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ALFONSO ALBACETE: INTERNAL AFFAIRS

Internal Affairs is the title that Alfonso Albacete (Antequera, 1950) has chosen for this exhibition featuring over 150 works on paper, culled from among the countless pieces stored in folders, drawers and notebooks in his studio to evoke a shifting map, a possible index of the themes, motifs and models of an oeuvre developed over the course of more than three decades.

Internal affairs is what transpires inside the studio when the artist strives to materialize his thought processes and convey, through the pictures that are their polished formalization, the results of his artistic research.

A ray of light; a body's expressive pose; an architectural form in the middle of a wild, rugged landscape; the shadow cast by a plant on a piece of paper; a mythological character, a maths problem, a newspaper photo; the memory of a situation or a poem... themes, figures and objects that have been meditated on, analysed and experienced in various ways and at different times, in some cases for years. Their forms, volumes and colours, their symbolic meanings and their ability to express the contemporary or the timeless are interwoven, acquiring mutual references and significances until they are finally resolved in a series of paintings.

This exhibition reveals the tracks of the processes whereby that persistent research linking the visible world with the world of ideas and sensations is developed, in notes, sketches, retouched press clippings, collages, tracings, etc. And it also shows the different technical resources and mental registers and the diverse languages that this painter, with the confidence of experience or the boldness of experimentation, uses to affix them to paper.

I recall that, years ago, Albacete described one of his works (*El estudiante de Praga / The Prague Student*, 1985) as “a self-portrait of my head from within”. In fact, we might say that visiting this exhibition is like being inside the artist's head. Each work is a neuron, and their interrelations are the infinite synapses that facilitate the complex mental processes of a keen intellect, ever attuned to the changing course of existence and of culture. It is not surprising that one of Albacete's recent series goes by the

generic title of *La seda* [*Silk*]. Like the silkworm that encases itself in a claustrophobic cocoon and emerges as a butterfly to lay eggs so the entire process can begin anew, ideas are fed, grow and are often transformed by the various formal mutations that the artist forces them to undergo in his alternately focused or haphazard quest to find the central thread of meaning, until unprecedented situations finally emerge which in turn plant the seeds of new ideas.

Index would have been another appropriate title – an index that tracks and traces, through the many works and series produced in the course of his prolific career, several possible thematic areas or guiding threads, which we might call *Interiors*, *Natures*, *Figures*, *Self-Portraits*, *Grids*, etc. Yet these areas are never self-contained; they cross-pollinate and contaminate each other, attempting to weave one of the possible orders configured by chaos, which in this case is not disorder but the only true governing force of the Albacete universe.

In the *Interiors* zone, the works' own internal structure echoes the built spaces of architecture, which, as Albacete the architect is well aware, is first erected in the mind and later takes shape as solid material. That interior is often the studio, an architectural space as well as the artist's living space but also an imaginary place of light and shadows which he occasionally expands to include nearby streets or places of art. With this limited repertoire – four walls, a few windows and doors, some personal belongings and the tools of his trade – the painter develops a meaningful discourse, capable of conveying information and knowledge not only about the world and its experience but about painting itself.

In *Figures* the artist explores the corporeal architecture of human presence in all its complexity by adopting different approaches to the challenge of pictorial expression: the figure painted from life, in the academic style, or as a symbolic vehicle that references other artists and styles. It is interesting to note how Albacete eludes outright narrative: those bodies are never "people" with personal stories to tell, but figures with evanescent faces and identities, empty vessels that can be filled with multiple meanings, such as certain iconic images taken from mythological symbolism and transposed into a pictorial key. Of particular interest is the *War Paintings* group, where body and painting are fused into one indistinguishable entity, in one of those playful double entendres that Albacete uses so well: painting as a war that must be fought day after day.

Works and studies related to the landscape and the impossible task of capturing its vast, ever-changing nature are grouped together in *Natures*. Here the parts are played by the rhythms of the seasons, sometimes with a musical inspiration, and the now unbreakable bond between the natural environment and the manmade interventions – houses, roads, etc. – that furrow and populate it, prominently featuring the scenery of the Mojácar coast and countryside which the artist knows so well. He also explores, often using resources borrowed from the graphic arts, the theme of visibility and the ability of the gaze to penetrate the plant cover, which we might humorously sum up as an inversion of the saying about "not seeing the forest for the trees".

This, along with the research motivated by his theoretical interest in fractals – those fascinating mathematical patterns found in nature – is precisely the origin of the pieces in the *Grids* section, which were begun in the 1990s and continue to hold the painter's attention, as we can tell from the drawings and sketches in the aforementioned series *La seda [Silk]*.

Like basting stitches, the self-portraits run the length and breadth of the entire exhibition. Created over many years by observing reflections in the looking glass or fixing a self-image floating in the miasma of memory, these are not so much autobiographies as expressions of the idea of painting as personal destiny. In them we see the artist's polyhedral gaze, capable of seeing or interpreting himself from any perspective: through the lens of rigorous realism, in the swift yet no less emphatic and accurate strokes of caricature, or with the graphic concision of illustration. With subtle pencil-drawn lines or the solid stains of a brush soaked in oil paint, Albacete's self-portraits configure a kaleidoscope of the passage of time, each capturing the emotional expression of a specific moment or situation. One drawing is particularly attractive in the way it fuses his face and his studio into a single image. By combining a few simple elements from his surroundings – a wooden plank and a canvas leaning against the wall, a discarded rag and stains and shadows on the wall and floor – he managed to compose, in a manner reminiscent of Dalí's portrait of Mae West, a self-portrait that is uncannily true to life.

William S. Burroughs wrote that "the price an artist pays for doing what he wants is that he has to do it". Albacete pays the price by working every day in his studio with the discipline of an office clerk. It is always hard for an artist to maintain tension in his work and weather the difficult moments when his own tension, or that of the art world, seems to wane or weaken. Attuned to the theoretical debates, formal concepts and technical

innovations of his time, this artist has always known how to separate the grain of his investigations from the chaff of passing fads. These internal affairs, or self-portrait from within, now presented at the CAAC are not the artist's personal diary, because the private universe of Alfonso Albacete, far from being self-referential, is the cultural world of his time, and his oeuvre is an ongoing process of reflection which, for over 40 years, has offered insight into his complexities and transformations.

Text about exhibition *Alfonso Albacete: Internal Affairs* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, February 15 - March 30, 2014)