

The image shows the front cover of an old, heavily worn book. The cover is light-colored, possibly off-white or light grey, and is covered in numerous dark, irregular stains and smudges, particularly in shades of red, black, and green. The surface appears to be made of a material that has become brittle and is peeling away in several places, especially along the left edge and in the upper corners. In the center of the cover, there is a faint, ghostly illustration of a cherub or putto, depicted in a seated or reclining position. The word "ENCUENTROS" is embossed in a large, bold, sans-serif font across the lower half of the cover. The overall appearance is one of significant age and neglect.

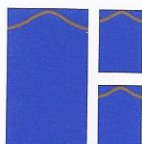
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DÁMASO Y EL TRÍPTICO DE AGAETE DE JOOS VAN CLEVE

UN PROYECTO DE / A PROJECT BY

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BETWEEN THE PAST AND THE PRESENT, IN TIME AND MEMORY DÁMASO AND THE FLEMISH TRIPTYCH OF AGAETE

We do not write so as to tell what we know, but so as to know what we tell. In order to write part of what I am going to tell, I shall refer to some teaching experiences – dating back many years now – regarding a university subject I taught in the past; it was entitled *Latest trends in Canary Islands Contemporary Art*, and was included in the old curriculum of the degree in Art History – which is no longer in existence – at the Universidad de La Laguna, in Canary Islands.

Back then, with my students, I learnt that the recent history of Canary Islands art is extremely exciting and singular, given the multiplicity of its proposals and languages, in a territory that is distant from the main centres for dissemination of contemporary art. At the time, I was pleasantly surprised by the creations made by dynamic and evolving artists, as well as by those made by already acclaimed artists, whose fame was due to an artistic work linked to the processes and plastic arts phenomena that were more in force at the time. It is needless to say that Pepe Dámaso was amongst them.

Back then, I was – and still am – also already interested in one of my subjects of study and research, that is, the art of flamenco and its relationship with the Canary Islands – the vicissitudes of life lead me to this path, as in life everything is unpredictable. For some years now, I have been teaching the results of this research at the University of Leuven, in a series of specialised courses. At that time, my students were also surprised – and still are – by the fact that two such distant contexts – separated by nearly 4,000 km – were socially and culturally communicated by broad paths. Naturally, Joos van Cleve, the author of the triptych of Agaete – where Dámaso was born in 1933 – took those paths moving steadily, and in a personal manner.

I am attempting to ‘encounter’ those paths. But I will not write about Joos van Cleve or his ‘triptych’, given that the first chapters of this catalogue – written by scholars who are more authorised than me – already address that topic. Nor will I write about Dámaso’s explosive oeuvre, which is more than half-a-century old, as various excellent scholars have already dealt with that issue. I will rather elaborate on the relationships between Dámaso’s work and Joos van Cleve’s triptych, and, mainly, about the unknown versions of that prodigious work, and about other works also related to the Flemish artist.

As is known, Dámaso's artistic work is one of the vastest in Spanish contemporary art. In the artist's work, representations of naturalist references, eroticism and death are all symbolically charged. These are essential elements in his prolific production. Moreover, his successful exploration of other plastic arts –such as drawing, design, sculpture, photography, interventions in urban spaces and cinema– also deserves consideration.

Dámaso's extremely dense work has been carried out with generosity and enthusiasm, and has raised an important amount of critical thinking; a debate and a climate of opinion that can be found in the texts included in his many show catalogues, as well as in the monographs, critical reviews and research conferences devoted to his work.

His oeuvre is essentially figurative, closely related to the artistic trends of the times of its creation. It is especially connected to Modernism and Symbolism –with particular reference to turn-of-the-century painters such as Néstor Martín Fernández de la Torre and Arnold Böcklin–, to the chromatic explosiveness of Pop Art, and the reuse of materials characteristic of Arte Povera language. Besides that, it gives off a poetic fragrance, a literary perfume characteristic of poets such as Tomás Morales, Alonso Quesada, Federico García Lorca and Fernando Pessoa.

Dámaso's work focusses on two main topics: eroticism and death, their limits seeming difficult to specify. The artist devotes all his passion to them, and discovers stark and startling realities. This enigmatic passion stems from a desire coming from the dark side, and takes him to the unknown. In this territory, the artist follows two senses: touch and vision, both at the service of desire.

Nonetheless, Dámaso's 'gaze' responds to a unitive aesthetic placed between the ancient spiritual visions of the triptych titled *Virgen de las Nieves*, and the lecherous obsessions shown in many of his paintings –which are much more unrestrained than the erotic representations (*I modi*) by Giulio Romano, Marcantonio Raimondi, and Waldeck; than Aretino's *Lust Sonnets*. There, the bodies intertwine and interlace giving shape to disturbing sequences, as they simply 'express' –and that has always been the original grammar of painting.

Pleasure, vision, and touch; to be looked at and to be caressed. On other occasions, the sexual theme is represented as a terrible denouement; this is the case in the work titled *Serie Sida*.

These paintings are strongly sexually charged; linked to a ritual of signs that creates the unrestrainable language of painting. Dámaso lives in these works. He is the subject as well as the spectator contemplating the action.

There is something vegetal in desire: it grows, ripens and opens. Desire is not a feeling, but an instinct; it stems from blood, not from the head. It is a wild dream born of desperate imagination; it is all the range of pleasures we simultaneously condemn and are fascinated with; irresistible inclinations charged with perversity. Therefore, in Dámaso's oeuvre, there is a dense substance, its liquid being the enigma of sexuality. In my view, that sexuality emerges from the depths of his transcendental experience. Sacred mystery and libertine ceremony. Sudden clarities and secret vibrations.

Thus, topics in his work move along fragile frontiers. He deals with those topics as if they were part of a winding river of furious currents; a river similar to the artist's character; a river that seems to quiet down if it ceases to flow. The whirlwind that is Dámaso only quiets down so as to create in full freedom.

Today, in the astonishing and singular production developed by him during the past years, Dámaso witnesses his dissimilar ENCOUNTERS. Amongst them, the stunning landscape of Agaete and its diverse territories –the valley, the town and the coastal town–; the art of flamenco that illuminated the place; Joos van Cleve, the author of the prodigious painting; the memory of his life, and the memories, and appreciation of –and perhaps also the tribute to– those who were closest to his heart, his most dearly beloved.

This is the testimonial manifesto of an artist who is grateful to life: to past and present. An encounter with time itself, in his search of the time that has elapsed, his time, in his town of Agaete, where he has spent most of his life. There, as a legacy, as a notary's record made of painting, his work will remain, certifying his existence, and the people he loved.

THE VERSIONS OF THE TRIPTYCH OF AGAETE

A general interpretation of Dámaso's versions of the triptych could take us to the depths of his oeuvre, where sensitivity is close to a magnetic area; a fascination, almost a quietist religious ecstasy; a streak of spirituality developed through aesthetic contemplation.

The creative process takes as its starting point the triptych of Agaete. Joos van Cleve's work becomes a means for rearranging Dámaso's concerns. The artist revisits a religious topic in a fascinating recreation.

The versions of the triptych were painted between 2012 and 2013, in the main attempt to build a bridge between the past and the present, in the permanent cycle of the cosmos, and in order to reflect not the style –of course–, but the enduring spirit of the triptych. Therefore, the versions are not an appropriation, but a reflection on a full and mystic world. These works are not a faithful version of the original or a

mimetic exercise, as both artists belong to different worlds and times, and speak diverse languages, convey different meanings. Through the surface of the painting –the epidermis, the epithelium– the artist immerses himself in the depths, and represents another reality.

Dámaso does not only represent the topic of the triptych, but he also feels it, appropriates it and interprets it in a personal manner. Therefore, this work is one of the most far-reaching testimonies in the artist's production.

The triptych has acted as an external agent; a metaphor for the pictorial entropy presenting us with the intensity of a white canvas filled with colours and forms until finally reaching a 'white triptych', which is deep and enigmatic. The work has been majestically displayed in the chapel of the Hospital de San Martín. Not by chance, another encounter has been orchestrated by time and its designs: the Genoese Antón Cerezo, the person who commissioned the triptych, also built the ancient hospital-monastery.

JOSÉ DÁMASO AND JOOS VAN CLEVE

Some details regarding the Flemish painter's life are still to be investigated: his place of birth, his full name, the date of his death, the way he was, his thinking, why he painted that way, and such like. But Dámaso has found out the way he painted the triptych.

Both artists have shared the same work, each of them using the vocabulary and grammar of his particular time. They will remain united in the history of time.

This has been a real challenge for Dámaso. He has had to inhibit himself, and perhaps to work at the limits. However, Dámaso's imagination has gone beyond the original challenge. The triptych was imposed on him as an order coming from an old time. His creative inventiveness has been altered by it. Dámaso started the series in the search of the Flemish artist, of the man, but he has discovered himself, his place, and his account of life.

Dámaso does not illustrate the triptych, but extends it; he is in constant search for sentimental and spiritual contamination. There is no correspondence between Joos van Cleves's characters and Dámaso's characters. This is a heterogeneous encounter –perhaps a clash– between the painting by the Flemish artist and the Canary islander's feelings.

Nonetheless, in this ENCOUNTER between two so very different artists, their singularities, and the deep fraternity of the profession are to be highlighted.

SEARCH, PROCESS, METHOD

The process of creation of this series is marked by a permanent exploration, as the images of the triptych have always

guided the artist; in fragments of drawings and paintings, film sequences –*Réquiem para un absurdo* (Requiem for an absurd)–, as well as other plastic arts works, it could not have been otherwise. For Agaete, the triptych has been a kind of *totem*: an undeniable cultural reference from the 16th century to current times. And for Dámaso –a born artist– it has meant even more, as Agaete and its triptych have protected him since he was born. In his quest of beauty, the artist has reached the level of a stunning artwork made of forms stemming from time.

But the completion of this series is recent; the battle was fought in the studio, as is the case with most good artists. His studio is a space bathed in a powerful and quiet light. There, between sketches, inks, paintings, books, carpentry works, old stuff and such like, the mess is only apparent. Gofio, his honest and persevering dog, accompanies the artist in a solitude that is only interrupted by the uproar characteristic of a working-class neighbourhood, La Isleta. But everything is under control, to the tiniest detail. Dámaso keeps a record of everything, even the tiniest detail.

In his isolation, there is a working method; with rigour and discipline, he works like a monk in a monastery. Nothing is coincidental, but calculated instead. He tastes and digests every painting. Improvisation comes when working, during his hectic and incredible activity, given that Dámaso conceives painting as total dedication, as a constant orgy, because he reveres work that is done well.

But chance is also present in his work, because in art there is always space for the fortuitous. In this sense, for example, I could recall Joyce. Chance furnished him what he needed: "I am like a man who stumbles along; my foot strikes something, I bend over, and it is exactly what I want".

After undertaking a thorough and detailed study of the original model –the triptych of Agaete– Dámaso started drawing, because drawing is learning to look. This process is purely ontological; it is based on training oneself in the neurological channels connecting the pupil, the brain and the hand. Drawing is skilfully handling simple tools such as pencils and charcoals that face the materiality of paper, its resistance, roughness, and softness, in short, its ductility.

Drawing and colour are used to model volumes in the space. Simultaneously, the artist pays special attention to the characters' expressions, and the layout of the objects in a well-organised sequence of planes. Drawing and colour are used to create forms and figures that are full of expression. This makes me think about Chardin's felicitous saying: "One uses colours, but one paints with feeling".

The composition of his wide-format acrylic paintings is based on preliminary sketches and studies, on a thorough analysis of the topics accurately represented by the artist in

well-prepared drawings. Despite the size of the paintings, thematic variations are emotionally charged, and intimism characterises them; they stir us as spectators.

The working process has focussed so intensely on study that Dámaso has ended up memorising every detail. From the careful selection of the objects and characters –interpreted from a poetic and symbolic perspective– to the balance in the composition of bright chromatic shades. The result of the composition is similar in all cases; Dámaso's characters are superimposed on a background composed of the original figures. The metamorphosis is complex and profound. There is tension and contrast in the forefront, between the two spheres of the painting: the celestial and the terrestrial.

THE SPIRITUAL TRANSCENDENCE OF DÁMASO'S CHARACTERS

After bringing a religious topic into the social and public spheres, Dámaso raises it again to the category of the religious. Every painting in this series contains a discovery, an encounter, as Dámaso's characters live together with Joos van Cleve's biblical figures –overlapping them. The figures appear and encounter each other, they are constantly facing each other, transforming into ethereal and sublimated figures.

Thus, the characters appear as in ecstasy, making declamatory and theatrical gestures, shaking their arms, exclaiming with their ecstatic looks the spiritual favour.

The artist has the extraordinary talent of seeing dignity in the characters he paints and honours. He sacralises the mundane world, everyday life of common people like him, and takes it to the highest level of spirituality.

In his many versions he creates a space for a different perspective. Thus, he gives his figures great power of expression, with plenty of nuances. At the same time, that reveals the enthusiasm characteristic of his painting; the pictorial territory becomes a place for interaction and reciprocity, a place between the experienced painting and the painted painting.

This large series of paintings follows the storyline of the original triptych, but from a symbolic perspective. This is a well-argued account where epiphanies appear through revelation. Enigmas are based on two opposed worlds that are united by the mystery of art; stories are suspended between the past and the present.

But this account appears with great clarity due to memory: the merging of memories, nostalgia, emotion and thought.

Memory is what one decides to remember. And remembering can also be inventing, given that memory is more fragile than it seems to be. Sometimes one tries to remember, but fails. Nonetheless, in this work, the images repre-

sent the encounters that have left an imprint on the artist. Dámaso could wonder –with sorrow– about the imprint left on him by those that were part of his life, about what will remain of the work he has created.

Memory has inspired him. He has explored that accumulated wealth that helped him to consolidate his life, and laid the foundations for his art.

Memory is the metaphor of the plastic entropy that places us between the intensity and the depths of time.

Over time, Dámaso has learnt that painting, if unrelated to the real experience of people and things, can be barren. Thus, the exercise of art is for him a drive for desire and happiness, which derives from time.

'Time' and 'Memory' RE-ENCOUNTER now that the artist is in his eighties, when the shadow falls from the cliffs and the fishermen stop working, and the inhabitants of the town protect themselves from the wind, and the evening chill of Agaete, in houses that are protected by two churches: uptown, the church called Iglesia de la Concepción, and downtown, by the sea, the church called Iglesia de las Nieves, in which the Flemish triptych was conceived to be placed.

END

A high level of revelation lies beneath these works, given that they uncover the artist's concerns, inventions, obsessions and secrets. These are his confidences, the core of his essential truth, what he says without always saying it.

The value of life and the mystery of art.

Dámaso has made an even greater effort of imagination and creative freedom to understand what exists than to understand what does not exist.

This may be his best-elaborated work; the best organised, the most sincere and poetic, the wisest and the most heart-rending: it is moving, its art that cannot be denied, it is visible and long-lasting: it is beyond praise.

Each painting has its own magic, depending on the exercise of astonishment that is characteristic of art. They all contain at least one discovery, in this case, one ENCOUNTER: characters –rather renowned or else unknown–, figures, trees, mountains, the sea, skeletal remains, flora, hieroglyphics, and such like. Thus, the works move, have music –one emerges from the other– and the artists' voices –Dámaso and van Cleve– can be heard.

In this series of works, Dámaso goes from an obstinate investigation to a fortunate discovery; even though he already knew there was a denouement, as it was already in his consciousness and his heart –I am referring to the version titled *El final* (The End).

As he worked he discovered the nuances of experience, of pictorial expression itself. Over time, his idea of art has expanded, reaching and dealing with new topics.

It could be argued that a separation between ancient and contemporary painters has always existed. I think that art should be interpreted diachronically. The classics –those who obtain that epithet– will always remain, whereas contemporary painters who will remain will be considered ‘classic’ in the future.

That is not bad at all to enjoy the beauty of art in these times, as in my view, only art, in its many manifestations, can compensate for the current impoverishment of life.

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