

CHRONICLES OF DE-SYNCHRONIZATION

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Juan Ugalde began to paint along with the Gilda sisters (1970's comic characters), to end up becoming the master of twenty-first century Spanish costumbrista landscape painting in his development as a self-taught artist. We cannot fail to mention that definition that an art critic of his time applied to him: he was *the most Surrealist realist painter in contemporary Spanish painting*.

We want our environment to be a *Wallpaper* type, but it is rather a Parla type, and it is preferable to recognize this and live with it, without prejudice. Acceptance of this fact represents the greatest wisdom. Ugalde achieves this and he conveys it to us through his paintings: he is comfortable in the environment in which we exist, presenting us with the cartography of an era in evolution. The images of life are out there, and the artist aims and shoots, and gathers them up.

Direct observation of the street is an inexhaustible source of iconography and artistic theory. The philosophy of bars also figures greatly in Ugalde's life and work. Even the park bench is a place of reflection of the

anonymous citizens who suffer and enjoy as life passes them by.

There are several paths in the apprenticeship of Ugalde's language and trade, but without pausing to investigate them we indeed see that the final result is a recognizable, assimilable and dearly loved iconography. This use and abuse of the daily and the real, its utilization and constant presentation, consequently has a perfect identification on the part of the viewer and makes us reconsider things. Juan Ugalde communicates with the public in a much more open and direct fashion than most artists do. This is the theoretical basis of his oeuvre. It is part of his challenge as a painter and is absolutely essential. What for very few viewers is now transgressing in his work signifies the language of the comprehensible for the majority. Thus Ugalde achieves that great power of attraction in the observer, and this constitutes his weapon of seduction as an artist. Ugalde moves within known spaces that establish a comfortable dialogue with the viewer.

Culture is local and visual, and Juan Ugalde makes his personal appropriation of it; through

his work he advocates a return of reality from which he has never departed, not even for an instant. Painting concrete things, calling attention to them is his objective. This is the world we live in and the Ugalde style fits perfectly: painting of transgressed costumbrista or manners genre, the gallery of situations and characters from the contemporary universe who are at our side entering and leaving the painting. Ugalde brings the codes of the real and the everyday into the present to offer us - with a singular analytic lucidity- a social diagnosis interpreted through the language of our time, with a poetics of our day. We wonder if there is any social criticism in Ugalde's oeuvre, or irony... I should say there is a respect for the daily routine, for what surrounds us ninety percent of the time. There is something of sociology, even anthropology, in the visual display of Ugalde's works. *It is not a question of presenting a report but rather of capturing images of the everyday.* We will later touch on his facet as a reporter.

We should note that Ugalde is interested in architecture, interiors and landscape, these being decorative elements that he employs as

a *modus operandi* to approach his perception of the world. The city blocks and apartment buildings are realities inundating the open spaces on the edges of the big metropolis, on its periphery, a hated space where the claws of urban sprawl lashing out appear to increase the city's perimeter without rhyme or reason, zones that we would like to avoid when we enter the city on its arterial highways. Ugalde recalls for us that ugliness generated by the ever-increasing sprawl. Scrap metal and junk invade the most bucolic settings; a sofa lies with its innards ripped open in the middle of a field that was a pleasant meadow not long ago. This is reality: the landscape, urban and rural, as a social element: the esthetics of the open field, the dump and the outskirts. As Huici declared in a review of Ugalde's exhibition: *he shows the dark side of globalization.*

From the urban apartment building to the shacks in the outlying zones of the city called shanty towns, and from these to the countryside. It is the Spanish landscape reflected in its purest periphery despite the fact that nowadays the definition of the word periphery is frankly difficult to explain, for its edges are more and more diffuse and diluted. It is on top of us: uprooting as a mode of habitual existence, development and underdevelopment, hand in hand, together.

Ugalde's works represent inquiries into daily, everyday existence, chronicles of the de-synchronization of our times. Ugalde makes us remember where we are, what surrounds us whether we like it or not. *Muebles Fernández* continues to occupy its spot, even though we now travel in a van and at more than 110 miles an hour on the highway to Andalusia. The artist offers us Polaroid photos of the highway and the suburbs, reinterpreted through his perspicacious vision.

The urban apartment building masks what there is behind it, that is, daily life. The building is an element symbolizing the social landscape. The apartment buildings become façades with anonymous windows, yet reality escapes through those very windows in Ugalde's paintings and it appears in front of the city block, in the foreground or on the flat roof of the building, in the form of a burro-taxi.

For contemporary Spanish painting Ugalde is an exceptional chronicler of the moment in which he was given to live, an observer simultaneously implicated and distanced from the cultural cloud that we are immersed in up to our eyebrows. His paintings show us a real world, but he treats it affectionately, without sordidness. As an example, we have his 1996 series with the contribution of photos by Luis

Baylón. Although already used for the artist's exhibition in the Buades Gallery in 1992, I would like to re-state the quote proffered by Kiko Rivas: *sparks of tenderness in a sea of sarcasm.* It is the reality-show, a guaranteed entertainment.

Juan Ugalde is also interested in new technological media and for some time now he has been using advances in this field: the digital camera is his daily ally for the creation of works that will always be paintings, for however much photography advances on the picture's surface. This nonetheless depends on the laboratory and the developing of his work, even though one day we may discover him selected to participate in a collective exhibition of a photographic nature. Ugalde's paintings are icons, created with a large-scale control that in some fashion ennobles, exalts everyday existence.

At the same time that the artist has undertaken new avenues of creation since 2000 (video, installations -involving the public most of the time-, even sculpture), one can perceive that Ugalde's work has become more serious. Visiting the current exhibition from beginning to end, the viewer clearly appreciates the evolution from the early 90's, where some figure of Bruguierian aspect (from the

Bruguera publishing house) has a place, but the artist's entire iconographical world has slowly become more formalistic, less pop, more real... more adult? In 1985 we read reviews on Juan Ugalde's exhibitions where critics insisted: *like his works, his language is maturing*. We have been reading things like this for the past two decades. Likewise, in some review of that same year the observation was made on how Ugalde *reflects the cultural reality of our days*. This is clear: his work evolves and will continue to do so just as the society we live in changes, and Ugalde will continue to be our most accurate chronicler. With the 80's comes color, mirth and *la movida*; the 90's becomes more sordid, and at the beginning of the new century the global village is devouring us. We observe it in the works of this artistic reporter, who works like the ancients, when they prepared their chronicle from the battle front, not from the newspaper copy room: Ugalde gets involved directly.

There exists an analogy of the pop evolution that we can see likewise in Ugalde's works, works that have oscillated between Rauschenberg and Warhol: from the comics Mortadelo and Filemón of yesteryear, to the most poetic open field we could ever contemplate in the painting *Eva*, from the brilliant and strident (even something of

phosphorescent paint) chromatism utilized some time ago to the gamut of whites, grays and blacks used presently with supreme mastery and authority on photographs of the same colors.

An old man with a beret is seated before a brick wall: what seems initially ugly and seedy, in Ugalde becomes beloved. We identify with his characters by means of the affection for them that the author himself transmits to us. Ugalde's heroes are defective and reflect that mordant criticism of modernity with a distinct, super-lucid look. The gallery of characters populating his canvases has also suffered this mutation, evolving from Professor Bacterio lost in an immense landscape, to the beggar who is our neighbor and now the main figure of the canvas (or of a video). Thus we have grown, thus it has been and thus have we recounted it from the 80's to the beginnings of the new century and millennium.

Media reality, so present in Estrujenbank through advertising and election messages, is transformed in the 90's into the reality ignored by the mass media. What Ugalde is interested in is news of the present day, what remains marginalized because it is close, in comparison to the great television news items highlighting catastrophes. *I'm not interested in*

portraying reality but rather in using reality as a point of departure. Nor am I interested in the reality of newspapers or television, but in the more intimate reality, the more everyday that I go along discovering...eluding any project or theory. His works are parables of the daily, fleeting chronicles taken in a snapshot, in a second, that the artist subsequently recreated in his studio.

Employing what we have at hand as an essential source of work. Skill for managing the apparently superficial, reaching the knot of the question. Nowadays few painters are interested in reflecting everyday life, more concerned with transmitting reflections of a more personal nature, absorbed in other ideas more in proximity with the esthetic plane.

Ortega y Gasset declared that thinking is exaggerating. For that reason, when one steps onto the public scene, an individual is pushed towards exaggerating in order to create something more theatrical and in doing so to call attention to the subject depicted. Ugalde, assuming the dissemination of his works and that his message is transcendent in a totally banalized society, communicates and depicts this theatricalization of what undoubtedly surrounds us through the content of his paintings. Thought is exaggeration, but its

depiction is not rhetorical; rather, it is carrying thought to a comprehensible plane of interpretation: visceral, comical or dear. The interpretations can be multiple in the case of Ugalde. Is it the depiction of the defeated loser that we see, or the heroic exaltation of this subject?

When Gordillo comments that *under the appearance of stupidity and filth (in the works of Young British Artists) there beats a framework with a language of its own and that calls my attention*, he is demanding that this should happen not only in Great Britain, but also throughout Europe, not to mention Spain. Therefore I think that Ugalde in his solitary evolution precedes many Young British Artists, in a manner extrapolated from our peninsular reality, beginning with precedents that are our Madrid figurative artists and master Gordillo among others. In turn he is linked with members of the younger, more recent generation, with whom he has even come to share a studio; and this generation has learned

from Ugalde the utilization of street language, of neighborhood figures and portraying what happens around us everyday with a capacity for analysis and inexhaustible invention. I have always like this quote by the artist: *One of the premises that has marked me is using a language absolutely comprehensible by anyone.* With a Berlangian turn of the screw, Ugalde launches a clear and simple, comprehensible message, and it registers not only in the public but in the new school of young Spanish artists.

I cannot avoid thinking of another tangential factor affecting the *evolution and maturity in the artist's works*. It is this journey that has taken him from New York to Madrid's Legazpi neighborhood, and now the artist resides in El Escorial.... The writer Paul Theroux said *traveling is easy if you have a home to return to.* And Ugalde now has this place, which makes one foresee changes in his paintings beginning with this exhibition, and perhaps they are already in evidence here.