

About the exhibition *Entrar al mar i sortir-ne blau* [*Enter the sea and come out blue*] by Alfons Borrell (2023)

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In one of his most celebrated essays, entitled *On Nothing*, the American poet Mark Strand wonders why this inclination to substantiate emptiness is due, to fill it with words, gestures, images.

Strand points out at least three tasks for language when it is challenged from the nakedness: one is a certain degree of obstinacy; another, lightness as a foundation against the definitive; the last one, a kind of opening towards that which, while not being a mystery, is not easily nameable either, something similar to a meticulousness pending precision.

The previous triad could well serve to bring us closer to the work of Alfons Borrell, to his persistence –so little exemplary and so resounding– regarding some of his own arguments through which to develop the practice of painting; to his interventions for the sake of that never fatuous or purely stylistic lightness, a kind of material ethics; to his intense way of erecting the details to make them essential.

There are two paintings, *Untitled* (1959) –the oldest piece in the exhibition– and *17.VI.2003* (2003) –one of the most recent–, which perhaps better exemplify what I am trying to say. In the first one, with which the artist definitively assumes the grammar of the abstract, we observe some vaguely geometric shapes that «measure» the lower part of the canvas and whose presence «discovers» a large silent surface. However, what is interesting is that those figures maintain the quality of being and not being at the same time, they are a tremor with which the exhaustive, the heroic or the irreversible are rejected. And even so, we do not see trials or proofs, they are appearances that disavow the heaviness of the signs. This same rectangular figure appears again on *17.VI.2003*, equally blurred, although now in the center of the work, without tragedy, similar to the waitress at Édouard Manet's *Folies Bergère*, like a portrait of all those questions that painting can pitch to viewers through an artist.

More than four decades mediate between one work and the other, more than forty years that, nevertheless, seem connected to each other by a very fine thread of consequences. The same persistent and subtle approach, changing and not at all predetermined, an obstinacy that, rather than mastering its methodologies, its achievements or its certainties, shows how much it opens up in circularity.

*Entrar al mar i sortir-ne blau* [*Enter the sea and come out blue*] brings together five works produced in the same year, 1978. Some of them deserve careful analysis, for example, *Untitled*, which synthesizes Borrell's work with the limits of the pictorial surface, his structural approximations to the architecture of the canvas through that rectangular shape that we named before and that in some way doubles and questions the distance between a pre-eminent space for attention and diction and a secondary or subaltern one. The pink color creates an interrupted movement, a path that invites you to contemplate the work by going through its borders, taking your eyes through a transit without unidirectional hierarchies.

This piece is in dialogue with *20.2.78*, in which color «travels» through the paper and reveals in its wake a whole symptomatology of light games and glimpsed gestures. Thus, the double impulse to delimit the space to de-hierarchize the gaze and to understand the surface through a color that builds, accounts for one of the features that characterize Borrell's language: his approach to each work as if it were the word of a phrase, that is, attending to the specific particularities and facing a general panorama, qualifying the problem with concerns, always from a position where constriction and deployment have a place.

In this way we could understand the diptych *15-22.XI.78*, whose scale is an exhortation to delve into its textures. And it is that when artists approach those formats that imply a physical distance, getting closer and separating to see, there is something choreographic that

operates in these types of pieces, a body that embodies itself, measures itself, makes itself present and is absent.

The work of painting creates tensions that find their fulfillment or that explode in the territory of the beholder. From this perspective, and even if it sounds extravagant, all of Alfons Borrell's work seems to me like an offer to start conversations made up of broken ideas, silences or calls for attention. Obviously, someone could say that all art is that, an attempt to connect with others, but I would add that, in the case of Borrell, not only what is said or insinuated is at stake, but, above all, the own withdrawal in its most vulnerable, most brittle and at the same time most urgent aspect. The filmmaker and writer Alexander Kluge has called this the power of feelings or the practical wing of theory, because in the same way that there is a totalitarian power in the discourses, there is also a rearguard force that emerges from below fragility.

*15.XI.87* (1987), *8.2.88* (1988) and *15.XI.89* (1989) are three works in which the characteristic rectangle from the seventies is joined by a colour, orange, equally identifying for many of his paintings. In the essay written for the exhibition *Els treballs i els dies [Works and Days]*, Oriol Vilapuig reinterprets George Didi-Huberman's analysis of James Turrell to state that «in Borrell, color does not appear as an attribute or accident, but rather acquires the category of subject and substance». Being this assertion absolutely true, perhaps one should add to what extent the auroral light of orange -as defined by the painter himself-, when superimposed on some dark backgrounds but not completely, backgrounds that are hollowness of the visible and transparency of the weightless, traces a movement where we are reminded of how any light comes out to meet us, it offers us its cyclical memory.

The papers *Untitled* (1977-1980), *Untitled* (1979), *11.8.79* (1979) and *4.2.80* (1980) use gouache and in some cases pencil to establish simultaneous orders and disorders. In a way, they are variations around some common ideas: scrubbing the surface through gestures from which a silhouette emerges; spread the chromatic and put it in contrast with lines that segment the backgrounds. These are works where the moment, the transience, remains fixed in everything elusive that it possesses, like that aphorism that closes a concept and allows one to continue thinking, just like that verse that ends a poem and encourages one to read it again, under another new perspective.

The small diptych *Untitled* (1982) could be understood from a musical position. A plastic adage that prefers fugue to symmetry. And finally, *Blau 1 [Blue 1]* (1978), the only work with a descriptive title, which also illustrates, perhaps unintentionally, the name of the exhibition. Within jazz slang, blue is a tone that marks depth and spirituality, the elegant blackness of the black sound. «Blue» would then be an ungraspable and somehow non-transferable condition, a field of meaning in which the intense surpasses the technical.

Alfons Borrell belongs to that kind of artists in which emotion is an indication or a prelude to a transformation. Gilles Deleuze defined this event politically with his famous sentence «Emotion does not say 'I'». Indeed, Borrell's painting does not decline in the singular either, which is why it is transitive and leads us in and out of us, like an opening towards the uncertain that still allows itself to shelter everything that is about to overwhelm us.

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