

José Noguero's iconographies of presentation

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The first time I saw the work of José Noguero was in a decidedly alternative context, the small gallery in the Artesà Cívic Centre in Barcelona's Gràcia district. The gallery itself, though poorly equipped and for the most part ignored by the non-professional public, had been for many years a vital point of presentation for emerging contemporary artists, and the gallery gained a reputation as a place where the work of new and interesting creators could be seen without commercial pressure. José Noguero's first solo show fulfilled the promise of the space. Enigmatic and alluring, the images and installations set out a way of constructing that he has continued to investigate and develop since. The carefully composed large format colour photographs and projections situated sculpted figures and other elements in austere interiors, with colour, light, and mirror effects folding and multiplying the space.

The intriguing beauty of José Noguero's photography from the early 1990's revealed a maturity of conception and construction that was – and is – untypical of artists of his age and generation. Though the situation is changing, young contemporary artists in Spain leave behind the obsession for craft inculcated in the academy with great difficulty, and with only mixed results. The fact that formal training still focusses on drawing, painting and sculpture, with photography only awkwardly incorporated into educational curriculums and video and film set even further apart from the core, has led to the dominance in this country of artists with high levels of manual and technical control over traditional materials. Often there is little encouragement to combine and merge media. Meanwhile, the relative denigration of theory in art schools has typically led to a poverty of content. Young – and even more mature – artists often mask these deficiencies by imitating or fetishizing the forms of recent international tendencies, as if a "good touch" and formal references to artistic currents were sufficient to create meaning.

In contrast, Noguero's early photos, rather than referring to another artist or tendency, or to an exclusive world created only for the photographic medium, pointed outward to the realms of sculpture, installation, and even painting. He has since shown himself to be capable of moving freely and simultaneously in all these fields. For if his photography intelligently assimilates contemporary art's reencounter with theatricality, it also makes a case for the renovated employ of traditional sculptural craft, the recovery of ornamental and decorative motifs from art history, and the pertinancy of an ecloding, Baroque space which would bring the viewer into perceptual dialogue with the work. Noguero's willingness to confront some of the most critical questions of the moment is also evident in his particular use of his own physical image, in a way that has transcended mere self-portrait.

It is in this sense that we could say that already in his early photographic works Noguero was sculpting – or installing, or decorating – for the camera. Noguero's images reflect the interest of contemporary photography for the making of scenes, with all that the setting of a stage might entail. Like other photographers who have marked out this current – Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Laurie Simmons, Joan Fontcuberta, to name a few – it becomes clear that the intention is not to document with an instantaneous shot, to capture a moment out of the flux of life. Instead, a considerable degree of preparation is evident in bringing together the props and pieces into the final composition. Sherman and Wall at times are filmmakers, preparing a film take; Fontcuberta has used the photograph's reputation as a scientifically valid document, in order to elaborate complex falsifications; Simmons, for her part, has used small figurines and models to make miniature scenes, pushing the camera's lense into the world of illusion.

The theatre of José Noguero is something quite different, neither altering scale, falsifying data nor employing human subjects or actors (with the rare exception of himself). Instead, he allows the photo to be a vista of a world that can only partially be apprehended, and even less so read in its totality. There is something enigmatic about the combination of familiar elements – an austere room, a window frame, a chair, a rough wall – with an odd array of props and figures: little meandering angels, flimsy metallic boats; decoratively painted canvased draped on the walls or floor; or more recently, tense dogs and stiff horses, as well as human figures rendered in ways that recalls iconographic and stylistic modes from different eras of art history. All told, the objects or elements not referring to the human figure are just as much "actors" as those

that do, the roles of colour, light and space on par with the pieces reminiscent of angels or persons.

All of these “actors” are summoned into a carefully modelled composition that allows the particular identity of each to stand out separately. Each element or prop or figure is set at a “distance” from each other, retaining gesture, guarding all grand effects within, but with a troubling result: nothing appears to be happening. All the props and actors are on the stage, everything is in its place, yet no real action takes place. The theatre represented, therefore, is not one of a shifting action within an advancing plot, with each character growing and developing accordingly. Rather, the solitude of each piece stands out, held in a tension of figurative, if not mathematical distance. The drama in Noguero’s photos, then, is founded on the imposing impression that what animates the elements is a forgotten function of history or culture, rather than a dynamic relation with another element.

The presence of the past is particularly notable in the figures Noguero sculpts in plaster or wood. If the photos and installations leave us with a sense of intangible, almost ethereal reality, a visit to José Noguero’s studio leaves an altogether different impression; not of an installation artist or photographer, but of a sculptor in the most formal sense of the term. One of the paradoxes of his art is that from the beginning he has shown himself to be unimpressed by his own, often masterly, sculptural hand. This is what could be concluded from his insistence on dedicating great effort to the realization of extraordinary sculpted figures, many of which are only revealed by the camera’s lense. His concern to take his art beyond the terms of technical virtuosity is indicated by the limitation he thus imposes on the full tactile and spatial values of sculpted materials.

In his text for the 1993 solo show at Galería Joan Prats, Noguero offered an imaginative vision of the many questions and themes that informed his “practice as a sculptor.” Noguero the artist sees orients his image-making through the passions of a sculptor (this is not simply due to the relative time he dedicates to the task). Apart from his sure technical understanding of habitual materials such as wood and plaster, which makes his work labour intensive and artisanal in dimension, he is particularly attentive to historical sources, which are studied interpretively and not systematically. The sculpted figures cite periods and styles in an eclectic manner, not dogmatically, without giving preference to one era or style over another, nor attributing superior ethical, aesthetic or social values to any one author, movement or set of cultural coordinates. The figures are not rendered in strict conformity to the sources.

Materials, scale, and finishing (the lack of conventional polychromatic treatment, for example) draw them even further away from their origins in classical, Romanesque, Renaissance and Baroque language. Furthermore – as we shall see this point is key – they are presented in original compositions, wrested from their original contexts, not serving religious iconographic ends, ignoring their ordinary roles in sculptural groupings or mural painting, indifferent to the aesthetic and spiritual orders they were once meant to uphold and embellish.

For all these divergences, the sculptural elements permit us to trace back to the worlds they arose from, enough so as to conclude that the artist's dialogue with past styles is somewhere between respectful and critical. Noguero is not providing us with a systematic and focussed undoing of past aesthetic orders, in spite of what could be concluded from certain positively irreverent works. Even in the most potentially shocking of his image, where figures finished like Romanesque statuary are put into an erotic scene, the unpointed bodies are frozen as if representing a fixed iconography, and a certain neutrality of emotion pervades. This work, presented in a photograph as well as a sculptural group (in ARCO '96), does not suggest a mocking of the pre-Gothic sources it calls back to, as the stiff unarticulated bodies deny us the erotic charge that pornography would typically emit.

Noguero's ambiguous relation with the past is not a defence of present aesthetic values. The artist understands that the attraction of historical forms (or the austere landscape of his native Huesca, dotted by the watchful great dane and carefree horses that he has incorporated into his language more recently), cannot be transplanted into the contemporary image in a nostalgic fashion. Just as aesthetic forms from other periods never liberate themselves from the weight of their unshakeable identities, the great danes, for example, are unable to overcome their instinctive uneasiness, straining their heads towards some as yet unseen presence. Alien presences transplanted with care into these seemingly harmless worlds, they establish an interference effect while at the same time enhancing the ordered beauty of Noguero's installations and photographic compositions.

The iconographical bricolage of this work bears witness to a postmodern dilemma, where eclecticism is not an end in itself, but a device in search of "decadence," something that, as Alois Riegl said, held out the as-yet-unfulfilled promise of innovation, novelty and change. The highly original scapes presented in José Noguero's photographs, projections, sculptural groupings and installations sharpen this strategy of estrangement, reminding us of the breach

between past and present (or between rural and urban sensibilities). Motifs from art history, or the expression of instinctive animal will, are not given life in these works for reasons of aesthetic or formal superiority (as the 19th century positivists would have required), but out of “a distinct will of art, out of a creative or innovative choice to say other things by other means.”¹

The will to art is also a will to say. Noguero’s will is intact. The repetition of an iconography of *presentation* suggests that the confirmation of this will is required, something we need to be reminded of. Pedestals, columns, simple wall supports, or the hands of the figures (whose facial features often resemble the author himself) – the expression of offering, of setting apart, of holding up, of showing the onlooker what is there to be seen, this is the curious and tantalizing function of ornament in Noguero’s work. Supports for seeing, they are also worth paying attention to in themselves, supporting actors come to usurp the roles of the principal figures they are meant to uphold. In the act of showing and demonstrating, of saying “look, see, here it is,” they suggestively proclaim “here I am.” A ritualized way of saying that “I am saying.”

That so many of the figures are modelled after Noguero’s own features makes this choreography of offering all the more intense. There is a photo of Noguero in the catalogue of the *Salon de los 16* where he is holding a small boat-like carving, his image and that of a sculpted great dane reflected in a mirror beside them. His features appear upon a great deal of the sculpted figures he has shown. Incorporating himself into the images along with his own creations, he becomes as inanimate as the other elements, and someone equal to them in importance.

Noguero is not an artist who presents himself in a self-portrait, but rather someone who places himself into his own complex scheme of relocation and recontextualization, his photos and installations like asylums for the refugees – whether inanimate or alive – of history, culture, and humanity. Are the objects José Noguero moulds and carves evasion tactics, meant to distract us from contemplating the figure of the presenter? Or are they a kind of bait, taking us into the image of the creator? The indeterminate resolution of these enquiries, like a carefully placed mirror, flips the image over, slicing open the space, sending all identity on its way – an identity that is both itself and something multiplied beyond and away from itself at once.

1. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, “Introduction,” in Alois Riegl, *Problemas de estilo: fundamentos para una historia de la ornamentación*, G.Gili, Barcelona, 1980, p. XII.