

Mariano Navarro

RUTH MORÁN: MAPPING FLIGHT

Let us begin with a temporal digression. How ought we to define artists who devote all their attention to the minimal, and to endlessly multiplying it, creating worlds and even universes? This is an essay that I also find useful for placing Ruth Morán (Badajoz, 1976) in an open-ended cosmogony or, more to the point, for inscribing her within a certain lineage, within a philosophical and mystical way of acceding to reality.

A forerunner could well be Claude Monet (1840-1926) and a suitable subject water lilies or *nymphaeae*, for our ends the more abstract ones, of course, like those in the Musée Marmottan in Paris, in which the shape of the flower dissolves in the undulations of the water or, vice versa, we see, as the artist wished, “water with grasses that undulate at the bottom.”

I realize the link with Yves Tanguy (1900-1955) seems a bit far-fetched, to say the least, but I can't rid myself of the sneaking suspicion that there's some sort of relationship between the desolate and at the same time crowded oneiric landscapes of the Surrealist painter and the electrically populated spaces of Ruth Morán. A question of energy.

The presence of the stain, or rather the way the wider brushstrokes are constituted in the body of the shape reminds me at times of the construction method of the more abstract Philip Guston (1913-1980), the one from the mid-1950s, who grouped the chromatically densest brushstrokes in the middle, which thereby drew the paler and lighter outside area to where they were.

In a recent essay Paloma Alarcó remarked that Mark Tobey (1890-1976) had acted as a bridge between the American Abstract Expressionists and European abstraction, defining his style as “delicate and linear, deriving from observation of the natural world as well as Surrealist automatism and Oriental mysticism. [...] In most of his paintings [...] the all-over picture-making structure is constructed with floating, interweaving, calligraphic forms that define his particular spatial representation of the cosmos.”¹ Apart from the distance in time, these are words that tally with Ruth Morán's way of doing things and with her mental painting.

Looked at another way, her works conjure up the *Reticuláreas* of Gego (Gertrud Goldschmidt, 1912-1994), her aerial installations of the early 1970s, which extend their material fragility—fine wires and minimal linkages—via network-like connections until describing a weave pattern that occupies the vacant space.

¹ Alarcó, Paloma. “Monet y la abstracción”, *Monet y la abstracción* (catalogue), Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid, 2010.

It's odd, too, that the German-Venezuelan artist's last drawings go by the name of *Weaves*.

Many years have gone by, it was in 1993, but it's hard to forget the experience of contemplation that Brice Marden's MNCARS exhibition of the *Cold Mountain* series afforded us. The reading of Han Shan's poetry, his wish to get away from minimalism and the opposition to ease of execution blended with a personal vision of nature, at once cold and romantic, giving rise to seven extraordinary canvases in which the line—sometimes described with the left hand—snakes, turns back on itself, floats or plummets, acquires opaque density or whispers its pallid existence.

There is in Marden, as I believe there is in Ruth Morán too, a dialectic of the artist's body confronting the physical act of painting. If in Marden praxis is resolved in a confrontation in which arm, hand, brush-length and movement intervene, in Morán the same members and dynamics take part, but with the breath held in more.

If we were to go looking in Spanish art, we could find certain similarities in the great polyptych by Alfonso Albacete, *El Mar de la China*, about which I've written that, "He evaluates the achievements of that involuntary will to paint, if I may be permitted the paradox, that being a painter is all about. Because for Alfonso Albacete painting is essential for discerning the world, and only by painting can he speak the world in the way that is specific to him. And at the same time they testify to all the infinite trails blazed by such action. There is, in this instance, a total abolition of perspective and a certain sway of the vertical, as if the gaze were driven or obliged to slide from top to bottom through impossible waters."²

And in the calligraphic drawings of Juan Navarro Baldeweg, dry runs for their potentially immediate application in architecture, which he calls "scribbles," and which led Ángel González to write that, "Juan has composed a kind of drawing in reverse, in which what we might have seen in a conventional one has disappeared here, and yet there appears what in the other kind went unseen: the residues of shapes that have disappeared; or, strictly speaking, of what there was between them; the tension between their boundaries, which finally divulges its material nature here."³ His text culminated in a comparison between the reflective *Garabatos* of Navarro Baldeweg and, with its geometrical brushstrokes that turn the picture into an ensemble of undulating lines, Claude Monet's vibrant *Rue Saint Denis, fête du 14 juillet 1878*, and its "dark splashes in a motley, translucent tissue, a kind of shawl trapped by a whirl of blue, white and red confetti, floating and fluctuating, silent and hallucinatory."⁴

² Navarro, Mariano. "Albacete o la extensión de una quimera", *El Cultural*, 2 June 1995.

³ González, Ángel. "Todo lo verdadero es invisible", *Juan Navarro Baldeweg* (catalogue), IVAM Centre del Carme, Valencia, 1999.

⁴ *Ibid.*

In these last five or six years, the most active in Ruth Morán's career, all the commentators on her work have tended to agree that hers is an abstraction as measured and controlled as it is dependent on gesture, which is rendered singular by its warp-and-weft composition and the presence of a revelatory inner light.

She herself dates the seminal moment that has its hitherto last stage in the CAAC exhibition, *Psicografías*, to 2006.

It hasn't always been that way. As I see it, there are paintings of hers from around 2003-2004, of a more obvious and perceptible expressionism, with as yet no prominence given to line, in which color, always nuanced in her, assumes the responsibility of giving life to the image, the result of a slight contrast in personalities. There is in these pictures a flowing of the paint similar to the kind we saw running in Miguel Ángel Campano or in the best, most solid Broto.

Even in 2006, in the exhibition *Tejido horizonte*, some surfaces, in *Mar de plata*, say, had the shiny consistency we get in Gerhard Richter, and others, *Un momento de felicidad*, referred to the layouts of José María Sicilia from ten years before. She was already making use of polytychs as a form of composition, *Puzzle de la forma mía*, and, of course, a monitoring of her ways of painting certifies to the solidity of her concepts.

Perhaps more importantly, in that exhibition, the way the catalogue reproduces them, she showed an extended series of works on paper using mixed media, including pencil, gouache, watercolor, and even ballpoint pen, which represent a beginning as well as a display of the many paths she was to explore in the immediate future.

Lastly, the series of the same name, *Tejido horizonte*, consisting of half a dozen pictures, for one of which she received one of the various important prizes she has won,⁵ puts an essential issue on the table: her relationship with reality, the reason for her paintings.

Tejido horizonte IV is a textile/landscape mix that interweaves two mutually opposed concepts of the gaze, the proximity of the interwoven and the gaping remoteness of what is contemplated outside. As if what is internal and external to the person were to coexist in one and the same knot.

"Landscape is not narration; it is above all structure," Juan Bosco Díaz-Urmeneta argued in his summing up of the awarding of the prizes. And he went on to say: "I don't know if I've hit upon the right words, but I know I have with the idea Ruth Morán was pursuing. [...] The painting is entirely coherent with this idea. It is an abstract work, close to Neo-expressionism, the stripy surface of which omits all reference to pictorial illusionism. It is not a landscape; it is simply painting. But in the solidity of the forms and in the consistency of the picture, a lot of thinking about space

⁵ The Focus-Abengoa Prize, Seville, 2007. *Verde pequeña madera*: Accésit ABC, Madrid, 2008. *Negro cielo dorado*: The City of Badajoz Painting Prize, 2008.

is visible: a form of meditation that has gradually separated out the anecdote until getting to the essential, the mutual relation between the body and whatever surrounds it.”⁶

It would seem, however, that the artist contradicts the two of us with her contrariwise convictions. “Painting is a vehicle that reveals clues about the landscape to me, it also lets us accede to knowledge and inner exploration. Landscape is fundamental to the painting I do; I owe it a lot. I extract elements that construct this landscape, codifying it in my very reality,” she’d said to Martín Carrasco Pedrero a few months before.⁷

A few years later, on the occasion of a group show in Sicily, the artist would pay close attention to the sea off Palermo and to the landscapes of Mondello and Sferracavallo for her drawings.

She created a large polyptych—consisting of more than sixty pieces—that is notable for a richness of color that is not very common in her work, with especially strong greens and reds, which led the critics to see an appropriation therein of the energy of the city that transformed her drawing into a seismograph capable of mapping the depths.⁸

As if some perfectly organized plan were involved, the evolution of Ruth Morán’s work in the five or more years we are speaking of has kept to a line that blends exploration and coherence.

To begin with, this involved, I believe, going beyond the weave patterns and grids acting on the actual surface of the canvas or paper, and discovering a figure/ground contrast that she could compose without the need for a strict background or for sharp definition. More than encountering a territory of action, in turn indispensable, this meant doing so with a territory capable of absorbing time, the expanded duration of the creative and investigatory act that leads to the creation of the picture.

Alongside this discovery of “place” was the defining of gesture; how much of herself, so to speak, there would be in each of the arm, wrist and hand movements that seeped into the line and that without representation gave presence a chance.

In the third place, although obviously not in the last instance, a progressive command of color, a natural or acquired ability to enrich monochrome painting, and of change, in order to transfuse colors that are by nature opaque in luminous vibrations, and also in order to incorporate other, brighter, dynamic and vibratory ones: shocking

⁶ Bosco y Díaz-Urmeneta, Juan. “Un balance de la pintura joven”, *Diario de Sevilla*, 8 December 2006.

⁷ Carrasco Pedrero, Martín. “Ruth Morán. Naturaleza interior”, *Diario de Sevilla*, 27 September 2006.

⁸ Marina Giordano. “Quando el viaggio diventa forma d’arte”, *Balam Magazine*, 2010.

pinks, scintillating yellows, atmospheric blues, torrid oranges, and juicy or arborescent greens.

Two of the artist's declarations focus on a few other basic ingredients of her work: "I'm interested in the gesture, a sort of action painting *à la européenne*, which is directed towards a certain construction; that is, a tangled geometric construction of forms controlled by a secret architecture."⁹ And "the picture is a micro-space, an accumulative game, a palimpsest. It is a work on light, which requires a sacrifice: extracting the light rather than showing it."¹⁰

Movement, construction, repetition and luminosity, all of them distinctive traits of her best work.

Among those who know her way of working and her person the best, the painter Juan Lacomba, of whom Ruth Morán has been an outstanding disciple, pointed out, quite early on, the course events were to follow in a text of exquisite lucidity, from which I take this description: "A painting that, if it previously justified itself in expressive gestures that polarized the contents of the picture, now activates interrelated fields in which plenitude opens out onto new pictorial geographies. Geographies: pleated worlds, fields of different scale, pertaining to the macro- as well as the micro-cosmos. Stellar universes and opaque material surfaces, which owe their origin to both the instinctual and the thoughtful.

Tangles or nebulae, weaves and grids, painterly strokes and actions, fragrant surfaces, spatial nuclei or calligrams. Landscapes, musical scores, counterpoints, waves and echoes. Different alchemies, picture-making processes, encounters, revelations and assorted pictorial epiphanies."¹¹

The Ruth Morán exhibition at the CAAC consists exclusively of paintings in vinyl tempera and felt tip pen, all of the same size, with an identical, opaque black background, from which floating, stratified, white compositions emerge.

This is a logical continuation of some of the works created last year, in which a relatively dark background already appears, on which lines are arranged and displaced via parallel sequences of a single, tirelessly repeated line, which either covers the width of the paper or is interrupted and plummets as if it were trapped by the force of gravity. One sequence is superimposed on another, at times with a minimal difference of angle, to form singular, clearly differentiated layers.

⁹ Carrasco, Martín. "Apuesto por la emoción y la inteligencia", *Diario de Sevilla*, 9 March 2008.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Lacomba, Juan. "La expresión de la superficie", *Ruth Morán. Tejido horizonte* (catalogue), Junta de Extremadura, Consejería de Cultura, Mérida, 2006.

In relation to her previous pictures, the artist undoubtedly reduces both her chromatic range, which is restricted here to the velvety black of the background and lead white, and the flapping and intertwining of the weave pattern, which in fact ceases to be such and takes on another appearance. I would say they are solidified filaments in articulated shapes.

I'm taken with the image of the painter bent over the cottony void she has created, making a start on the drawing, the first line of a single, extended stroke on which the rest of the visible construction will hinge, generated by the reiteration and repetition of that same gesture or another one very like it. An invasive re-incident, which establishes at the same time as she draws them the map and the territory that are all her own. A mapping, to be sure, and of the depths, but now of the actual self and of the metamorphosis the practice of painting inculcates in she who paints.

The way she uses time and the imminence of its irruption in what is painted appeals to me. There, time is guzzled, image-wrapped, turned into sentient appearance. Duration given a shape.

All or almost all of Ruth Morán's oeuvre has a dual consistency: terrestrial, cartographic and territorial, on the one hand; ethereal, in expansion and cosmic, on the other.

The shapes in her most recent works also have something wing-like about them, though not the natural wings of some bird or other but wings constructed by an artisan, a Daedalus of painting, who sees how the rods and feathers forming them stay up so readily, beating or motionless, floating in the aroma of the sky, how they lose their canes, how the strings that adjust and bind them unravel; and how their qualities, like all that is temporal and human, dissolve in the darkness of the air.

Mappings of flight or isobars of feeling.