

BAD WEATHER CIRCUS: The fabulous one-artist band and his amazed (phantom) public.

An interview with Curro González about his installation/sculpture *Like a Monument*.

Pepe Yñiguez.

Like a Monument is the first installation/sculpture project by Curro González (Seville, 1960), one of the most important representatives of the generation of artists that appeared in Seville in the 1980s. The piece, which will be permanently installed in the CAAC, is his most recent recreation of the figure of the artist, a subject he's shown an interest in since the beginning of his career, almost. On this occasion, moreover, the public has a leading role, not only as the viewer-cum-receiver of the piece but as a constituent part of it. Humour, the conceptual games of the Baroque vanitas, and the historical memory of painting, with references like Brueghel and Hogarth, are some of the keys Curro González manipulates in order to suggest all kinds of warnings that, like contemporary, albeit disenchanted emblems of a sort, can help us decipher and avoid the deceptions of today's world.

***Like a Monument* is an installation in which the artist is presented as a one-man band, almost like a figure from vaudeville or a humble street performance. He is a visual artist because we recognize certain attributes, except that he's overwhelmed by all the tasks that have to be performed at the same time. In some paintings you'd already portrayed yourself and had portrayed the artist as a foul-mouthed person or as a tightrope walker—what does this update mean in relation to earlier iconographic projects?**

I think this figure of the one-man band can transmit, quite clearly, the feeling produced in us by the task we have to confront when acting as artists. As you say, it's overwhelming, but at the same time it displays an admirable ability to tackle different, even contradictory, tasks. The role of the artist here reminds me of how Homer defines Odysseus at the beginning of the book as an *anthropos polytropos*, which could be translated as a man of many paths or of many tricks. I reckon that's a good starting point to position yourself, in general, vis-à-vis the world, and very necessary to do so in particular as an artist.

It's more than likely that thanks to the precedents in my work that you mention José Lebrero would propose I do this project for the CAAC gardens with a subject matter that reflected the image of the artist. In this case I was sure I ought to take the determining factors typical of the site, material and technique used into account. I had to consider all these elements and it seemed

interesting to add another that, like the Wooden Horse of Troy, inadvertently introduces the viewer into the piece by using him as one more element in it.

The piece is going to open accompanied by sketches and earlier works relating to the figure of both the artist and the public, or at least with the potential viewer who appeared in *Friso*, a work from 1993 shown in the now-defunct Arenal galleries in Seville, or the expectant figure in *Enjambre*, which could also be seen in Biac3. As well as all these works, among which is also the claymation of *La broma infinita*, a series of drawings will be shown in the exhibition that imitate visual jokes in which different types of artists are portrayed with, among them, the artist as a one-man band. What interests you about these jokes about artists, which are especially abundant in American magazines of the 1950s with the triumph of Abstract Expressionism? I say this because, seen today, they seem to express a somewhat more intelligent judgement of the image and the idea of artists than might have been considered at the time.

Apart from their particular style as vignettes with fuzzy edges, the really fascinating thing about the caricatures that appeared in publications like *The New Yorker* is that in many instances the paintings that appear in them have become indicative of some of the abstract works certain artists who defend abstraction in their pictures have recently painted. It's as if the premise, which has been fulfilled since the appearance of the Modern Movement, of exaggeratedly privileging some aspects over others to the point of defining the work method—that is to say, of caricaturizing—had performed a pirouette by feeding off its own mockery. Although I wouldn't be very sure that this was the intention of those artists.

As you know, I've used caricature in my works for years now because in some ways it continues to have that quality which is alien to the serious, high-minded discourse impregnating much of contemporary art, even when this is defined from a supposedly marginal, ultra-committed position. For me, caricature functions as an antidote to dogmatism.

In the series you mention there appears, along with others, the image of the artist as a one-man band. From the evolution of that idea there arises the idea of the sculpture. For the latter I needed a figure that wasn't exclusive, with a certain universal character, and I think that this was the right one.

The profusion of detail in the sculpture has to do with your work, but it seems to go against the idea of a monument, in which one tends to highlight the essential in order to make recognition and possible identification easier. The work is, so to speak, anti-monumental, something which, as I see it, accentuates its ironical charge. More than exalting the figure

of the artist, the conception of a monument marginalizes him, in the same way that the current status of the idea of monumental sculpture is marginal, however fashionable it might be in a lot of town halls. How does one reconcile the idea of the artist who is recognized and occupies the top step on the podium although he might be treading in shit? Of the artist who, finally, deserves a monument with the marginal character that same monument bestows on him?

It could only be reconciled if we recognize it as a paradox; a chain of paradoxes, I would say. This is also what the phrases denote that can be read, not without a certain difficulty, on the sides of the drum: "I keep the time of a time that will never be" "I look at what I cannot see," despite putting on night vision goggles, perhaps. This work is not, then, a monument. It's something "like a monument" and therefore it asserts and denies itself at the same time. Hence the complex game of readings on different levels, from near and far, in different spaces.

When I think of the idea of the triumphant artist I can't help thinking of the story Félix de Azúa, in his *Diccionario de las artes*, illustrates his entry for the word "artist" with. In it he likens the word to that of a figure included in certain Jewish accounts of the Holocaust. In short, that of a character, a lookout, propped up by the occupants of the windowless wagons of the train in which they were travelling to the concentration camps. To the others he narrated what he could make out of the outside world through a small ventilation hole in the roof of the wagon. Azúa ends up reminding us that this task didn't pertain to them but was the result of an ephemeral collective pact. A work of narration that as a result had to avoid the arrogant expression of individual genius.

Shit on the sole of the shoe is a symbol of chance, the luck every winner has to have, but it also serves as a parody of that reminder that in the celebrations of a triumph in ancient Rome a slave repeated in the ear of the victorious general, "Remember you are only a man."

The latter reminds me of something you've reflected on in your recent paintings—I'm thinking of your last exhibition at the Galería Rafael Ortiz. I'm referring to the relationship between everyday life and transcendence, between the ordinary and the sublime. Is this the most relevant task of the artist today, the combining of that everyday life so that the viewer recognizes, in some way, the place from which he interrogates it, and that value, if not transcendent at least meaningful, that enables him to question that everyday life? I ask this because that relationship can also be the one that exists between the image of the white-on-white painting of the sculpture and the image of the desert island that appears on the computer.

I don't know if it's the most relevant task, but it's undoubtedly very necessary. What in that

exhibition I called “false epiphanies” was the outcome of assuming this situation by proceeding from the way Joyce tackled them. In actual fact, it was a matter of proposing a game in which meanings slip in when confronting a common, everyday situation as if they were moments of revelation: a moment charged with magic that can only exist thanks to the ability to believe, to the faith of someone who experiences it. In our culture the feast of the Epiphany is the day of the Three Wise Men and, as we well know, with this feast we also celebrate a great swindle. The “white on white” picture has something of this; it partakes of the need to believe in something. A tautological affirmation that functions well in contemporary art and that places us on the terrain of what I would call the eternal discovery of gunpowder. Maybe due to this, so as not to be duped by appearances, on the back next to the word *Eden* I’ve placed a small wasps’ nest. That’s also why the image on the computer screen is of a desert island with an advertising slogan asking us to get shipwrecked there.

All this seeks to produce a recognition that might lead us to accept that this search for transcendence, for an art that marks the path of the absolute, is nothing but a sham. In short, that the sublime is nothing but damaged merchandise that continues in the shop windows as a lure.

There’s also the issue of the importance of the siting of the piece. The sculpture faces away from a garden. A not very important garden, perhaps, although Ferdinand Columbus’ ombu tree is nearby, that in some way contains the memory of ideal nature, of that nature which no so long ago was the mistress of the artist. Is it possible that the artist’s marginal position may be due to a forgetting of nature, as the positioning of the sculpture seems to suggest?

Frankly, I don’t think the forgetting of nature contributes to increasing the marginality of the artist. The idea of the natural has gradually been faded away for all of us. In some ways the stereotype has devoured the original model. The artist ought never to have been imagined as a noble savage; except for a few literary fantasies, he never was one. The activity of the artist has always been artifice. Art’s appeal to a model of the natural is contradictory, since what we may obtain from art is only an imitation of nature. Hence, that original model is always conditioned by the representation that precedes it.

It’s obvious that the sculpture is situated in a totally domesticated framework. The garden could be understood as a frontier, a hybrid space in which the diverse shores that delimit, or marginalize, different worlds converge. This being so, it could be understood as the ideal space for siting a representation of the artist.

The idea is to place it in an almost hidden location. The polychromed bronze and the many details invite the viewer to glimpse it as he draws near. But due to the narrowness of the

site, this drawing near is actually individual. How do you understand this individual “representation” with the fact of being installed in an open public space’

A central space, say, would have meaning if my aim was that of playing at making a piece that would reproduce the tics of the monuments that pay tribute to power. This isn't the case. On the contrary, the intimate—I wouldn't say hidden—character of the chosen location also permits a double level of reading. A distant one, in which we consider the ensemble as a whole, allowing the existing architecture to participate; and one that is close to, that leads to a relationship of intimacy necessary to appreciating the details, which finally extends and enriches the content of the piece. I've often used this near/far alternation in my paintings. It's an effective way of involving the viewer, of obliging him to actively interpret things, to forego his contemplative passivity and assume an inquisitive, critical attitude. This calls for a degree of involvement on the part of the public that isn't always easy to find. But it's our job to propose that challenge.

Although the monument is dedicated to the artist, it appears that the true hero of the piece is the viewer. He deserves the fanfare and the applause merely for approaching something that seems to be a monument. But Fame was a highly controversial figure in antiquity, as praised as she was insulted. She saw everything and transmitted everything, the good and the bad, the great news of heroic victories and the most malicious bits of gossip. I say this because the viewer, although deserving in your piece of the attentions of fame, doesn't come out of it very well, either: while the fanfare sounds in his honour, his surprised, frozen image is projected on a screen at the entrance to the area. And so the piece seems to acclaim the viewer and to reward him for his daring, but at the same time situate him in Warhol's insubstantial fifteen minutes of fame. To bring this interview to an end, what is the role and the place of the viewer in this work?

As I've remarked above, his role could be likened to that of the occupants hidden inside the Wooden Horse of Troy. The piece exists and is justified with the public, but the latter also draws up its death certificate. This is the way that starting out from an offering the city ends up being destroyed. Over the years my work has insistently gravitated around the idea of vanitas. The ephemeral nature of existence cannot be foreign to the work of art and by extension—or inclusion—to the public. Auden said that no individual belonging to the public genuinely commits himself, given that for only a few hours a day does he effectively belong to the public, the rest of the time he will be himself, therefore he won't be public. We artists are no different in this, either.

Translation from Spanish: Paul Hammond.