

## **From Orissa, an encounter with Indian sculpture in the workshop of Lingaraj Maharana**

PABLO J. RICO (EXHIBITION COMMISSIONER)

José Noguero (Barbastro, Huesca, 1969) is one of the most brilliant artists of his generation. Since graduating from the Massana Art School (Barcelona, 1990), where he studied sculpture, he has produced some exceptional sculptures, paintings, photographs and more recently videos. Until now, his most significant and acclaimed work has been in the area of photography, where he has posed essential questions about the presence/absence of the object, creating almost metaphysical interior spaces, spiritual scenes, representing intuitions about the origin of life, silence ... José Noguero has lived and worked in Berlin since 1999, where he has discovered an atmosphere that is suited to his artistic endeavour, an ideal setting given his instinct towards serenity, peace, quiet and personal introspection ... Meanwhile, he has had a truly promising artistic career, flecked with important experiences and his work has been exhibited on many occasions in Spain, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Brazil and the US.

The first time that José Noguero came into contact with India, Orissa and Lingaraj Maharana was at the end of 2003. During his first trip to India, which lasted around two months, he arrived in Orissa almost by chance (although perhaps a better expression would be "by necessity," since encounters are necessary, driven by Fate, just as misunderstandings are inevitable). He went to Orissa looking for bronze sculptures that he admired, hoping to find out more about their origin and metallurgy. There he encountered Lingaraj Maharana and his workshop, traditional Indian sculpture, the origins of sculpture and almost of art itself, perhaps even his own origins (and I don't mean just his origins as an artist: sometimes you have to believe beyond the logic of rationality and open your heart and mind to other possibilities, to reincarnation for example, why not?). That first encounter with the master sculptor Lingaraj and everything he represents – especially his status as a maestro and "medium" when it comes to sensing the purity of origins – as well as his subsequent aesthetic

experiences in Ajanta, Ellora and Elephanta, convinced José Noguero that he was on the right path to discovering (recognising) the necessary conditions of art from its origins to contemporaneity, beyond the contingencies of time and fashions, cultural peculiarities and conventional formalities ...

José Noguero returned to Berlin “agitated” by everything he had seen, experienced, wanted ... Once in Berlin, he was determined that he would return to India, to Orissa, to see Lingaraj, to work in his stone workshop, to learn the fundamental aspects of Indian sculpture, its techniques, iconography, mythology, spirituality, the value of images and its powerful presence beyond all traces of circumstance, space or time ... It was probably around this time that José Noguero began to sense that the image pre-exists even before its presence is felt, before it takes on a certain formal reality through a specific material or conventional visual representation. Perhaps Michelangelo was closer to the truth when he said that the sculpture (its image) exists inside the block of stone before the artist begins to “reveal” its secret ... Artists, some of whom are visionary geni, often see and feel the meaning of things that are hidden out of the reach of a rationally “intelligent” gaze.

I have known José Noguero for a long time, almost from when he was first starting out as an artist, and I have always been interested in his work, in his works, in the spiritual and “meta-artistic” meaning he bestows upon them. I have chosen his pieces for collective “content” exhibitions on many occasions and his contributions have always shone out at such events. Over time we have shaped trust and complicity, friendship ... In 2004, when he had just returned from India, José told me about his experience and I could feel his enthusiasm; it was infectious ... Months later, I suggested that we should work on this project together and consider the possibility of presenting it as an SEA exhibition at Santa Bárbara Castle in Alicante. With this complicity and verbal agreement, José Noguero returned to Orissa in late June 2005 with the intention of working in Lingaraj Maharana’s workshop for six months. Once there, José had the great honour of living alongside Langaraj’s family and apprentices 24 hours a day, working and living the simple life ..., learning not only ancient techniques and means but above all ways of moving through this world as an artist and as a man: with simplicity and sacred serenity, imbued with that spirituality that binds us in essence to the university and share in its ongoing task of creation and transmission of life, helping to formalise the idea of the absolute and transcendental, perhaps even learning to create a plausible image of the unsayable ... His soul and his body also learned about the invaluable hospitality of someone who has no material wealth to share and the alchemy of affections

born out of an utterance of admiration and respect. And of course, he learned to understand who and what it means to be a “Master” ... Lingaraj Maharana was his Master.

I insist, Lingaraj Maharana is a Master ... Of humble origins, his father was an artisan woodworker and even at a young age, Lingaraj was already acknowledged as having exceptional talent and skill for carving stone and achieving perfection in his reproduction of Hindu gods, their avatars, following the models of India’s great statuesque tradition. His sculptures are classical in the sense of sculpture that follows pre-established canons, but also innovative, looking for new movements, obtaining that particular “grace” and expressivity that can only be achieved with genuineness and personal emotions. What is clear is that Lingaraj Maharana creates masterpieces, unique models of perfection in his sculptures of Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, and Ganesha: deity-sculptures with souls (here gods have a soul and the artist must be able to endow representations with that essential transparency). For many years, Lingaraj Maharana has been acknowledged as a grand master of Indian sculpture: in 1987 he was honoured with the State of Orissa Award for his sculptures, and in 1989 he won India’s National Award.

José Noguero told me that he learned a great deal (as an artist) in Lingaraj’s workshop and he hopes to convey all of this to the general public and the art world through our exhibition and the booklet we are planning to publish in the future. The values he learned there include drawing, as a fundamental preliminary step, projection, imagination, empathy with the original, a respectful relationship with the original motif (if copied), and the virtue of taking on the shape of things just as they were created, collaborating humbly in their translation, resisting the lure of intellectual arrogance that makes us believe that we invented before nature did, before the universe existed in all its possible forms (“creating” from a human perspective is in actual fact a way of reading and translating). José Noguero told me that “drawing time” in Orissa is a special and different time: as night falls, swathed in tranquillity and relaxation, with background music and imbued with songs nearby or jungle sounds ... There is also a special light – the images that Noguero captured of those evenings remind me of the light in Van Gogh’s early paintings, *The Potato Eaters* for example. Van Gogh did not want people to look at his painting and say that “it was beautiful,” just from an aesthetic point of view, or that they liked it because of something that was not what he had been trying to express: that the men who ate those lowly potatoes with their hands did so with the same hands that had grown them and pulled them out of the ground. Of course, in the imag-

es created by José Noguero in Lingaraj's workshop we recognise the value of work, of "cultivating art" with one's hands, the pleasure of resting and eating in silence or listening to music after a job well done, that inner peace gained from doing what you have to do well and with enjoyment ... (that "amor fati" as Nietzsche would say).

During his stay in Orissa, José Noguero "harvested" forty hours of video, over 3000 photographs, three drawing pads (with over 200 original drawings) and so many unquantifiable things. From that extraordinary "harvest" we have selected eleven photographs for the exhibition organised by the Alicante Art Symposium (SEA) – representing sculptures from the workshop, processes, "souls and fragrances" of art – along with three videos providing around twenty minutes of images in total, and ten stained glass pieces that are a kind of synthesis, of dialogue between sculpture and a certain hazy light that the artist uses to create indefinite, blurred and metaphysical spaces in which the poetry of his experience in India swells and reverberates, and the artist's innermost feelings are revealed ...

Our intention was to document this beautiful story, which should serve as an example for modern art and artists, and to celebrate the spiritual meeting (ingenuous, with no unconfessable perversions) between East and West, of two ostensibly opposed artistic visions, of the traditional and the "contemporary," and even a necessary encounter between sculpture and photography/video at a point that is equidistant from their respective (and sometimes contradictory) modes of representation ... and above all a tribute to Lingaraj Maharana, and through him and in his name, to all artists who work and create their art with humility, a spiritual calling and believe (if not faith) ... It is good (necessary) to believe ... Art is a system of beliefs ... You have to believe in order to create ...

However there are other intentions, other questions, other answers that Noguero was seeking and which he poses in his work. Why am I an artist and what for? What is a work of art, how do we recognise one? What is the thin red line between art and what we call "crafts"? What is my condition as an artist? How should I go through life as an artist? Do I feel different? Before, after ...? In general, his stay in Orissa and the time he spent with Lingaraj have confirmed what he already sensed, shoring up his most intimate thoughts ... Things that are related to universal humanism, kindness, natural talent, communication that flows easily (in silence or in just a few words), spiritual philosophy, the humble acceptance of the grace/gift received (from Fate or nature), the need to work and personal effort ... [...]