

GALLERY TEXTS AND EXHIBIT LABELS

More than twenty years since his death, we can finally see the artwork by Luis Claramunt (Barcelona, 1951–Zarautz, 2000) stripped of the uniqueness and magnetism of his strong personality. This anthological exhibition of his artwork aims to trace his brilliant thirty-year career and recognise it as one of the most personal, intense and dramatic in Catalan and Spanish art in the second half of the twentieth century. Such artwork, however, is not at all easy to classify, being as incorruptible and irreducible as it was. As we reflect back on his career, we can say that he belongs to the great family of expressionists of all time: those who were not so because of any affiliation to a particular school, but rather in a fated and inevitable way. Claramunt always prioritized the subjective expression of reality over the objective impression, and for this reason he was fine tuning its meaning as his career unfolded, as if in each new stage his own reality demanded a different way of expressing it. Hence, this exhibition covers the different cities and territories that were key to his life's journey: Barcelona (1970–1985), Seville (1985–1990) and, finally, Madrid (1990–2000), with the counterpoint of the summers he spent in Horta de Sant Joan (Tarragona), his seven trips to Marrakesh and his fascination for the sea inlet in Bilbao.

Certainly, what Claramunt needed was to distort reality in order to capture a whole network of tensions and dynamism which were both external and internal, but, unlike the German expressionists of the early twentieth century, he no longer held any attitude of insurgency, he only sought to create a visual space endowed with a life of its own, something he amply achieved.

Treasure Island

His formative years in Barcelona (1970–1985) are pictorially dark and dramatic yet still full of resonances (Goya, Van Gogh, Schiele, Nonell,

Picasso and Soutine). It is a painting that seeks itself in each of its pretexts: figures (portraits, self-portraits, people playing billiards or dice, or betting); urban views (the Plaça Reial, rooftops in the Gothic Quarter, the port, Montjuïc, the Estació de França train station or the Estació del Nord bus station); bars and interiors. The background and figure often merge and confuse, the palette is both contrasted and reduced, but during these years we can already see the transition from a more descriptive figuration to a more autonomous one: it is tremendist expressionism that deepens in a certain face of reality, sometimes a bit truculent or literary. Claramunt was a great reader of adventure novels, as we can see in the set of engravings and drawings about *Treasure Island* that he showed in his first exhibition, held at the Taller de Picasso gallery in 1971.

Cities and landscapes

After those first years in Barcelona, with the counterpoint of spending the summers in Horta de Sant Joan or on trips to Majorca and Madrid, during his time in Seville (1985–1989) an important change takes place: as if Claramunt suddenly knows which direction he wants to go in as a painter and is therefore much clearer what his goals are. For the first time, he tackles large-format works and refines the motifs of the painting as far as possible. He leaves behind the variegation of those early years, disregarding colour, texture, chiaroscuro, description and symbolism, and reduces as far as he can the elements he uses: “The outlines, the ‘tensors’ of the picture, are virtually the major protagonists of what takes place”. He takes the colours of Barcelona with him to Seville and that is why we find the monochrome series dedicated to its streets, squares, parks, bars and the river Guadalquivir: as a kind of ‘nocturnes’ that in no way suggest that we are in a southern city.

Marrakesh

Between 1985 and 1988 Claramunt makes seven long trips to Marrakesh which become one of his most fulfilling creative stages. He moves from a period of analysis to one of synthesis. Indeed, there he approaches the motifs without the landscape scheme, superimposing plans, he once again uses colour, chiaroscuro and some surprising changes in scale, while returning all the protagonism to the figure through an endless number of scenes captured in the Jemaa el-Fnaa square and market place which are increasingly stylized, even transparent. It is a world of vendors, disabled people, musicians, blind people and beggars in the most contorted positions, accompanied by all sorts of objects and animals with the horizon of the medina wall in the background. In his own way, Claramunt was an orientalist painter, just as Delacroix, Fortuny and Matisse had been before, for whom Marrakesh was a happy pretext of scenes endowed with the maximum plasticity with which he brilliantly solved the set of challenges that this city posed for him.

Winter bull

Under the title “Toro de invierno” (Winter bull) we can refer in a generic way to a set of works and series articulated around the motif of the bull, which were tackled over a period of ten years (1984–1994) – during which time Claramunt manages to renew one of the most well-used topics and he applies many of the plastic solutions he tried out in Morocco –, as well as the impact of a visit to the Altamira caves in 1988: the distorted perspectives, the homogeneous use of colour, the primacy of the structure, the singularity of the points of view and the simultaneity of some actions which allow him to move from the centrifugal line of those bullrings of Barcelona (1984) and Seville (1986) to the schematization of a bull running – a *capea* – on a country estate in Ávila or in the spectacle of some bulls running freely that seem to be painted by a hand of a primitive painter.

The golden tooth

In the early nineties, Claramunt makes a series of works using black paint on a white background entitled “La muela de oro” (The golden tooth) – alluding, apparently, to a tooth that was making his life impossible at the time. These works draw inspiration from the profile of the buildings visible from the balcony of his workshop on Calle Montera in Madrid, in which we can see in a surreal way some teeth in movement, like the rats in *The Plague* by Albert Camus that he had illustrated. This same technique is found in other series such as “Vall-de-roures” (1991-1992) and “Bilbao” (1994), in which the traced drawing imposes itself on the painting and even eliminates the colour and incorporates the graphite, as if it were the olive trees by the river Matarranya or the sea inlet in Bilbao.

‘Shadow Line’

In 1989 Claramunt moves to Madrid and exhibits the series “Shadow Line”, in memory of and homage to Conrad’s famous novel about the ‘shadow line’, in other words, “the passing from youth, with its carefreeness and fervour, to a more conscious and painful stage of life”. So, we return to the marine motifs of his early days, but with a disconcerting formal leap that leads to abstract expressionism. What is surprising is the implosion of lines, strokes, spots and colours that are created, focused so much on one motif: that of a sailboat that seems to be reflected in some still water. Later on, Claramunt returns to this theme with the series “Mar Rojo Mar Negro” (Red Sea Black Sea) (1995) and “Congo Money” (1997) where the motif of the drifting ship is recreated in countless ways. Despite his return to initiatory readings, the resulting work is paradoxically less literary and more autonomous from an artistic point of view.

‘Shipwrecks and storms’

This is Claramunt’s final series – and the name of his last exhibition – in which the motifs no longer evoke the worlds of *Treasure Island* (Stevenson), *Shadow Line* (Conrad) or *Les secrets de la mer Rouge* (Secrets of the Red Sea) (Monfreid), but have instead become the best possible objective correlative to reflect his own life story. That is why his career ended as it had begun, with the sea, the voyages, storms and shipwrecks invading and dominating all his artistic space, but with a sea that is increasingly less literary and more mental and abstract, as we can see in the final sub-series entitled “Tormentas de hielo” (Ice storms) with which he played the last rhythms in his work. So, we could say that Claramunt’s work also reveals itself to us as the gradual elaboration of his own formal vocabulary and syntax that close in a premonitory way on themselves.