influence, which is remarkable in the irruption of a strange element that hampers the reading of the piece.

But the insertion of a social criterion in the works does not result from a detraction of the hegemony, since the artist does not pretend to deconstruct dogmas; on the contrary, he likes to play with them, show the semantic ambiguity contained in the concepts that rule a nation. His series *Para que el enemigo no regrese* (To Prevent the Enemy from Returning) again refers to the use of the poster, but in this case he utilizes engraving, which is far from his first creations in that technique (in the beginning his engravings were allegorical, very dark pieces, with evident influence of Rolando Rojas). Espinosa uses the poster as central element of his compositions, but he discovers its spatial location in places that are usually frequently visited; thus one reads mottos like: "We want no masters here!", "Great causes require great sacrifices" or "We have and we will have socialism". The invariability of these well-worn phrases and their survival in both a rural and an urban environment illustrate the omnipresence of a system that pretends to create strong ties with its object of possession.

In turn, in the series *El peso de la sangre* he continues to work from this esthetics, but he does it with a different chromatic incidence that places the works in a different field of interpretations which include the materialization of the ideologies and the pop background of a dual influence.

The conceptual searches as to the ideological theme not only add to the artist's efforts to picture the participation of the authorities in urban dynamics. As part of that intention, the words and their meanings also receive new semantics, in an attempt to deprive the idea of the circumstantial load in which it is immersed. This becomes evident in the series *Defender las ideas* (Defend the Ideas), where Espinosa takes fragments of speeches by Fidel Castro and appropriates an isolated word, presenting its meaning but hiding its spelling in order to activate a playful search on the part of the receiver.

Three

In recent times the artist has developed other interests also linked to the social element, aimed at examining the macro history and its sources of tension. Espinosa constructs personal genealogies where it is possible to identify an order of relations that include the annals of the nation and its future. The artist employs dissimilar objects for these inventions which, from the point of view of their functionality and representation, transgress his usual semantics to reflect a transit full of critical shades of meaning where the objects *narrate*, explain on the basis of their own significance and contribute historicity from their subversion.

These works, aimed at clarifying a chronology of events, show a weighing of the historical nature of all that exists, since the value of use of the object in question implies making a chronicle of it. Thus, multiple stories or multiple historical aspects are exteriorized in which things tell, in a new semiotics, their own chronicle and also that of all others.

The majority of the works handling this topic were exhibited in Villa Manuela Gallery, with a design that pursued highlighting the visual changes in the artist's production and the subjects handled by him. One of the main pieces of this ensemble was the triptych *Sujeto colectivo* (Group Subject), illustrating the intention of speaking from the "otherness". The work intends, based on the visibility and multiplicity, to show a series of psychological states in which the human being annuls his individuality to throw himself into a state of communicative entropy. Stamps, packages of pharmaceuticals and candy are pretexts to delve into processes such as alienation and conformity – common in a society that Antonio Espinosa wants us to identify – since these fictional recreations always start from a common context resulting from intimate experiences.

The story evoked by these pieces is as intimate as plural; it is a product of group memory, where the spectator identifies his own biography, since the proposed chronicles open to let the receiver complete their significance with memories. In this regard, the pieces *Imagen de mi memoria* (Image from My Memory) and *Historia* (Story) alluded to the inclusive and plural elements of memory, which contributes to the sense of collectivity of the pieces. In the first case we witness the powerful image of the sea, which has marked and conditioned the history of the nation through the exchanges, the traveling, and the exodus. The second piece stands out for the game with dimensions; it uses the spelling of the word to (re)construct a concept of historicity that is very dear to the Cuban context. The assumed bookcase symbolized in the piece in an attempt of installation contains books on Cuban history and on its topmost representatives. It is, in this case, the apparently happy union of titles recognized and endorsed by the State, and of others with a different discourse, written by the "detractors" or dissidents of the regime. Antonio Espinosa allows a glance at the variability of every historical construction as a fictional construction); hence, their re-writing is essential for the creation of a chronological narration.

The semantic hybridization contained in words is one of the resources employed by the artist, who objectifies their graphic representations, as becomes visible in the pieces *Resistir* (Resist) and *Revolución* (Revolution). In those works, the empty boxes and seals of the Communist Party of Cuba form significant entities that have become slogans deprived of meaning along the years. In the same way, the ensemble *Renuncia y ambigüedad* (Renouncement and Ambiguity) maintains this intention and advocates the exhibition of certain slogans or patriotic hymns said in speeches and public rallies. Phrases such as: "...my main obligation", "many years of struggle", "...the revolutionary achievement" are precedents with which Espinosa alludes to historical periods and social conflicts that became a fracture of the preceding orders.

The pieces taking History as essential link with the context start from a common memory, although they transgress and extend it, play with it and maximize it. It is an unfinished re-writing that increases its lines based on the creation, leaving an open path for the works to communicate and tell again.

Four

In continuation of that taste to approach the spelling of words to artistic forms in order to conceive interpretations of them, the creator forms words with objects, which are the ones that vary the meanings and alter the determinations that we usually read in straight sense. In his series *El jardín de las delicias* (The Garden of Delight), flowers are the subject of these ambiguous elaborations, but they are dehydrated plants that no longer exercise their embellishment function. Espinosa thus rescues a material in disuse to create words such as *Política* (Politics), *Democracia* (Democracy) and *Libertad* (Freedom), which maintain a conflictive meaning in certain contexts – a fact that he takes into consideration to change round and reformulate the meanings.

The artist constructs live and changing concepts using what is apparently dead and useless; in this way he recycles the own words and also the objects for his accomplishment. The end product is the suggestion, a textual image that allows multiple interpretations and at the same time offers a delicate making.

The influence of design that has fascinated Espinosa so much in his diverse creative periods is to be highlighted in these “live pieces” because of the material of their creation. This is equally noticeable in the series *Estudio para un jardín paulista* (Study for a Paulist Garden), where Mondrian's influence is evident in the geometric synthesis, boosting straight angles and lines belonging to abstraction, although the fragility of the flowers forming these panels eases the visual tension. The artist thus widens his creative repertoire, boosting works that go from figurative to conceptual and to installation.

Five

One of the most recent interests developed by Espinosa has been related with large seascapes, which continue under the same visual equity of his previous landscapes. Antonio conceives these works from the equality of the gray tones, and succeeds in capturing the vastness of the sea in them. The artist boosts in those works the multiple questions produced by the ocean, and widens the dimensions of his pieces in the urge to capture the extension of infinity.

The expressiveness achieved in his seascapes lies on several elements that communicate simultaneously; in the first place stands out the duality inside them, since Espinosa conceives sky and sea as two parallel halves marking an individual drama in each work. Hence, the skies are usually filled with clouds foreboding the storm and the night, in the face of the peacefulness of the sea. The creator thus conceives diverse natural reactions and faces them, setting a *rhythm* in these landscapes, a fluctuation similar to the tides he pictures.

It is interesting that these pieces struggle to achieve the visual effect using culminating moments of the day. Almost in all cases we witness documentations of dawn or sunset, achieved with a technique that distances itself from the chromatic reduction in favor of the superposition and juxtaposition of diverse tones, granting volume and mobility to the pieces.

These works create surreal spaces because of their perfection, since the artist assumes the complexity of nature and holds an intimate dialogue with it.

On the other hand, there is a kind of analogy between these seascapes and the series of boats that Espinosa has been making in recent years; in this last case, the boat documentation is equally based on evocation. They are drifting boats that get stranded in desolate places or sail the sea, and on the sky's reflexes with the same integrality. These works have a kind of precedent in the artist's *Estudios previos* (Previous Studies), consisting of collages in which, through the inclusion of photography and of restless, expressionistic brushstrokes, he creates very plural pieces that oxygenate his customary visuality and serve as basis for future pieces.

Espinosa's body of work maintains a profound complicity and relational dynamics in all its facets, marked by personal concerns on the esthetic and individual planes. His work offers a common space where figuration and conceptualism harmonize, where he avoids presenting definitive answers and, on the contrary, throws questionings and doubts that invite to revisit his world view over and over again.

The creator offers his vision of the world, succeeds in capturing the magnanimity of the environment and the issues that affect the destinies of the individuals in their context. In this way a work of profound individuality is created, nourished by the knowledge of "two natures" captured in each work through experience, in a dialogue between the artist and the whole.

¹ Gastón Bachelard: *La poética del espacio*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, Mexico, 2001.