

PROLOGUE

To Roberto Rébora's book

Materia y discurso de fe / Matter and Discourse of Faith

Philip Ball

I'm not sure that the notorious *anxiety of influence* doesn't extend beyond the creator to the audience. Whether we like or will it, or whether we do not, to look at a work of art is to seek points of similarity and reference, echoes of the familiar. Thus might one be tempted, in the paintings of Roberto Rébora, to find signs of Rayonism in the emergence of human figures from what seem like rays of polychromatic light, or perhaps to sense the Delaunays' Orphism among the strong colours and geometric shapes. The linear grids and complementary contrasts speak of early Mondrian. But what does all that mean, in relation to the true intentions of the painter? Not a great deal, at least beneath the surface. These are mere labels to make us feel comfortable. They say nothing about where the art comes from.

How, then, can we regain the untrained eye, to see these paintings without the biases imposed by the pattern-seeking, preconditioned mind? I think that the mistake here (and not just here) is to imagine the image to be divorced from the act of its making. Rébora's art makes the most sense when considered not in terms of the configurations of pigment on canvas, but of the gestures and the materiality involved in their creation.

It's an act of invocation, except that it uses not voice but movement, light and material. *Manifestation* is a better word: a revealing or disclosure that comes about by action, by the striking (Latin: *festus*) of the hand (*manus*). What is made manifest this way is the human presence "found," as it were, in a web of light. "I don't have any reference but light," Rébora attests.

How, though, to find this non-figurative presence? It won't happen by chance; it needs method. This too is an all too easily

overlooked aspect of the painter's craft, which has come to be idealized as a spontaneous outburst of creative imagination and intuition. It is not that for Rébora, not any more. Once, he says, his painting was "all emotive and instantaneous." But now it is "completely conscious. I have to decide where to introduce the next step." Before pigment touches canvas, he needs a "mental order," a sense of which lines to paint.

"Painting," he says, "is nothing but well-ordered material." This feels like the complement of Philip Guston's remark that paint itself is nothing but "coloured dirt." Both could sound dismissive of the business of painting, but neither is. That dirt matters: for Rébora it is important to use stable mineral or organic pigments, to find an integrity in the material. "Materials, the sensibility of materials, determine the painter."

And as for organization: the mind is after all an organ that seeks order, first and foremost as a survival tool. It uses whatever it can find. Line and geometry will guide the eye, and so will colour. In Rébora's paintings the two elements must work together perfectly, refuting the old art-historical dialectic of *disegno* and *colore*, as if the two must be considered rivals.

The result is an active canvas: an image alive with presence, movement and illumination. I think it is vital too that it is a *record*, a visible testament to its making. The image, points out Rébora, must not lose "the principle element of gesture." The strokes are delivered without barriers, in lines invested with tension and direction. They come, literally, from the painter's breath, embodied in pigment. Here, the analytical mind (I can speak only for my own, of course) finds resonances with the unification of breath and stroke in East Asian painting and calligraphy. But, again, those analogies matter less than the specific act of making: a person, a place, a time. It is from here that Rébora's paintings acquire their moral essence. "Painting has the responsibility to leave a trace of the present time in an image," he says, "to make a synthesis of our time."

Roberto Rébora, *Materia y discurso de fe / Matter and Discourse of Faith*, prolog. Philip Ball, trans. Adriana Díaz Enciso and Fionn Petch, Mexico, Turner-Páramo, 2016. [Critical essays, interviews, and literary texts: Erik Castillo, Eduardo Milán, Jorge Contreras, Juan José Gurrola, Miguel Cervantes, Josué Ramírez, Eduardo Vázquez Martín, José Luis Barrios Lara, Daniel Rodríguez Barrón, Gerardo Deniz, Jorge Juanes, José Kozzer, Berta Taracena, and Carlos Prospero.]