

## Nico Munuera: Moving forward through loss

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Nico Munuera's work is constructed from a gaze that is slow and fluid. Although this statement seems contradictory, it is by no means fanciful, and the paradox is justified when we consider that in his paintings the image never seems to be shown in full. When we look at them we feel a kind of unfathomable seduction, an undefined attraction. Our attention lingers and seems unable to coalesce, probably because everything is centred on colour, which acts as a horizon, but also as a barrier. Colour, as a structuring element, challenges us to respond intuitively, while at the same time imposing a slow, meditative tempo, like a note suspended in a dying harmony. This establishes an idea of movement. As when Ingmar Bergman refers to the kind of film that speaks through our everyday consciousness directly to our feelings, to the darkest depths of our soul, or when Luc Tuymans wrings out his paint to form his ghostly oil paintings. In Nico Munuera's case, colour is a vehicle for narrative, transporting us slowly yet vertiginously into a dreamlike landscape of realities.

His poetics is derived precisely from the difficulty of establishing the specificity of the image. In this case, we sense a sea in the background, which, like the clouds, has no limits and is ultimately enclosed in its own projection. Water, like Nico Munuera's work itself, is a mysterious presence which gives us no clue to what we are looking at and creates uncertainty. It is as if his object were the viewer's experience in itself, a feeling that takes precedence in these paintings over the actual image. Everything is governed by the process of internalising the gaze, prolonging our impressions, delving within. Nature is divested of any narrative element that could distract our attention as viewers. I am reminded of the artist Roni Horn's photographs of water in the River Thames, in which she lays reality bare, like a desert, where we are given nothing to go on, and yet every fragment can seem unique and unrepeatable. Painting has always been an excellent space of transit, a form of navigation, and Nico Munuera, whose work is concerned with the specific nature of the medium and who sees painting, the act of painting, as a process, yields to the temptation of discovery, whatever the chosen scale, motif, colour or support.

In a similar vein, Tarkovsky wrote in his diaries that "I could not have lived knowing what life held in store for me. Life would lose its meaning ... If I could know for certain what is going to happen to me, what would all this mean?". So what he was seeking to achieve in his films was for the viewer to be swept along by the image, becoming completely absorbed in it, as it were, without any revelation taking place. Personally I am captivated by all these artists who work in an intermediate space, capable of evoking inconclusiveness, of moving forward through loss, softening it,

expanding it. In this fragmentary state our gaze is intensified, alerted to the surface of a picture dominated by subtle brushstrokes, each less calm and vertical than the last.

Nico Munuera creates the figurative from the abstract, or the abstract from the figurative, with a lyrical gestural quality which dilutes the image in colour, combining the fluidity of ink with the decisiveness of paint.

Some associations are facile but no less crucial for that. The figure of Friedrich makes its presence felt, and not only in his snow-covered landscapes. There is undeniably a Romantic atmosphere in Nico Munuera's work that goes beyond formal aspects. The way he lets nature insinuate itself into the painting, the way he seeks to make it captivate us as viewers, and the way colour embodies the beauty of the incommensurable, identify him as heir to a succession of Romantic quests. It is like that mist in Friedrich which grew denser and more present and became unbearable in Turner's last works. Friedrich himself pointed out how "generally the eye and the imagination are more readily drawn by nebulous distance than by what is perfectly plain for all to see". That horizontal abyss appears in many paintings by Nico Munuera, who is attracted by fluidity and mobility, even though they have always been arrested by the time they reach us.

On this occasion the scale is amplified to a degree that becomes almost too much to take. If bigscreen projections are our modern equivalent of the large history paintings of earlier eras, in this case it is painting that is projected onto the walls of a space accustomed to a different kind of light, that of projection: it is a brave and decisive act, a gesture of commitment to painting. Once again it creates a mirroring effect, a mastery of inscrutability, although here the vast scale is that of the painted and the painterly. Munuera is seeking to make us concentrate on the image, on the contradictions of the landscape, on its atmosphere. And nothing is more enigmatic than the sea, an intermediate space, a poetic emotional distance.

The exhibition at the Sala Verónicas in Murcia is entitled *Frame Time*. It speaks to us of time, of process, of the craft of painting, of how colour is refined and tempered. The sea and the sky as patches; painting as landscape. His central piece, *Frame Time Color Chart*, is a curious work which faithfully reflects a lot of the history of painting, from Pointillism to the reincarnation of painting in the pixels of a video. All this is not very far from Poul Erik Tojner's view of Lichtenstein, to the effect that no one should be in any doubt that the marked similarity of his work to existing images is intended to evoke the difference between them. As I see it, that must be more or less what Nico Munuera thinks; it is not a matter of defining where we can place a painting within painting but of thinking about what kind of image a painting is and what kind of image an artistic image is. It is one thing to paint an image on a frame, another to enlarge it while still revealing the dots in the pattern, and yet another to abstract the painting from painting itself and reincarnate it in a video. The backdrop is time, memory, but also the virtual hyperrealism of abstraction, of a landscape absorbed in contemplation. Artists like Chuck Close split up

hyperrealist works into a series of obvious planes or layers in the image, different distances in the structure of the image and of our gaze: if we look closely at some portraits, such as Maggie, we see a series of sandwiches composed of centrifugal brushstrokes arranged in a diagonal grid; this is the plane of the painting itself, which is abstract but constructs the illusion which makes up the face, the other plane of the image.

This has been one of the courses painting has followed since Goya, in whom every shade of colour in the palette is perceived as an identity and the image is produced by combining these basic constituents. The image of reality is constructed or constituted as a model of itself. For this reason, the relationship between reality, model and image is of vital importance for contemporary painting. To paint models of representation is to think about and reveal the position from which reality is represented, and in his exercise in painting and mapping, Nico Munuera allows us to retain the successive moments that occur in the journey of painting.

So painting is a sort of trace, a scent, a suspended melody. It is rather like what Monet might have been aiming to achieve in his attempt to "paint the air". It is certainly curious that as Monet got closer to the heart of the pond - constructed by him and thoroughly familiar to him - references gradually disappeared. Everything is water, and impressionism gives way to abstract expressionism *avant la lettre*; we do not know what is reality and what is reflection, probably because everything is reality and everything is a reflection of something given. It is a question of apprehending the subtle distances, the intervals, the "interludes", as Munuera calls the works he places on the floor. It is significant that interludes were associated with improvisation, a time of enjoyment and vitality, close to what this artist is aiming for here in his painting. It is a mixed, borderline experience, like Foucault's heterotopias.

All these impressions, combined with the physical dimension, the highly cinematographic scale, create a very special atmosphere: a suspension of stasis. As Berger points out in his book *The Sense of Sight*, "the uniqueness of the experience of looking at a painting repeatedly- over a period of days or years-is that, in the midst of flux, the image remains changeless. Of course the significance of the image may change, as a result of either historical or personal developments, but what is depicted is unchanging: the same milk flowing from the same jug, the waves on the sea with exactly the same formation unbroken, the smile and the face which have not altered". Nico Munuera deals with the transitory with no need for rhetoric of any kind; the magnitude of what we sense speaks for itself.

I am also reminded of the sedimentations and faded colorations of the photographs of enchanted mountains by Antonioni, who was similarly close to Rothko and his play of opposites marked or divided by the line of the horizon. They are images midway between the topological and the mental, capable of containing the breadth and thickness of the sky and the earth, or the sky and the sea as in the case of Munuera here. Rothko himself confessed that he had never forgotten the impression of seeing a car appear like a little spot in an empty, fog-bound landscape. From then on his pictures extended mentally beyond the canvas, resolving themselves from a much

more emotional perspective, like Herbert Brandl's mountains emerging from the brushstrokes, from the way the ink happens to flow.

Time and gaze. These two words would probably be sufficient on their own to sum up what I have said. It matters little whether they are flags or medals, snow-covered landscapes or seascapes, it is simply a matter of meditating on the painting so as to let it breathe, letting the colour work its effect, letting the image speak for itself.