

JORGE YEREGUI: LIFE AND ARTIFICE

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I was reminded of Jorge Yeregui (Santander, 1975) when gazing at an old painting, *St. John the Baptist in Meditation* by Hieronymus Bosch¹. The saint appears pensive, almost sleepy; his head rests lightly on his left hand, and his elbow is supported by a kind of mediaeval eco-topography which is also a minimal landscape. Another impossible horizon rises up in the background, while the foreground is dominated by a mysterious pomegranate; a setting with plants that look as fragile as glass.

One of the issues addressed in Yeregui's work has in fact been a key concern of art over the centuries: the relationship between what we see and what it represents. And what, in the last analysis, the artist seeks to represent. In other words, artifice piled on artifice. Is art, after all, just another artifice, however sublime?

Yeregui's photography is grounded in the paradoxes and anxieties of the contemporary world, hemmed in by uncertainty and contradiction. A world also tinged with deception, symbolised by the loss of innocence of a landscape once hailed as the quintessential, supreme refuge of the soul – especially the artist's soul. Nature, the landscape all around us, has been a major theme of art through the ages; of late, it has been vindicated by Robert Rosenblum's ever-topical theories, with their praise for the boundless energy of the landscape².

¹ Hieronymus Bosch. *Saint John the Baptist in Meditation*. Fifteenth century. Oil on panel. 49 x 40.5 cm. Museo Lázaro Galdiano, Madrid, Inv. num. 8155.

² The critic Robert Rosenblum (1927-2006), in his article "The Abstract Sublime" (*ARTnews* 59, n° 10, New York, II/1961, pp. 38-41) was a contemporary exponent of the well-known theory that pictorial abstraction had its beginnings in the landscape paintings of the nineteenth century, and particularly in the Romantic tradition of Northern Europe and America. Rosenblum charts a course from Friedrich's icy wastes to Gottlieb's lunar expanses and Rothko's imposing fields of colour. Rosenblum – as vague and irrational as the feelings he sought to pin down – argued that the sublime was to be found in both art and nature; indeed, one of its most eloquent expressions was achieved in the painting, the representation, of sublime landscapes. Cf. Alfonso de la Torre, *La ilimitada energía del paisaje*, Gobierno de Aragón, Zaragoza, 2008.

Yeregui, however, focuses not on hard evidence but on the uncertain nature of the space around us, prompting a certain suspension of reality. Artists, previously eager to capture the allegedly objective appearance of things, are now faced with the arduous task of hinting at another existence, a non-visible life, whose vestiges are still to be glimpsed, though concealed amidst a world of forms. A sublimation of the sensory world, of a reality which – cloaked in pretence, in the indolent assurance of the unnoticed, or in apparent innocence – could slip sand-like through our fingers, becoming yet another non-visible reality.

Art – great art – has always been concerned to transcend the visible. It has sought to show what lies beyond appearances, what lurks behind the phantasmagoria of the world. For the act of creation, true creation, is at the same time a permanent act of transgression. This sense of a crossing-over, a “trans” movement, perfectly describes Yeregui’s approach. He is a powerful trans-imaginer, whose work makes full use of what one artist – a connoisseur of the arcana of the real – termed the active or visionary imagination, i.e. the creative or transgressive imagination that goes beyond mere appearances, embarking on a journey to the other side. A ruin, a tree, bleak moorlands scarred by the hand of man, clusters of new homes offering a promise of happiness, fatuous urbanization as the suburban ideal, grass growing through the tarmac. Or the landscape thrusting up unbidden amongst today’s glass and metal. Like a Bosch character, the world grows around him and Yeregui’s seemingly innocent gaze is that of a perplexed onlooker.

I have lately been rereading Antoni Tàpies: “for the artist, (the) truth must perhaps be a kind of relentless backdrop, always there in spirit, but silently, very discreetly”³. Photographs of contemporary architecture being swallowed up by the encroaching jungle, for example in *Sitescapes*, and the stark brashness of contemporary ruins. A plant crying out in the bleakness of a brand-new building, a kind of pseudo-Japanese fraud; a lawn which, skin-like, seems oddly to reveal the shape of a soft body. Yeregui the transformer recalls Walser the wanderer. Walking about sharp-eyed we store up treasures, like earthy poets wandering around the tracks of their time, almost as though lost in the mist, in a trance-like search for the adventure offered by the landscape that surrounds them. Where Walser’s writings provide occasional autobiographical notes quickened

³ Antoni Tàpies, *El arte y sus lugares*, Siruela, Madrid, 1999, p. 91.

by a sense of imminent extinction, Yeregui's photographs also capture the unbridled alienation prompted by a walk amongst the ruins of our time, later to be symbolised in his findings: the waste products of real-estate greed, walled-up doorways, buildings buried by fallen leaves, dead-end streets, and so on *ad infinitum*. These are elements symbolising a trip that will become an inward journey, captured in this volume. Stored up, they are the fruit of an intense tale of wandering, whose findings take on metaphorical force: "Many notions, flashes of light, and lightning flashes quite of their own accord intrude and interrupt, to be carefully pondered upon"⁴. A walk across the stage of our times, contact with the contemporary landscape, turns into a trance-like experience; the outward voyage becomes an almost hallucinatory journey towards knowledge. It is a trance in which the outside world, with all its contradictions, is the place where poet and stroller construct their paradoxes: "I had become an inward being, and walked as in an inward world; everything outside me became a dream; what I had understood till now became unintelligible"⁵. Yeregui's work sets out to pose truly complex questions. In art, discovery results not from an extensive search conducted in the world of forms but rather from a concentrated exploration of the unfamiliar. The space around us, for all it may appear "empty", is in fact – as David Bohm remarked – "a cosmic sea of energy". In this abyss, surrounded by these hieroglyphics, it is the artist's job to spot forms as they emerge from, or sink back into, that sea of energy. Yeregui, in series like *Cotacero* – salt flats, cropland, pylons, shipyards, industrial estates, airports and other equally disquieting spaces – becomes the new seeker of messages which are more difficult than ever to decipher. As Novalis said: "Various are the roads of man. He who follows and compares them will see strange figures emerge, figures which seem to belong to that great cipher which we discern written everywhere"⁶. This is logocentric art, the work of an artist who ventures to look into knowledge, purifying the forms of reality until he succeeds in turning a boundless gaze into a definitive, unified, complete image.

After all, creation is a configuration of signs and a fiction, a *poëin* of symbolic intent. To create has always meant to create signs and symbols. Exploring both

⁴ Robert Walser, *The Walk*, Revised and retranslated by Susan Bernofsky. New Directions, New York, 2012, pp. 15 and 47.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Novalis, *The Novices of Sais*, trans. Ralph Manheim. Archipelago Books, New York, 2005, p. 12.

creation and destruction, extracting beauty from the wreckage, willing to share his perplexity, drawing on his frequent praise of conflicting opposites, Yeregui's work offers, to some extent, a defense of mystery. Photographs of landscapes, images of architecture, a vindication of irony? What matters is that Yeregui blurs boundaries, and in doing so forces creation across genre frontiers. Harnessing this nomadic urge as a tool for thought, Yeregui is a circular artist, in the sense that his research has consistently focused on certain issues. He ranks among those artists for whom creation from the appearance of doubt has become a hallmark. Delighting in exploration, in vertigo, his work is the clearly-nomadic act of a wanderer through our times, who deliberately tiptoes, aghast, around the edge of the abyss.