

## RETROSPECTIVE

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Carnal remains a word from the beyond.

EDMOND JABÈS, *The Book of Questions*

In Juchitán, Oaxaca, people say that if a child witnesses two adults having sex, then it should be tied down sitting on a donkey's back, facing backwards, and led through the streets proclaiming the names of the couple and what it saw them doing. It is also said that in the olden days, at a certain time of year, the devil would disguise himself as a deer in order to deceive the old women of the village and have sex with them.

Given its very nature—comprising want and a search to satisfy that want—sexual desire has an extraordinary, if latent, poetic power. Also, due to the strong tension between the degrees of presence and absence implicit in sexual desire, it frequently brings up moral notions and attitudes. In the series *La Niña Precoz* [*Precocious Girl*; 1993–1994], working with the resources afforded by the line strokes, Rébora undertakes a provocative reflection on sexuality and perversion in relation to morals. In this series, the space of the composition is dependent on the images of the characters, and the diegetic space of each piece is relevant insofar as it modifies the idea of a stable situation, therefore acquiring a significance that involves an altered conduct.

In his essay *Abstract and Representational* (1954), Clement Greenberg refers to the work of Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko as moments that explore only the flat surface of the canvas and the two-dimensional condition of painting, causing it to lose its interior, a diegetic world where things happen. By contrast, in the works in the series *La Niña Precoz* the lines fulfill the function of providing a setting for the narrative and the poetry, that is, for

literature; it operates as a trigger that sets in motion a diegetic world. The action of lines is not to represent but to provoke an interior dimension of drawing and painting. Each gesture of the brush and the stroke contributes to the construction of an atmosphere and a situation. The strokes cause space to emerge together with a set of latent inferential triggers, which together make up a possible syntax, and a narrative. Likewise, space shifts from the surface that supports the image to the plane within the image, in such a way that in these drawings the plane of the painting is already the diegetic space of the image.

Thus, this series establishes a sphere of altered perception that corresponds, precisely, to the image that emerges in this space. In *La niña precoz* [*Precocious Girl*], the work that gives its name to the series, the figure of a naked girl with a disproportionately large head is depicted on the corner of a bed. The bed is sketched with a few lines, as if the artist's intention was not to draw a bed but to suggest the idea of a bed with as few lines as possible. And, rather than a girl, his intention would appear to be to draw the idea of a naked girl in order to generate not a representation but an unusual and strange situation.

In this way, the result of these line strokes' behaviour is, on the one hand, a diegetic universe that demands the involvement of the viewer to complete the image of a naked girl on a bed in a room; and on the other, this image functions as an inferential trigger for the scene, increasing the active involvement of the viewer by associating him with the abnormal sensation implied by the image: not the sensation of looking at a naked girl, but of thinking about a naked girl. One constant in the work of Rébora is the way he makes explicit the viewer's need not to decode a work but to complete the construction of the image. As such, this series operates not only in the field of representation, but also in the domain of the dialogue with the viewer. And something else too: it operates as an object that *does something* to the viewer.

In his long 2013 essay on Willem de Kooning's work, John Elderfield explains the painter's need to employ the resources of abstract art in order to produce figurative painting, as well as the need to employ the resources of figurative art in order to produce abstract works, in such a way that in combining the two he converts painting into skin and body at once.<sup>1</sup> In the case of Rébora's *La Niña Precoz* the resources of the figure are employed in order to present

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<sup>1</sup> John Elderfield, *Willem de Kooning: Ten Paintings, 1983-1985*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 2013.

concepts and ideas that lead to a reflection on the bodily nature of the sexual experience and of experience in general.

Given that in *La Niña Precoz* Rébora explores sexual liberty, the possibility of rejecting prevailing values, and the construction of spaces of altered perception, we are almost immediately led to think of Vladimir Nabokov and the authors of the Beat generation. The gestural nature of lines also recalls the narrative technique Jack Kerouac called "spontaneous prose." As in Kerouac's work, the investigations of Rébora using the resources of painting similarly lead him to allow a glimpse of the spiritual aspect of his work.

In *La hamaca* [*The Hammock*] we cannot see the point from which the hammock where a couple is swaying hangs, though it may be the roof of a room; neither roof nor room appear in the image, but may be intuited from a number of clues: a gently curving black line that crosses the piece from top to bottom on the left hand side; the lines that comprise the hammock itself; and the areas of colour in the background, suggesting a depth towards which the hammock with its two occupants sways back and forth.

By thus constructing the piece's inferred internal space, the viewer participates in the intention of the painter. Conscious of this participation, he is caught in the artist's proposal to focus on the two figures, and thus cannot help but find himself observing the image of two people having sex in a hammock.

The firm stroke in the few lines that shape the hammock seems to suggest the tension of the weight of the bodies in movement and at the same time configures an above, a below, and a displacement as part of the scene; it even suggests a narrative journey, pausing for an instant to allow our complicity in this observing and to discover in us, at the same time, an awareness of the tension that links the line of the drawing with the desire that gives rise to our gaze. In this way, by drawing images concerned with desire and perversion, Rébora also probes the fracture and the desire that lie at the gaze's starting point.

In its connection with painting, our gaze is an historical artifact, a process that occurs in different ways and which has its origin in the act of contemplation, meditation, and speculation. Plato refers to the "eye of the mind" in the *Timaeus*, underlining his distrust of the ability of looking to "reveal the world;" for this reason too he mistrusts the eyes and believes they produce illusions. *Contemplation* comes from the Latin *templum*, which designated a space marked out for auguries. Originally, it was the area that the *augur* delineated with his staff in order to observe the passing of birds, or stars. Later, the *templum*, and its Greek equivalent, *témenos*, referred to the sacred space from which the sky was observed. Later still, the introduction of mirrors as

a tool for observation contributed to defining our gaze as necessary to gain access to what the gods or nature do not tell us. Observation and our gaze have their origin in a primordial absence, and in a need to gain access. Since then, the gaze has been configured as the desire to know something, not as possession of information but as a lack, an absence. According to Deleuze, when we desire, in reality we are not seeking to possess an object but a conjunction, a situation to which we have no access but that, in a sense, we can intuit and therefore we feel as an absence. In this way, in the drawings of *La Niña Precoz* series our gaze functions as a mechanism of desire, and brings to light what is not depicted insofar as it remains absent, though with a latent presence. Thus presence and absence coincide in themselves, as if they aspired to realization, and desire is the tension that keeps them together, yet distinct.<sup>2</sup>

In another piece in the same series, *¡Ven! [Come!]*, a bed is shown with fewer lines than are used to represent a blanket; a single line in the background demarcates a bedroom's depth, where a male figure appears to be gesturing towards an adolescent girl. Other elements in the drawing—an armchair and an intriguing circle on the floor, where a cat has trapped a bird—contribute to constructing the idea of an altered room and setting.

It is precisely sexual perversion as a field of altered conduct, of what is not permitted by society that makes *¡Ven!*, like the rest of the drawings in the series, allude to the forms of thinking about sexuality, rather than to concrete acts. Thus conceived, sexual perversion allows the artist to present an essay on the degrees of tension and power that constitute erotic desire. Yet in the drawings of *La Niña Precoz* there appears, above all, the idea that desire orients our behaviour and our perception in such a way that working out where the origin of this desire lies is a way of probing our attachment to and hunger for the experiences of everyday life.

Meanwhile, the series refers to the fascination we experience when we are able to observe with a certain lucidity—and fear—amidst the confusion of the forbidden, the perversion that inhabits each one of us. It alludes too to the taste for flesh, skin, and the details of desire and eroticism. As such, these works provoke an encounter of the viewer with him or herself, and with individual conscience as a process that involves others. The boundaries between what is sexually proper and what is transgressive are historical and contingent; they allude always to the understanding of the body as a sensible artifact

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<sup>2</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *¿Por qué filosofar?*, Barcelona, Paidós, 2004. [Translator's note: Jean-François Lyotard, *Why Philosophize?*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013.]

and as a mechanism of perception. Up to the Council of Auxerre in the year 587, it was common practice to hang from the ceilings of temples objects that represented parts of the human body: arms, legs, breasts, feet, hands, hair, genitals; and religious ceremonies were held amidst such installations. The representations of the parts of the human body were elements of the sacred space of the ceremony. Accounting for sexuality as a historical social construction; removing the division between order and transgression, between good and bad taste; probing into what is forbidden in order, perhaps, to show that it is possible to enjoy both the most radical and the most subtle forms of will and desire, and that this enjoyment—inasmuch as pleasure—makes us more human, though in some cases, less human too: this does not imply a moralizing intent. It simply suggests that it is possible to observe the nature and nuances of sexual desire.

In *La zorra* [*The Vixen*], the center of the image is focused on the fearful gaze of a girl, shielding herself behind her father's legs, looking towards the two figures shown on the floor of the room depicted. The two figures may be a boy having sex with a vixen or two of the girl's dolls placed in a sexual position that she means to show to her father.

In several of the monotypes that form part of *La Niña Precoz* series, we may observe an exploration of desire as an active will that produces experiences, of desire as the source of our gaze and as source of its own objects. In the series there is a staging, an acting out of our own desire; there is the transition of our intimacy towards the emotions that we recognize and share with others. However, in Rébora's singular lines these scenes touch on transgression, reveal the forbidden, and leave the viewer with two options: on the one hand, to find guilt-less pleasure in his or her own will for perversion, to alter the established order, to transform him or herself and explore pleasure, fear, memory, and so on; or, on the other hand, to show the extent to which sexual desire can alter the comprehension of oneself as a human being. The drawings appear to be constructed with the fewest gestures required to represent a scene, a possible narrative, the characters' frame of mind. They also bring the artist and viewer themselves to the fore. Rather than telling stories or explaining, Rébora presents us with an extraordinary, and modest, aim: to allow us to see, to allow us to see into ourselves.

After *La Niña Precoz* series, Rébora continued his exploration of the theme in large-format tempera paintings: *La visita* [*The Visit*, 1993], *La hija* [*The Daughter*, 1993] and *Pareja* [*Partner*, 1992] are examples of this. In the first piece, the stroke is sustained through a lengthy journey that reveals a girl with her legs spread apart; in the second one, a body appears hugely elongated until it touches the edge of the image's space,

drawing the movement of the brush on the canvas into the territory of perversion, as explained by Umberto Eco.<sup>3</sup>

In *La visita*, the brush prolongs to its final conclusion the pleasure of resting on the canvas, carrying the drawing beyond a recognizable figure. This gesture takes the image, precisely, from the sphere of representation into the field of painting, where the painter finds himself alone with the canvas, relying only on his resources and his abilities to produce a diegetic space.

In the painting *Pareja*, however, a recognizable image no longer appears: there is no more than the testimony of the elongated gestures of the artist that generate the strokes on the canvas. Rébora appears to be saying that painting is not about representation but about an extraordinary experience in which there is no rational control over what is produced, only the pure desire of losing oneself and allowing paint to say what it is impossible to express in verbal language.

In *La Niña Precoz*, as in the paintings which I have related here with this series, although the images are recognizable and admit narrative constructions within a space, it also becomes clear that the artist is continually discovering the possibility of living in the paint and that aesthetic gesture on the experience of painting consists in to disappear for a few moments to let the brush and painting live on their own, guided by an individual who is not the painter but a collective actor. This condition provides a bridge between the inquiry that Rébora realizes in *La Niña Precoz* and being made in *Media Star*: both series can be considered research programs in which the artist accomplishes a reflection on his practice as a painter and, at the same time, on understanding the continuous flow of his experience.

(Translated by Fionn Petch)

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 Kozler, Berta Taracena, and Carlos Prospero.]

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<sup>3</sup> In *Lector in fabula*, Umberto Eco asserts that the pleasure of pornographic images lies above all in pausing to observe the naked body very slowly. Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula*, Barcelona, Lumen, 1981. [Translator's note: Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader*, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1984.]