

## SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF ROBERTO RÉBORA'S PAINTING

Eduardo Vázquez Martín

The first thing we need to say is that Roberto Rébora's painting is narrative. His images form part of a story in which the characters experience specific situations. Hence the visual form seeks to convey through its own means an experience that is not only sensory but historical as well. For this reason, the bodies created by this Mexican painter, the figurative forms that inhabit his paintings, always describe some movement: they are moving from one place to another, they stop doing something, or are about to do something else. The precise action that is taking place is added to the meaning of settling in a certain temporal indeterminacy, to the actuality of happening: we don't observe actions that are useful for their visual representation alone, for the delight in forms or colours; they are not, in short, forms held hostage to a preconceived—and thus predictable—aesthetics. The actions we observe in Rébora's painting do not soothe our anxiety on our recognizing them as balanced visual elements that may be assimilated through taste. Instead, his figures appear to be at odds with themselves; they aren't women—and we can't get away from the fact that Rébora's universe is fundamentally composed of women—displaying their natural grace, in line with the tendency of painting from antiquity and systematically enriched up to at least the early twentieth century (we need only think of Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, Rubens' *The Three Graces*, or Picasso's *La Toilette*). Rébora's characters are caught in the very instant where their fateful humanity, the shadows of fear and envy, of light and sensuality, egoism and fraternity, are laid open by the evidence of the painting.

Who are Roberto Rébora's women? They are the mother and the sisters, the wife and grandmother, the aunt and cousin. The

painter's gaze seeks to reveal the feminine matter; it is not interested in woman in terms of a male fetish, an alienable reality. The women who inhabit Rébora's world are visible in the light of the domestic space; they are not the disturbing creatures of the night, the street, the party, the bar, or other exterior landscapes that man's desiring and unsated compulsion have tended to favour. They are lit by the indirect light that comes in through a window to illuminate a bedroom's interior. If they disrobe before the eyes of the painter it is because the presence of this gaze is part of their surroundings, and thus participates in the action it describes. The gaze of the *narrator* neither interrupts nor bursts violently into the paintings' space. Its condition is that of the son, the brother, the cousin, or the lover. In each canvas, Roberto Rébora asserts the earthly dimension held by those women that define him and point at his own particularity. Among skirts and genitalia, the painter does not seek to reduce difference or dilute the insurmountable otherness that separates him from the object of his reflection. The act that determines Rébora's paintings is a form of the identification that states: *they are the women*, and he seeks to turn this recognition into the work's meaning. If we set aside precedents with which we can't identify Rébora's expression, we can also name others where we find affinity, although this action seems whimsical. I am thinking, for example, of a painting by Tintoretto, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, in which we are made complicit in the rape it depicts; through the painting we enter the private world of the characters it refers to, and moreover, we understand that their nature is our own. Unlike Titian, who depicted nudes full of harmony and majesty, Tintoretto, his heir, creates complex figures with fleeting movements that seem to merge with the light. The uneasiness conveyed by this light and this movement is precisely what interests Rébora.

It is impossible not to point at the resemblance between Rébora's work and the representations conceived by Balthus. An echo of those scenes where the Balthusian characters stage a series of inner relationships and reciprocal secrets that require deep reflection to reveal themselves—and whose best reader is Juan García Ponce—can be heard in these works. Roberto Rébora is also interested in putting to work the deductive and interpretative skills of those reading his pictures, not so much to test their readiness and intelligence, but rather to make them complicit in his visual investigation. In Tintoretto and in Balthus, as in Rébora, the painting is a means to overturn the boundaries of intimacy and in this way gain access to a broader comprehension of the world.

*Suite Cojín [Cushion Suite]* is the title given by Rébora to the series of pieces at the core of his work [in 1995–1996]. They are an account of the painter's intervention in the private sphere of some women. They are not representations of an insinuated feminine essence, but rather characters that in the paintings experience the concrete singularity of any individual. In *Cojín [Cushion]* the emphasis is placed on the satisfaction that results from trust: the naked form of a woman lying face down on a pillow looks to the right, apparently unaware of the presence of an observer; her open legs are like two compass legs drawing us to the left perspective. It is impossible not to recall Boucher's *Reclining Girl*, with which it shares a spatial arrangement, while both allow themselves to be touched by the pictorial gaze with an immodest distraction that is not, however, indifference.

In *Ana* and *La trenza [The Braid]*, Rébora paints an adolescent pre-pubescent girl who is apparently being chased, and whose gaze expresses a sadness and bewilderment that contrast with the lightness, grace and composition cognizance that define a body shaped from a range of shades from blue to white. The iconography of the twentieth century has a precise antecedent for this image: the photograph from the Vietnam War of a naked girl with napalm burns running in terror down a road. In both images the beauty and fragility of the figures impose themselves on the fatefulness of their circumstances. Meanwhile, *La trenza* penetrates the world of the female bath, one of painting's classic and recurrent themes: from Memling's *Bathsheba in the Bath* to Degas' *After the Bath*, this space is one of the voyeuristic obsessions of painting, one of the fairest intrusions by the pictorial gaze into the privacy of others, to which Rébora adds his experience with serene and sharp plasticity—before rereading the scene as a violent profanation perpetrated by some women on others in his *La desnuda [The Nude]*. Here, the submission of an almost transparent nudity to the hands of another body, with the complicity of a third figure, naked as well, resembles a circle of hell inhabited solely by women, like a ceremony in honour of Dionysus.

These works, *La trenza* and *La desnuda*, clearly define the pendulum motion in operation in Roberto Rébora's work: one that moves from sensual celebration to the violent nature of the society of women and recounts the perpetual battle between them, the persistence of the mother-daughter dichotomy and, of course, that of guilt and punishment. This is precisely the meaning of *Las señoritas [The Misses]* and *El bat [The Bat]*. The latter presents a kind of chase between three female figures and three periods of

womanhood: the daughter, the mother, and the grandmother, a theme that recalls Klimt's concerns in works like *The Three Ages of Woman*. In *El bat* the ages are not created as successive moments of a single being unfolding in the painting's space, but rather as a kind of dance in which the ruthless struggle for power and authority in a matriarchal community takes place—in the universe of the family created by Rébora the father appears to be absent. The same condition is addressed by the piece entitled *T.V.*, in which the painter depicts an atmosphere resembling that produced by a wide angle lens. In this nightmarish vision brought to us by an elementary, but effective, cinematographic effect, Rébora reveals a desolate woman inside a television set, living out her own childhood fantasy and suffering failure and shame.

Only in one work does a masculine presence appear: in *La cola* [*The Tail*] the substitution of the painter's self by the phallic form is evident. Unlike García Lorca, who in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (*The House of Bernarda Alba*) conceived of a world not unlike that of Rébora's and kept the man as a ghost, an invisible presence that threatened the women with madness, Rébora invited himself in an optimistic affirmation of pleasure. The surface of this piece is traversed by all the painter's themes: woman as the object of the gaze and of desire, sweetness, and absurdity. In *La cola*, Rébora materializes the intervention of the impertinent eye in the private lives of his characters. Here he consummates the desire implicit in all the other works: to fuck, to appropriate even if only for a moment the nature that stirs his passion.

Since Rébora's experience is the result of a close attention to the history of painting—and to the founding movements of modern sensibility, above all—it is shot through with Impressionism, Fauvism, and Expressionism. There is, however, something of the aesthetics of comics as well, with its images strung on a narrative thread. Unlike much contemporary painting, which is driven by its need to discard and innovate—impelled by the style imposed by the Spring-Summer fashion and the voluble whims of the market—Rébora pursues the synthesis of his critical consciousness as a thoughtful painter of a particular experience that makes of him something of a stowaway (certain thesauruses relate it with *rasca*) aboard the women's ship.

(Translated by Fionn Petch)

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