



José Noguero, Scenographies, Installation view, Suñol Foundation, Barcelona, 2008

Setting the Figure, Setting Space

The Art of José Noguero

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For a 2010 installation at the Georg Kolbe Museum in Berlin, José Noguero prepared a plaster reproduction of a Kolbe sculpture, with its softly turning torso and twisting limbs. The piece was then destroyed, its demise cleverly recorded on video and projected on a wall.

In order to capture the figure as it was dropped to destruction, Noguero constructed a long vertical shaft with a hard transparent floor set above the base. Filmed from underneath, the Kolbe copy rushes towards the viewer and shatters abruptly into shards across the screen. Then the video sequence is shifted into reverse, now in slow motion, and the plaster bits retreat into their original form, poised in the centre of the focal plane, waiting for the moment to charge us again. Accompanied by an audio track run forwards and back, Noguero's looped study of sculptural disintegration and re-composition seems to be breathing, a heaving respiration that exhales to death and laboriously draws in again to life.

In the early twentieth century, when Kolbe emerged as the leading German figurative sculptor, he created delicately lyrical figures still grounded in classicism. Unlike Rodin, a mentor, Kolbe moulded bodies that pushed tensely outwards while their mental energy was drawn inward, the eyes often closed, the head turned away. In his day Kolbe's most renowned work was the 1912 *Tänzerin* (Ballerina). For us, stranded on this side of modernity, our main bridge back to Kolbe is the 1925 *Der Morgen* (Morning, sometimes called Dawn), which Mies van der Rohe placed so neatly—and so apparently incongruously—into a recon-dite corner of the temporary pavilion commissioned by the Weimar Republic for the 1929 Barcelona Universal Exposition.

For half a dozen decades, when all that remained of the pavilion dismantled in 1930 were black and white photographs of its sheeny surfaces of marble, glass and steel, it acquired a reputation as an icon of modernist architecture. Only Kolbe's *Morning*, stylistically out of place, pre-dating the spirit and intention of the flowing plan of reflecting planes and its Bauhaus-inspired furniture, would come along to haunt this seamless reading. For if, as many insisted, the pavilion was the sculpture, what was this sculpture doing in this building?

Even today, when a replica of Mies' Pavilion stands on the site, *Morning* arouses perplexity. In the early years of Spanish democracy after the death of Franco, Barcelona's socialist City Hall set out to restore the progressive project cut short by the Civil War and subsequent dictatorship, and rebuilding the pavilion was part of that. The lost years of rationalist modernity could not be retrieved, but their symbols would be resuscitated. A modernist pastiche, if you like, though nonetheless a pedagogical tool

illustrating the nexus between function, materials and form in service of social space. Such ideas were vital to what is known as the 'Barcelona model', where architecture, quality design values and urban planning were enlisted in the rebuilding of social democracy. What did *Morning* have to do with all that?

Work on the Mies replica began in 1983. The year after, in 1984, José Noguero, still in his early teens, arrived in Barcelona from his native province of Huesca to study at the Massana arts and crafts school. Enrolled in the woodworking department, he belonged to the last generation of Spaniards to go into a traditional craft apprenticeship instead of conventional secondary school. His training soon extended into the visual arts, although his creative identity was forged in sculpture. Still today, alongside his expert employ of drawing, painting, photography, video and installation, Noguero's masterful three-dimensional technique and sculptural sensibility guide his highly diversified oeuvre. Yet for Noguero, sculpture does not stand alone: like *Morning*, it has its place.

The rebuilt German Pavilion was opened in 1986. By the late part of the decade Noguero was showing in alternative galleries. I first saw his work in 1991, at a small space in Barcelona's Gràcia district. Already then, at age 22, he had set out many of the ideas that have since characterized his work. References from art history, such an



(Top) *Clay Tone*, video still, 2:24 minute loop, 2010 (installation Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin)
(Bottom) *Clay Tone*, video still, 2:24 minute loop, 2010 (installation Georg Kolbe Museum, Berlin)



Relief I, Plaster and stainless steel, 110 x 120 x 25 cm, 1993

initial interest in the Baroque, were handled in contemporary language. This meant generating suggestions of past form as props, rather than for historicist motives. The figures were thus displaced in time so as to fit them into a larger picture, which often involved an austere, even sublime, architectural interior. More than the sculpture in and of itself, which could have ravelled Noguero's talent up in undue attention to the quality of materials or fine art finishing, the concern was to lead both his gaze and ours towards a particular view of the sculpted figure in a controlled setting.

In accomplishing this, Noguero has paid attention to frames and other ways of delimitating spaces and focussing gazes. Most habitually, any three dimensional creation could also appear in a photograph or photo series. In this way the view is decided previously, as if by default. In one image a large figure appears, in another it is gone; in one there's an elegant plaster sculpture, in another it's been blasted to smithereens. The Kolbe video effectively records an idea that Noguero had previously expressed with two photostills.

The frame could even be a part of the sculpture itself, as in a large piece shown in his first commercial gallery show in 1993. A curvaceous Baroque moulding was set around a finely cut relief of a Baroque interior, while a carved image of the artist himself accompanied the scene, his hands held out ritualistically. Noguero has frequently placed a depiction of himself in his work, though not as self-portraiture. Whether appearing as a tiny sculpted figurine, or captured in a photograph, the artist stands as both witness (there to

avow to his own creation) and host (there to offer up the proceedings to the spectator).

The importance Noguero gives to guiding the gaze has been served by other techniques. Early on he resorted to upraised wall supports as tools of presentation, though often the shelf would be empty. Later in the 90s he introduced small illuminated boxes, like miniaturized model theatres, to be hung on the wall or photographed. Often these boxed scenes are "empty" too, spaces of representation representing only their own space. More frequently they are occupied, sparsely to be sure, by a variegated lexicon of figures, geometric angles, dense monochrome surfaces and even drawing.

A more recent take on the frame was introduced in the 2005 exhibit *Vastu*, inspired, at least poetically, by his first travels in northern India. At the Malaga Centre for Contemporary Art Noguero presented rectilinear tubular constructions in the gallery space, inferred habitats inferring inhabitation.

The structures were suggestive of three dimensional sketches of the residences he had encountered in Srinagar, Kashmir, set on stilts along a river. They were contrasted by sculptural renderings of a form of house boat he had found at the same site: in one case the river flowed under the home, while in the other the home floated over the river.

With this array of solutions, Noguero typically runs the gamut, developing variations where the enlisted cast of characters (anonymous or generic, animals or human, Baroque, Romanesque or Hindu) might appear and disappear in a multitude of combinations and settings.

In the mid-90s Noguero's work was often fit into a tendency in Spanish art concerned with a reinterpretation of the Baroque. As the Baroque was associated with the Spanish Golden Age, some critics saw this as an attempt to rework a canonical past, much as Picasso or Dalí had done with Velázquez. More sophisticated readings strived to bring this into contemporary terms by referring to a neo-Baroque. Taken aesthetically, the neo-Baroque addressed quandaries of meaning, of the semiotic worth of words and images on the stage of a grand theatre of representation. Taken politically, it became a vehicle for a critique of modernism and its failed rationalism, seen to be disabled before the illusory mechanisms of power and ideology as evidenced in contemporary media culture.

Thus the neo-Baroque addressed the Baroque critically and selectively. In retrospect, it is clear that Noguero was more

interested in problems of representation than by any specific historical iconography. If anything his work sought to activate the mechanism whereby, when confronted with an illegible proliferation of signifiers, time might be stopped, the action might be held, we are forced to wait, and the possibility of a clairvoyant moment in the present might be activated.

In a text for Noguero's 2008 exhibit in Barcelona I called this a "freeze-frame Baroque", borrowing the term from Susan Sontag's reading of the Benjamin essay on German tragic opera. In another context, it would seem that Mies van der Rohe was also seeking to congeal the frame and fix the gaze when he chose to place pre-modernist sculpture into his buildings from the time of the German Pavilion. Rather than expunging human presence from his gardens-courtyards, Mies sought engagement. The presence of Morning in the German Pavilion was thus a way of "providing a focal point for the viewer, leading the eye and telling it where to rest...phrasing an extended physical experience in more narrowly figurative terms."

Baroque, classical, modern, Hindu—Noguero moves through past styles undogmatically. The problem is that he is so respectful towards the tradition or style at hand, dedicating such technical prowess to the task, that he could easily be mistaken as a follower or fan. An outstanding series of smooth plaster figures from the mid-90s referred to the Romanesque, with their gaunt torsos, a certain primitivism, and postures that could be considered pre-modern: lying naked on the floor, turned shamefully into a corner, unable to deal with their own presence, never mind consciously represent it. Noguero called them Sleepers. The sculptural language was so carefully construed that not even a ménage a trois, with a woman performing fellatio on one male while the other took her from behind, could be made to look pornographic. The piece, whether shown as sculpture or used in large photographic compositions, never lost its aura of medieval piety in spite of the intensely erotic configuration.

With his incursions since 2005 into traditional Hindu religious sculpture, Noguero continues to show how the sculptural process takes precedence over any specific historical iconography. Though radically different in context, Noguero's "Indian" production continues to be fascinated with the figure's emergence from the material and the search for an appropriate setting for its contemplation.

After his first travels in India led to Vastu, Noguero returned to deepen his knowledge of Hindi religious sculpture in general, and certain traditions more specifically. Case in hand was his interest in the well-known cast bronze figurines from Orissa. While travelling in Puri he came across the stone sculpture workshop of Lingaraj Maharana, and, altering his original intention, arranged to return in late 2005 for a six-month period living and working in close contact with the master. Noguero's choice to submit himself to the discipline of the workshop (he learnt Oriya) is reflected in three extraordinary videos. Each illustrates an aspect of his outsider-on-the-inside experience, from the daily rhythm working on

commissions for temples and private clients, to details of his apprenticeship under the tutorship of Lingaraj, including meticulous drawing exercises, to night-time activity, with each worker dedicated to personal carving amidst shared song, the scenes awash with a tenuous light.

In the work from his time there, Noguero was careful not to attempt to dress himself in the guise of an Orissa master dedicated to a traditional religious language. With the small stone figurines shown in dark boxes, or blown up in large, black and white photographs, he refuses to oblige his chisel to define and refine every canonical detail of a representation of Ganesha, to give an example. By presenting the figures roughly and unfinished, and thus useless for cult, he makes it clear he is not imitating the master at all, that he is not in the service of a religion or culture that do not belong to him.

This is what allows him to present photographs of half-finished sculptural figures done by Linjaraj himself, such as a Radha-Krishna, along with his own. Of course from a European perspective these subtleties can hardly be perceived; Noguero's work is equally "other" here and there, which perhaps explains why it has only been shown once (in Alicante, where he also arranged a workshop with Lingaraj and a sculptor from Mumbai, Shrikant Deodhar).

Untitled (Sleepers, Corner), Plaster and stainless steel, 105 x 25 x 30 cm, 1996





Vastu I, Photograph, 150 x 150 cm., 2004

Oddly then, this body of work does not fully satisfy any of those who behold it, whether from this side or that. Yet Noguero seems unconcerned with the generalized estrangement it provokes. He is content to have it sit on the fence between potentially conflicting ways of viewing, with every gaze equally susceptible to accept, reject or misinterpret it for all the wrong or right reasons, in function of the particular perceptive ability and cultural bias of every viewer.

References

¹Only the Kolbe sculpture, taken to Berlin and placed in a park, survived the dismantlement.

²Kolbe came to collaborate with the Nazis, to make matters worse,

though perhaps more ambiguously than Mies, who was accepting commissions from the National Socialist government until 1937.

³Jeffrey Swartz, "José Noguero's Freeze Frame Baroque", in José Noguero. *Scenographies*, Barcelona: Fundació Suñol, 2008. Online at <http://www.josenoguero.com/texte/2008/publicacio_acte3.pdf>

⁴Penelope Curtis, *Patio and Pavilion: The Place of Sculpture in Modern Architecture*, London: Ridinghouse/Getty, 2007, p. 20