

**De la rialla Del crit
Elegia del retorn**

**[Of the laugh Of the cry
Elegy of the return]
Rosa Pera
November 2023**

Exhibiting Albert Ràfols Casamada today means delving into the work of one of the artists who are understood to be pillars of contemporary Catalan art, present in the main Catalan public and private collections and who is also represented in other important national and international collections. As a whole, his art speaks to us about us, about the cultural substrata that have nourished us. Looking at his paintings and drawings, reading his poems and writings, helps us to understand ourselves, in part, as an artistic community.

When I attended a few months ago the opening of the celebration at EINA of the centenary of the birth of Albert Ràfols Casamada, one could perceive in the atmosphere his imprint, through the materials and documents that traversed not only his pictorial work, but also the relevant pedagogical contribution he made, together with Maria Girona.

As soon as I received the invitation to curate an exhibition by Ràfols Casamada from Joan Prats gallery, I found it very stimulating, and I have experienced it since then as a joy, a responsibility and a challenge, and I wanted it to be a shared experience from the start. The first thing I did was to ask myself to what extent and in what way Ràfols could be present, manifest himself, in the artistic research of active creators of other generations. I immediately felt that I had to think about the exhibition from a contemporary perspective, in an active and activating way.

As a leading artist of his time, Ràfols Casamada has been honoured with tributes, catalogues and commemorative exhibitions that have guided us through his career. Subsequent generations have become familiar with his art through the best-known and most recognised works, rigorously selected by art critics who are experts in his work and the best connoisseurs of his character and creative concerns, in some cases experienced at first hand.

At this moment, and from my position, more distant in time and experience, what is needed, I thought, is to invite him to work with contemporary artists, side by side. To do this, it would be essential to take the creative processes as a starting point: those of the artists we would invite and, of course, those of Ràfols. Once the keys to these processes have been identified, it would be a matter of promoting confluences, spaces where they could meet to work together in complete freedom.

Taking contemporaneity as the main articulation of the exhibition would also mean weaving links in a project that would have to be collective, based on a real and sustained conversation between all the artists participating in the exhibition, including Ràfols. The aim would be to achieve a lively and effective conversation, in a way that would not be restricted to the rather metonymic dialogue that oozes out of contiguity when the pieces are exhibited in the gallery's rooms. It would have to favour an inclusive space for all the parties that I proposed to involve in the gestation and development of the show: the gallery owners and their team, the artists we would invite, myself as curator and, ultimately, whoever wants to join in when the exhibition is open, collectors, students and visitors, whether they are art agents or not.

The first complicity came with Patricia de Muga and Marta de Muga, when I raised the possibility of inviting three artists from different generations, to whom I would suggest the collective challenge of making an exhibition in which Ràfols would be as active as them. Once I had shared the starting point, I concentrated on listening attentively to Ràfols' works, paintings, drawings, writings, and some pieces tempted by three-dimensionality, exploring the artist's processes and musings, identifying moments of rehearsal, experimentation and recreation. And this has been a practice that I have subsequently opened up to the other artists, as soon as they have been incorporated into the development of the exhibition.

The aim: to seek in Ràfols' work the gestures where one can make out tensions that are often contained in reserve and which are, in the artist's own words, "dust of meaning" ["polseguera del sentit"]¹.

Polseguera del sentit
entre l'objecte i
la paraula hi ha
la imatge

però
hi ha paraules
sense imatge
imatges sense
paraula

una mica d'ombra

¹ [dust of meaning / between the object and / the word there is / the image / but / there are words / without image / word / a hint of shadow / between the eyes / and the lips]

entre ulls
i llavis²

It would be a matter of capturing that shimmer of shadow between what is seen and what is uttered or not uttered, with all its possible variables and infinite modulations. It is to some extent a poetic dawn that in Ràfols manifests itself in colour, line, motifs and mentions: with the birds, the trembling waters, the echo, the twilight, the murmur, the stars or the music.

When visiting Ràfols Casamada's work, as extensive as it is diverse, sound and light immediately emerged. Both incorporeal and the most penetrating elements, in Ràfols, sound and luminescence are flashes that create spaces. Like an intimate paradox that is never fully apprehended, the strength of Ràfols' compositions is derived from the artist's own language; either as a self-referential note, or as a fortuitous gift for sensitive gazes that want to stay. We would look for them, each one from their own practice, to question them and to question ourselves.

Ràfols himself generously offers us a fascinating game, which consists of trying to catch the questions and insinuations that he was throwing into the air, through space, light and words. These are the three axes from which I started at first to begin the collective creative process that would lead us to work, not on or from his work, but together with him.

When thinking about which artists could be involved in this game, two names came up quite naturally: on the one hand, Pere Llobera, a figurative painter (the description is his own), whom we often find incorporating the limits, like a rusty hinge that does not quite fit, opening ways between discomfort and impossible indifference. Between painting and sculpture, symbolism and chance, pop and romanticism? Sometimes, the syntax of provocation, sometimes, the silence of latent, ironic and sly violence. On the other, Anna Irina Russell, an artist who also explores limits, from the subtlety and, like Llobera, with the traction of humour to question everything: space, presence, durability, bodies and their agency, in mutable and difficult to control environments, with cracks to contingency and the unforeseen.

Both accepted the challenge and shared the enthusiasm; I explained that Ràfols, when asked about his references, cited Kurt Schwitters and said that he adopted the collage technique after seeing his work, which fascinated him. Could we imagine a kind of collective Merzbau, raised with Ràfols? We left the idea in suspension, as a potential

¹

² *Polseguera de sentit*, in *Raons*, parte de *Paranys i raons per atrapar instants*, 1981. In *Albert Ràfols Casamada, Signe d'Aire. Obra poètica, 1939-1999*. Barcelona: Proa, 2000. Page 640.

methodology, while everyone immersed themselves in the artist's creative universe and searched for the beats with their own work.

Gradually, interesting crossovers have been appearing between the creative processes of the three of us, nutrients for conversation in our meetings; we have been fine-tuning my first selection of Ràfols' pieces, which is very numerous, to open up new paths of research and dialogue. Pere immediately felt the urge to explore the other end of one of the strings that connects his work with that of Ràfols: the tension between figuration and abstraction. This was precisely the path chosen by Llobera to share processes with Ràfols, abstraction, which has led him to create his first totally abstract painting, made without any evidence linking it to reality.

S/T, 2023 is an imposing, rotund and dense piece that I have imagined from the first moment as aerial, flying over speeches, conjectures and protocols; free, playful and threatening, like a comet that could be a dragon and whose origin and destination we don't know, because it is impossible to calculate its trajectory.

Anna Irina Russell's proposal is eminently playful, in every sense of the word. Play has been her way of relating to Ràfols, and she has sought it in her work, through drawings, the contemplation of which leads us to imagine the artist expressing unspoken thoughts, perhaps hypotheses, perhaps suspicions or occurrences that could coexist with dreamlike narratives or jokes of the soul. Assuming the essential elements of pictorial practice - Ràfols' main tools for experimenting and communicating ideas, emotions and sensations - Irina has made them her own and transformed them.

Tangram I is offered to the public with the invitation to interact, as is the case with the game of which Irina has adopted the name and subverted expected conditions and behaviour. If in reality, the pieces of the game are sharply delimited and fit together in solid, expansive configurations, in Irina's version there is a soft, monumental piece, made up of fragments that never quite fit together. Manufactured from canvas clothes stuffed, the parts do not respond to a calculated design for the assembly of any form; rather than configuring shapes, they are pieces that invite the enjoyment of deformation through the infinite possibilities it promises. They are elements that breathe, and it is the air that is embraced in each configuration that gives body to different spaces. *Tangram I* draw inverse maps in movement, where the territory is not given by the drawing of the waves breaking over the immobile stones, but is a territory of water that comes and goes. Irina's Tangrams are living spaces with the potential for transformation through the action and influence of different variables in play. The same thing happens with Ràfols' work, if we take the drawings, poems, paintings and writings, and read them by adopting collage - which he appreciated so much - as a methodology.

The third artist to join the project was Mar Arza, through words, the main elements of her own work, and in this case, words are demiurge in the search for links to be discovered with Ràfols. More than affinities or contrasts, the result has been the emergence of joint works between the two artists that reveal a new grammar. Or the achievement, at last, of the yearnings that Ràfols himself expressed in one of his poems:³

Voldria retallar
els mots damunt
la fusta vella i tacada de
la taula on hem sopat
(...)
Retallar aquests mots
signes aproximats de
coses vistes
pensades
moments viscuts
desig i somni

Retallar-los amb cura
lentament
però amb duresa
fins que saltin espurnes
guspires de llum o foc⁴

Mar Arza's subtle gesture has made the creative processes of both artists merge, each one turning to "build now / some new object" ["construir ara / algun objecte nou"]⁵.

In fact, it is the sublimation of what Ràfols himself perhaps already indicated in the work that gives its name to this exhibition. "De la rialla. Del Crit. Elegia del retorn" ["Of the laugh Of the cry. Elegy of the return"]⁶, are verses that he himself rotated and intervened with drawings on top of them, recomposing a previous composition; line, words and the space between them, make the meanings fly through spaces that seek to fit into the pre-established, but in another way.

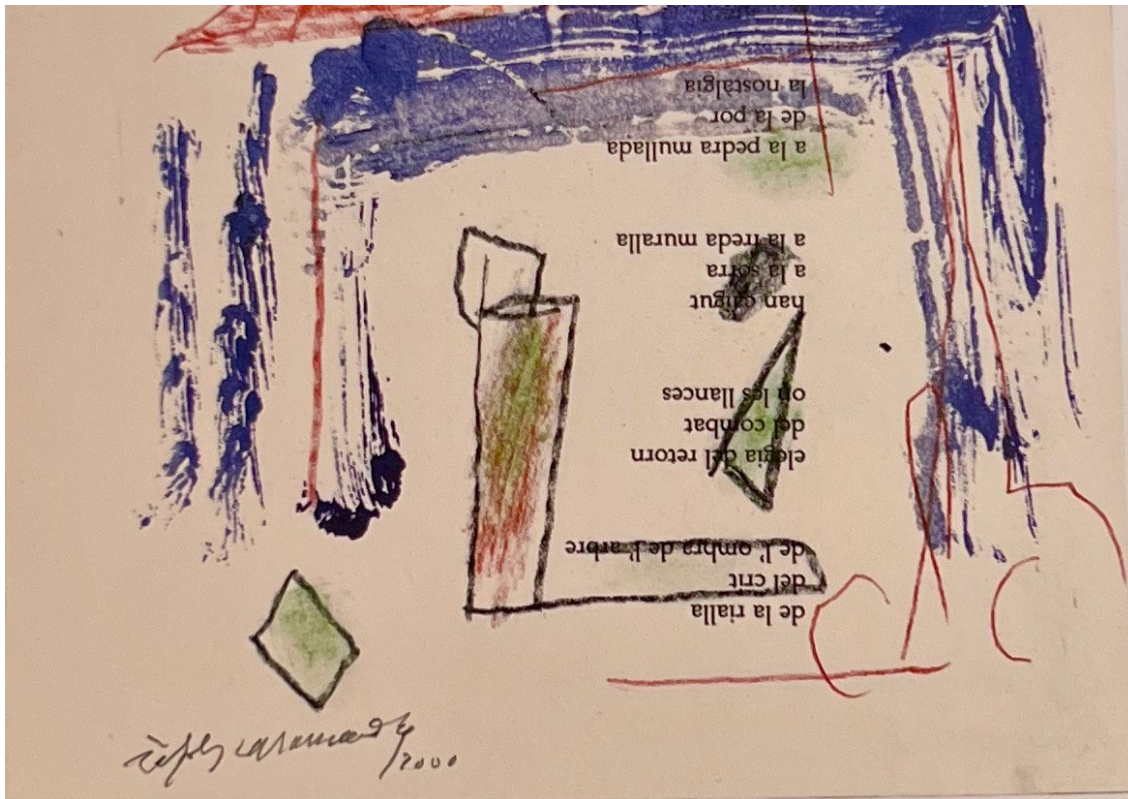
³ [I would like to cut out / the words on / the old and stained wood of / the table where we have dined / (...) / Cut out these words / rough signs of / things seen / thought / moments lived / desire and dream / cut them out carefully / slowly / but hard / until sparks / flashes of light or fire.]

⁴ *Retorn al poema*, 1966. In *Albert Ràfols Casamada, Signe d'Aire. Obra poètica, 1939-1999*. Barcelona: Proa, 2000. Page 209.

⁵ *Retorn al poema*, 1966. In *Albert Ràfols Casamada, Signe d'Aire. Obra poètica, 1939-1999*. Barcelona: Proa, 2000. Page 209.

⁶ Albert Ràfols Casamada, S/t, 2001. Pencil on paper (17x21). Private collection.

Following the flow of Albert Ràfols Casamada's work, we wanted to invite him to meet him again at a time of great changes in the world. We met in the gallery where he shared the beginnings of the path, in the 1970s; at that time, with the leadership of another generation that is not ours and from which we have learned to read "el poema [que] és el traç que queda en l'aire ["the poem [that] is the trace that remains in the air"]⁷. Listening to Ràfols, we have perceived that the line can be grasped in infinite ways, from the present, to give it a few turns and continue to give life to art, convinced that nothing ends, because there is always a new beginning.



RÀFOLS CASAMADA Untitled, 2000, Pencil on paper, 17 x 21 cm. Private collection

⁷ Line of the poem *Epíleg en forma de palmera*. In *Albert Ràfols Casamada, Signe d'Aire. Obra poètica, 1939-1999*. Barcelona: Proa, 2000. Page 1016.