

## On the possibility of portraying color

### 1. As a general overview

Pushing the boundaries of painting to the utmost limits is a challenge which is still continuous to this day, centuries after the gauntlet was first thrown down. Nevertheless, interesting voices emerge from time to time, with the periodicity of calendar cycles (be they Chinese, Aztec or Gregorian), stirring up the old, worn out defence force, sensitive to even the slightest threat of attack. Why is it, with the popularization of industrial neons bursting forth from their natural surroundings in the factories and mesmerising laboratories and the validation of the Industrial Revolution at the close of the XIX century that this absurd disrepute has spread amongst certain supposedly intellectual self-proclaimed progressive classes regarding the death of painting? Perhaps it is due to the emergence of new techniques, many of which stem from the hand of the new craftsmanship known as technology – and as such have nothing to do with art –, having at the same time signified the disappearance of other techniques from the past and those still in force at the time, as if the basic point under discussion has more to do with the volume, the ability to draw on every expression and the resource-based economy of the planet, thus comparing it to a tiny island in the southern seas, than to other less pertinent matters and which only bear relation to the deep, rationally indefinable emotion, which connects the very real personal impact to a work of art?

In recent times Charles Saatchi has played a major role in kindling the debate. Firstly, with exhibitions like “Sensation”, which made the generation of Young British Artists headline news with Damien Hirst at the forefront with his famous formaldehyde shark, in the piece titled “The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living”, the paralysed and damaged painting, hanging one step from the grave, yet already inside the coffin itself, that moment of formal rupture making way for every kind of new expression, however unsafe and caustic: just what the wealthiest social class of the new deal required to confirm their distinction, the maximum expression of capriciousness and vicissitude by all appearances unrestrained under the label of the sanctity of artistic work. Like a commercial operation, designed according to the cultural context generated after the Second World War (and the rebound of the earlier societies, in reference to the most rigid and authoritarian forms destroyed in the struggle), “Sensation” and its fringes (which were still highly visible in the last show of the *Dokumenta de Kassal* in 2007, with Cosima Von Bonin in a highly visible position, followed by an ever-growing band of not only younger but older artists. Amongst those worth mentioning, not in any ranking order, but simply as they spring to mind, are Thomas Hirschhorn, Jason Rhoades, Paul McCarthy, Mike Kelley and Thomas Schütte) were part of a resounding success, sanctified perhaps by the staggering announcement of Saatchi’s 12 million dollar sale of Hirst’s celebrated shark and the verification that during the final ten nominations for the Turner prize, of the forty or so artists selected for the final phase only five were actually painters.

Yet painting has neither died nor is it predicted to do so in the near future, at least while the human eye doesn’t alter its way of viewing the world by means of those deciphering codes which are based on perspective, the simulation of volume and space through optical and mental subprograms and the perennial virginity that their nerves always experience when faced with an explosion of colour. This confidence, with the security that brings about the conviction that the chosen path, although it means facing important challenges the future, cannot be better placed, rooted than in the medulla of the human spirit. From his earliest years, Yago Hortal’s ambition to explore new territories, his overpowering chromatic force, the magical quality of the

expression which in spite of existing is still questioned, we could almost say that his discourse is trans-pictorial (something which will be explained presently) and the incorporation of new techniques and materials in the confection of the mixtures used, should unquestionably be considered as one of the strongest prospects within the contemporary panorama at the moment of predicting the new artistic tendencies at the beginning of the XXI century. And with Yago Hortal: long live painting!

## **2. Chromatic Baroquism**

Something which is always interesting in hindsight is that, in the work of outstanding artists, it is possible to appreciate that at the time of their appearance on the artistic scene they were ahead of the events surrounding them, as if the artist were living, at least in terms of his creative process, in a differed time in relation to the others, differed as in the opposite sense, in other words, advanced in regard to conventional time. Yago Hortal presented his first solo exhibition in 2008 at the Espai 2nou2 in the Senda Gallery, Barcelona, just as the mother of all economic crises exploded on a global scale, reflected in the depth of a substantial crisis of values and models throughout the whole of western society. Depression then, not exclusively economic, takes possession of the planet and the gloom, the profoundest despondency, sadness with nihilistic overtones never seen before, takes possession of all spirits. Everything leans towards the monochrome, the camouflage of urban pollution depending on how you view it, and the virulent campaign against the objective criteria of a work of art is run between the hands of the collectors and the least informed critics. In this light, the constant prevailing eclecticism resembles the absence of real direction, on both a social and cultural level, which brought about the decline of the Roman Empire, to offer one example. If Cato were reincarnated and given the means to speak he would say that everything counts because nothing is worth nothing.

The work of Yago Hortal stems from somewhere else, a place where we will undoubtedly find ourselves in a few years. Throughout history every critical situation has also generated a generic response and from time to time it has provoked a violent change. In fact Baroque in its classical form, in the period roughly between the Renaissance and Neoclassicism, offered a cultural solution to the situation of psychological suffering which was affecting the human population throughout a Europe bereft of solid religious and ethical values in the light of the new science, the Protestant Reform and the consequent crisis in the ruling Catholic faith. This feeling of emptiness was filled by an increasing use of metaphor and allegory, along with the abandonment of the false and meticulous formal discipline of the Academia thus the pejorative idea of the excessively ornate form would follow only later, closer to the end of the period. Let's consider, for example, that Velázquez is, because of the timeline and the complexity of his compositions, a true Baroque painter. In the same way, the planet's current state in complete crisis of values and referents, the appearance of work with a truly complicated colour palette such as that of Yago Hortal comes to fill this space ahead of time in the response to the horizon without horizon in which we live.

Hortal submerges his expression in an arena where the tinctures lack shame, they shout out and even evoke electric vibrations which distance them from all convention or norm based on the natural balance of things. The array encompasses the entire spectrum and the sub-spectrum of the visible; the complete undulating range of this substance in a corpuscular form of energy that is light. Like a tsunami, the apotheosis of colour propels the viewer and provokes personal vibrations in union with the frequencies generated by the

outrageous combination of colours. A vibration which becomes the internal pulse of the subject, since, as we already know, when all is said and done, the form of the subject is the colour.

### **3. The form of colour**

The movement of the brush or the paintbrush over the canvas, in addition to the chromatic complexity reveals the calligraphy of its own design, like the design of those skyscrapers where the architect has left the view of the supporting structural framework exposed. In this aspect Hortal's painting becomes related to the work of Juan Uslé and Jason Martin, to name two analogous examples, openly displaying arpeggios from the same cuisine, at least in reference to their precise process and the magic of the execution. The scored surface opens the terrain of the painting up to an exultant, festive topography, with a boldness verging on the audacious and a total absence of cowardice, with the vibration of areas in movement and the almost impossible sparkle of phosphorescent bands which radiate a light where only an abyss had been visible before. The radicalism of the colour itself, as the true protagonist of the work, with its form and movement due to the skilful handling of all the structural elements of the composition, always perfect in Hortal, creates a boldness which finally brings about pure equilibrium. So much so that, even some pieces with subdued greens and reds, intense in the first analysis, on the fringes of a daring combination of fields and furrows of colour, are reminiscent of the classical abstract forms such as those generated by Howard Hodgkin in his day.

Thus the colour becomes the pure motif in Yago Hortal's work, adopting all forms imaginable in conceiving a long awaited psychological portrait of itself. This prominence carries the artist's work far beyond the brushstroke, also bringing into play other resources such as the outrageous style of dripping, the judicious spattering of bold strokes, the level of intensity pushed to the limit, the harmonious canalization within a certain randomness presented in the accidental paint on the canvas or working with experimental dialogue on backgrounds previously primed with colour. Yet the most important of all is what governs the use of all these resources, that natural disposition towards the composition of the work, that singular mastery in bringing all the extreme elements to the final equilibrium that makes Yago Hortal an extraordinary artist, someone who holds the keys to the realm of Alice in Wonderland.

Of course, Hortal's period of study in Seville in 2004/05, and the approach, which led to the work of illustrious painters at his school such as Luis Gordillo, Abraham Lacalle, Miki Leal and Fernando Parrilla has some part to play in this truly audacious, compact, cohesive palette, so pop, so explosive at the same time. His passion for colour and his sometimes reckless but ultimately brilliant synergy owes a great part to this Hispanic source, even though he has been affected by other later influences, without doubt drawn from his sojourn in Berlin, where he lives and works today. At different moments in his career Yago Hortal has been attracted to Albert Oehlen, Pipilotti Rist, Matthew Ritchie, Peter Zimmermann and the great, eclectic and interminable Gerhard Richter and his artistic culture reveals this, yet there is no doubt that his voice has its own singular force.

#### 4. Colour as space

Painting is not closed off, as some fortune-teller could have mistakenly lamented in recent times, to the incorporation of new techniques coming from the emergence of new materials. As such, I am not only referring to oils, industrial acrylics or other combinations in the mixes and the tinctures originating from chemical advances, but also to the possibilities derived from resins, conglomerates and the expansive catalysts which is posited in the rupture of the already surpassed two-dimensionality, that concept required by Clement Greenberg under the term flatness for the painting to be considered as art. The expansion of colour, the protagonist as I have said, in Yago Hortal's work, across the space, beyond the surface of the canvas, is a logical consequence of the roots of his compositional approach (the psychological portrait of colour) and its physical materialisation has been facilitated by the latest generation of specific industrial products. In the last series the colour has grown upwards as much as beyond the limits of the canvas in a movement which is not only justified in the incorporation of the volume in the work but also, in my view, in the consequently clear omnipresence of its leading character – colour. The form is pure colour, the space is pure colour. If “the form is never anything more than an extension of the content” as Charles Olson states and the space is nothing more than the realised form, in Yago Hortal the colour contains all the answers because it is also the origin of all the questions. For the eye, with its recondit bond of nerves and its terminals of neurons in the brain, there is nothing more than colour. All the rest is a fictitious composition which the mind creates. Colour is the true face of the universe. The source of our understanding. Its analysis, therefore, is the way in which it is possible to decipher the mysteries of a reality which cannot otherwise be distinguished from mere entelechy.

That is why, in his last works, seen here in the current exhibition at the Casal Solleric in Palma, the colour's occupation of the space, in a movement which has nothing to do with any other vaguely sculptural or merely interventionist approach, should be viewed within this interpretative line in that the colour of light is the substance of the world and even its most secret longing, most hidden desire, or phobia, or spiritual indiscretion, or feeling of immanence are indelibly printed on it and its entire, even psychological portrait, depends on what may be revealed before our questioning eyes. In the hands of Yago Hortal the oracle of this unattainable reality that can only be represented and never completely embraced, physically, appears before us in all its nakedness, coming close to that famous remark taken by Huxley from William Blake in *The Doors of Perception*: If the doors of perception purified everything man would see it as it is, infinite. The essence of colour, as Yago Hortal knows, and we know, thanks to him, and which remains clearly visible in his extraordinary work gathered together in this exhibition organised by the City Council of Palma, is clearly the infinite.

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