

CONFRONTATIONS: REMARKS ON THE ART OF GUILLERMO MUÑOZ VERA*

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I entitle this essay "Confrontations" so as to immediately begin the dialogue regarding "the object" and the crisis of representation in the last years of the twentieth century. Certainly Guillermo Muñoz Vera epitomizes a mastery of a specific approach to realistic conception of the observed detailed, precise renditions of people, places and things may be viewed as end-products of a very long struggle to conceptualize reality in the visual arts. "Reality", one of the most protean and difficult to define terms, has been the obsession and the dream of artists ever since the notion of aesthetic contemplation of images began. Although the beginnings of this concept may be vigorously debated, it might be wise, for argument's sake, to situate it at the beginning of the Renaissance. It was then that art emerged from a position of medieval servitude of other values into an arena in which the image itself could be regarded on its own merits. Reality, or the representation of the tangible products of the world, came to the fore as a principal point of debate and controversy. Which aspects of the world and how to represent them became itself a subject of artistic creation and intellectual rumination (think, for example, of the writings of Vasari or Pacheco and their contemplations on the meanings of reality). Solutions were as varied as the number of artists that existed during the "classical" eras of western art. Was reality to be exalted in the manner of Titan? Or would the unmanly of the essential quality of the banal, as in the work of Velázquez, be the most effective to evoke an emotional response in the viewer?

During more modern periods the nature of "reality" and "realism" became even more acutely necessary to define. In the later nineteenth century the Realists painters such as Gustave Courbet were opposed the Impressionists. Artists like Monet or Renoir attempted to undermine archetypal notions of the observed world by dissolving reality and creating an art form in which the means and techniques of defining the image became ends in themselves. The Cubists (led, of course, by the Spanish genius Picasso) never forsook reality but, rather, repositioned the object as central to the discourse they were fashioning. Ultimately, the myriad of options involved in the process of artistic creativity resulted in a split between the avant-garde and the traditionalists. In conventional definitions of modernism, followers of the various novel tendencies of the mid and late twentieth century have been considered artistically advanced or privileged. However, within the parameters of a wider retrospective view, it may indeed be those artists who continued to concentrate on realism and develop a new approach to the definition of observed materiality that may well be judged to have been the true creators of a late-century or post-modern vanguard. In this category I would certainly include an artist such as Muñoz Vera, who has looked with intelligence and receptiveness at the art of the past and, in his appropriation of the theoretical constructs of this antecedents, has formulated his own approach to the demands of a visual vocabulary based upon the tangible "facts" of existence.

Any scrupulous assessment of the art of Muñoz Vera would certainly entail an enumeration of his affinities with artists of both the past and those realists in the late twentieth century whose sensibilities he shares and who has served as touch stones for his paintings and drawings. While Chilean-born, this artist obviously derives not only direct inspiration but immeasurable sustenance from the Spanish tradition of realism which was initiated in the seventeenth century and continues with such admirable strength to the present day. While this essay is not the venue for situating the artist within his heritage, it is necessary to at least designate a few of these parallels and analogies. The Prado Museum has been an obvious laboratory and place of nurturing form Muñoz Vera. The museum's collection has been for him a locality in which both as a student and, later, as a master in his own right, he found both refuge and validation. In studying the work of Muñoz Vera we sense the inevitable presence of the spirits of the entire cast of characters who have dominated the list of grand sages of the golden Age realist tradition. These include the still lifes of Juan Sánchez Cotán, Juan van der Hamen and, later, the paintings of fruits, vegetables and animals of Luis de Meléndez and Goya. When naming these inescapable figures of the history of Spanish painting, it is significant to make a point that relates to Muñoz Vera's use of "historicity" in his art. When contemplating one of his still lifes or figure compositions, we are never faced with a work that is rooted solely in the past. While the delicacy of his depictions of flowers or

the convincing corporately of a group of objects on a table may remind us of the mastery of the old masters, there is always a distinct contemporaneity in these pictures. In his paintings and drawings, Coke bottles compete with ancient vessels for attention. We are always distinctly cognizant of the fact that the things we see before us are products of the banal throw-away culture of the late twentieth century. Do we also not sense a distinct awareness of ecological concerns in these still life images by Muñoz Vera? I think that there is little in his art which does not question the realities, in both a positive and a negative sense, of human existence and the state of the planet in the 1980s or 1990s. Such an impressive canvas as the 1995 *El Vertedero I* refers to this explicitly but many other paintings underline these realities more subtly.

The melancholy aspect of contemporaneity is powerfully evoked in many of these still life and other compositions. In this aspect, we observe a strong affinity with other of the significance proponents of the "realist" style in contemporary Spanish art (especially with that of Antonio López García). In earlier twentieth century art the "tragic sensibility" (so brilliantly expressed in the writings of Miguel de Unamuno) was stressed through an emphasis on objection and the outward sensation of anguish or misfortune. In these canvases by Muñoz Vera there seems to be a more subtle evocation of the anonymity of everyday life and the solitude of individuality. Alienation permeates the atmosphere of many of these pictures, highlighting the disaffection of modern urban spheres.

The term "urban" is indeed a critical word in any discussion of the art of Muñoz Vera. For as much as he may paint the rural fields of Spain or the desert areas of his native Chile, he is an innately city-oriented artist for whom urban existence serves as the quintessential metaphor of the contemporary social and psychological situation. While Muñoz Vera has painted scenes that take place in such diverse metropolitan areas as Lisbon, Barcelona and Santiago de Chile, it is Madrid that holds pride of place in his repertory of urban sites. For the most part it is not "monumental Madrid" that he chooses to depict (even though works such as the 1983-86 *View of the Plaza de España* or the 1988-89 *View of the Royal Palace* speak eloquently of the grandiosity of the city). The most appealing and convincing of the urban scenes are the less historic corners of the city in the Chueca district or those which show is the unassuming rooftops of Madrid. In these paintings there is a palpable sense of the tangibility of the buildings and the spaces (and a brilliant evocation of Castillian light) that constitutes their urbanity, yet at the same time, there is also a strong evocation of the nameless and the faceless aspects of life there.

Emptiness and intimations of loss are also palpably present in many of Muñoz Vera's images. Uninhabited rooms and corner spaces in which nothing specific occurs define an air of nostalgia and gloom. This is counter balanced however, in the many figure studies in which the artist revels in the plenitude of the human body.

Among the most significant aspects of this artist's engagement with reality is his openness to confrontation. I have called this essay "Confrontations". In my estimation, the notion of confronting reality in all of its multivalent aspects is one of the most compelling things about Muñoz Vera's work. Within his art one makes the leap from the realms of sensuality and hedonism to a direct encounter with the levels of degradation which, in their essence, define the human experience in the late twentieth century. Far from being an aesthete, Muñoz Vera searches out the interstices of contemporary life, depicting those individuals and situations that delineate social and moral dilemmas of today. In his work in the 1980s he often depicted scenes of the hopelessness associated with those individuals who had lost their jobs and, consequently, their residences. Scenes of beggars in the Madrid metro may be comprehended as emblematic of the privations possible in a late modern capitalistic society. Irony is certainly not absent from many of these images.

In more recent work, such as the 1992 *Jordi* the subject of drug addiction comes into play in Muñoz Vera's iconography. specific references to political events are not common, yet the impressive series of drawings done in the 1980s depicting torture scenes inevitably remind us, even if in a very general way, of the terrors inflicted on the populace during times of dictatorship, such as that of Augusto Pinochet (which, of course, touched the life of the painter in a palpable, direct manner. In these works Muñoz Vera confronts his past, his

memories and creates a path for the viewer to enter into his imagination and to question those premises that define the meanings of "reality".

The present exhibition is an important event in that it offers the public a significant opportunity to observe and study the largest number of works by the artist seen together in one place, from his earliest drawings and paintings executed in Chile to his most recent production. Even in his earliest work, Muñoz Vera displayed an obvious affinity for realistic representations of tangible places and things. In his drawings from the mid 1970s we observe a characteristic care and sensitivity to his surroundings. In a c. 1978 graphite drawing entitled *Passer-by*, a man is observed walking slowly but deliberately down an empty street in an anonymous urban setting. Even in this seemingly simple rendition of a cityscape we sense Muñoz Vera's preoccupation with creating a specific mood. While I would hesitate to use the term "surreal" to classify this drawing, the flavour and atmosphere suggested in this work is certainly not one of cold, objective observation. He drawing rather sets up certain ambiguous tensions and creates a sense of disquietude, reminiscent, in a sense, of the mood of ambiguity observed in some of the early paintings by Giorgio DiChirico. In a slightly earlier drawing, the 1975 *Dead Girl*, an air of sadness, even desperation, is created. In this drawing Muñoz Vera displays his sensitivity to visual traditions of the past. In medieval art as well as in that of the Renaissance and Baroque traditions, representations of deceased children were common, evoking in the viewer a sense of pathos and pain. This study, however, presents a depiction which is chilling in its objectivity and seems to refer to the potential for violence and mortality in contemporary life.

It is the most recent work, paintings and drawings of the last several years, that we observe a widening of Muñoz Vera's visual vocabulary to include themes that he had investigated with relative rarity in earlier phases of his career. One of the subjects that has become a principal concept in his visual vocabulary is that of the *corrida*. The theme of the bullfight may be considered a quintessential "Spanish" subject in traditional art. We have only to turn our attentions to the great series of prints and paintings of the master of such subjects, Francisco de Goya, for the best example of this motif in earlier Spanish painting. The heritage of Goya as a describer of the *corrida* in all its details is very rich in nineteenth century Spanish art. Eugenio Lucas, the quintessential Spanish Romantic artist, employed the subject with great enthusiasm as did countless other painters and print makers (both Spanish and foreign) working in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, in the art of the post Civil War realists (those of the 1950s to the present), the bull fight, the "national sport" has virtually disappeared from the repertory of subjects dealt with by the most well-known names in the visual arts of Spain. Perhaps there is a reluctance to deal with what had become a symbol of Spanish "folklore" in the hands of lesser talents in the earlier part of the century. The poets of the Generation of 1898 (Antonio Machado, most outstandingly), complained bitterly about the debased depictions of the "popular" elements in Spanish life. In this spirit, the *corrida* has become something of an uncelebrated theme in modern Spanish painting. It is both fitting and extremely interesting that Muñoz Vera has appropriated and, in many ways, breathed new life into this subject. A Chilean born painter, Muñoz Vera has made Spain his primary residence as well as his primary emotional frame of reference. He has chosen the subject of the bullfight not to enter into an empty dialogue with past achievements of other artists, but to resurrect the inherent visual appeal that the theme elicits. It is, furthermore, interesting to observe that Muñoz Vera does not treat the bullfight in a direct way. In other words, we are not shown, in his recent paintings of the theme (dating from 1999), the grand moments of the lidia; we are rarely confronted with the tensions of the bull ring at the dramatic finale of the event. While he has indeed created certain depictions of the *corrida* in progress, the majority of his works with the bullfight theme are more subtle and allusive of the essential dramatic potential of the spectacle. The artist chooses to suggest these tensions, climaxes, fears or moments of dramatic elation through more oblique references. He will describe the moments before the start of the *corrida* by giving us a glimpse of the preparations of the matador. The 1999 canvas entitled *Traje de matador. Rafael González "chiquilín"* shows simply the presence of the costume draped over a chair in an empty room. The proximity of the man himself is merely suggested by his clothing. The artist also depicts a mirror in the background with a reflection of a candle and an image of Christ on the Cross, an obvious reference to the inevitability of pain, suffering or even death that must be felt by the matador before any *corrida* in which he participates. In this painting we are brought back to mundane reality, however, by the inclusion of the very ordinary lamp plugged into a

socket at the right portion of the image. A more concrete representation of the image of the bullfighter is seen in the painting entitled. *El Litri en el Palace*, depicting the matador in the act of dressing for the bullfight, adding a virtually domestic, even banal air to the grand event.

The bullfight is associated with the spring – the season of the year which also witnesses another grand event which has been defined in the visual arts as a quintessentially Spanish spectacle – the Holy Week celebrations. Each region of the country has its grand processions and other forms of worship/ pageantry. Those in the northern parts of the country, as in the city of Valladolid, are more somber, formal and quietly dramatic. The Holy Week celebration of Seville, however, is the most characteristic and extravagant in the drama it employs to express the deep religious and personal emotions that it represents. The *Semana Santa* paintings of Muñoz Vera, another outstanding facet of his most recent artistic production, are as powerful as his *corrida* images. Both series of paintings and drawings capture the grandeur as well as the emotional intensities inherent in the commemoration of the passion and death of Christ. Through the panoramic views as well as the more intimate and detailed descriptions of elements such as the *pasos*, the *nazarenos* and the reactions of the other participants and on-lookers, we are presented with a deeply moving landscape of emotions associated with this event. Through these paintings we are able to understand an even broader scope of the multi-faceted artistic personality of Muñoz Vera.

[*] Essay by Edward J. Sullivan from the book Muñoz Vera exposición *Antológica, 1973-2000*.
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