

Mission at the Border

Following, not too closely, an idea expressed by Walter Benjamin in a short essay about painting and drawing,* we would say that, contrary to the graphic line of a drawing, which needs a background upon which to appear and manifest itself, the stain, an element that is essential to painting, happens from inside the medium itself. The painting does not rest on a background; the painting is in its totality the stain and the medium of the stain.

The character of the appearance of this stain, its control and its use, transform the painter's work, the painter's way of seeing and the kind of attention the painter gives to the occurrences on the canvas, into something special and unique. The painter produces a kind of attention that mixes itself with the medium, and that orients the painter's grand and small gestures. We can observe the peaks of this process in the faces painted by Titian; however, the place where this characteristic of painting is highlighted, pure and simple, is in some monochromatic paintings which, in order to be effective, need the person who makes them to exercise this kind of attention constantly, and to proceed with the utmost correction. Contrary to what someone who is little accustomed to seeing and recognizing the work of painting might think, the execution of a flat surface without any blemish, or with the stains where they can and should be, may constitute one of the most arduous tasks that a painter will ever set out to handle. This is especially valid with respect to black. Controlling the execution of a black surface is a Herculean task. Black seems almost to demand that never-ending stains emerge from within itself, that small glimpses of light break through the surface, that that which is different also reveal itself.

The work of Laura Pels Ferra appears here immediately submerged within a terrain of ambiguity; the very title "Double Agents" underlines this. On the one hand, she utilizes all the components of drawing: the graphic line and its character of being a sign, white paper as background, and the medium itself, the *guache*, which partakes of that basic graphic intent. On the other hand, by presenting us with archipelagos of black islands whose dimensions are such that we are forced to look into the matter and vibration within them, she moves away from the world of graphics and clearly enters the domain of painting. It is the tension resulting from this ambiguity that artistically characterizes this work. This boundary between these disciplines is further reinforced by an endeavour to differentiate at the border line between forms, in the contours that show here the ambiguity and duplicity of its nature.

This duplicity, which produces the artistic tension of the image, is reinforced and complimented by the tension within the representation, which is always present at the threshold of a possible acknowledgement, as if camouflaged by the impulse to be seen as abstract. It is analogous to the behaviour of a double agent whose survival depends upon the ability to be, at one and the same time, recognisable and unrecognisable.

At their genesis these images are fragments of other images, of images in picture books that recount the adventures of secret agents, spies, police and bandits. They are little books for quick reading during everyday pauses. They don't aspire to attain the *quasi*-artistic-literary status of other comic books; they possess the eminently graphic aspect that their black and white nature imparts to them, and which thereby gives them a startling variety. And interestingly enough, and despite the contemporary nature of this art form, they possess an air of something that has passed.

The genesis of the choice and the procedure that transfers an image from one medium to another, as it adds new dimensions, seems to take us back to methods that we relate to Pop Art from the 1950s and 60s. But here the intent is different. The aim is not to re-present the image, adding symbolic value to it or reaffirming its contemporary nature. By locating the referent and the origin of the images at the threshold of recognition, this work reaffirms, on another level, the almost secret, ambiguous and double nature of this act of being on the border between the affirmative nature of the sign and the camouflage-like nature of painting, all the while obliging the spectator to take on the mission of discovering a double agent operating on the border.

Über die Malerei oder Zeichen und Mal

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