

Conversation in a Low Voice. Interview with Joan Hernández Pijuan

María de Corral



Photo: Belver, March 2003.

María de Corral: How would you define yourself, as a painter or as a visual artist?

J. Hernández Pijuan: For me gaze and sensibility are very important. The transformation of the pastosity of paint into "painting" too. The word "artist" has always sounded very pompous to me, and that is why I have always described myself as a painter, even on my identity document.

MdC: What circumstances in your life explain your decision to be an artist or a painter?

JHP: That is very difficult to explain. In my family there was hardly anybody on either my father's side or my mother's who was interested in the subject. I don't know if that is strange, but it must be common enough, since I have known quite a few people interested in painting, in art, who are also unique cases in their families. I would say that they may be things which are not inherited, which are not learned, they are just there. And naturally I began and continued for several years knowing nothing, trying to overcome my clumsiness with sheer willpower. Then, quite a lot later, when I went to Fine Arts school, I found it difficult to believe it when they told me how to paint, all that business of the fluid brushstroke, in the "Impressionist" style. Perhaps over the years I have been working, all those years, since the start of being a painter, not at all skilful I would say, not at all easy, what I have been able to do is try to take painting into my own ground.

MdC: Do you consider yourself a classical painter, interested in order, balance, material?

In painting, the only thing worth doing cannot be explained in words.

Georges Braque

JHP: Yes, yes, and moreover I work and have always worked with totally classical materials like oil and canvas mounted on a stretcher, with the canvas very taut and front on. And I would add that, at the beginning, with a good deal of order to maintain the balance; order and balance which then in the work can, of course, be broken. I have always liked the pastosity and the visual density of oil rather than acrylic and the movement of the hand on that material. I have never ventured into other grounds, like sculpture, for example. When I have tried, I have never believed in it. I must still need the flat surface, the two dimensions.

MdC: Nature has always been your leitmotiv, at least in the last thirty years. What does nature mean to you?

JHP: Well, I have roots on my mother's side which, as I told you, come from the country, a landscape which is very dear and special to me, which is all that part of La Segarra. When I was very little I spent part of the war years there (1936–1939) and some of the postwar ones, and the memory of that space, the order, the use of the borders, the dividing walls, the huts, the empty spaces... It is a landscape where the elements are always like units, they are never in the plural, and where you can easily follow the flight of a bird between two trees. I would add that I often think that landscape has conditioned my way of being and living and because of that, of course, my way of painting too. And that became possible as soon as I got rid of cultural "conditioners" that had nothing to do with me and adopted my own.

MdC: Have you ever thought you might be considered an obsessive artist for systematically using nature as a referent?

JHP: I have thought that and it may be true. Indeed I have often said that painting is an obsession and I don't know if it is because of that duality of joining thought and manual skill, that transforming material with a painter's intelligence.

Really, there are times when I try to escape, to get out of my space, because of that thing of not being dependent on a "style", but in just one picture, begun with the determination to "break", that obsession with my "order" will win in the end. What I do try to do is to set up a dialogue with the picture, not a monologue in which I am the only one with something to say.

Chance, the unforeseen or the indeterminate can play an important part in the course of the making of a work, and for that reason, if you are open to dialogue, it can open up new paths, both conceptually and formally. In that dialogue, in that discovery of the unforeseen, new forms of knowledge can grow.

I don't know if I systematically use nature as a referent. It is often present, but obviously there are times when it is not. What does happen is that it may also be my painting that has been turned into landscape by itself, whether due to that sensuality and pastosity of the material, by what I would call "tension" parallel to what the landscape may produce, by the very frontality of the picture and also, of course, by the formats.

MdC: Do you think it is important to create a personal world? Is it something that has worried you? Are you concerned about the idea of being transcendent, of leaving a mark, a print on the future history of art? Or when you paint do the pictures have a birth and death in themselves?

JHP: Well, that is one of the obsessions which – frankly and seriously – I have never even thought of. What may happen along my way is that as I have found my "manner", and with no pretensions to it being different, there may have emerged a parallelism between what I am like and my painting, a painting which, because I have always followed my own dictate, has not been too

involved in what had to be done at any given moment. That may be the reason why no-one has ever been able to pigeonhole me, not even those critics who count by decades: the seventies, eighties or nineties, very simply. I have hardly ever been selected for any exhibition of tendencies or decades. Right now I can only think of *Pintura dels setanta a Barcelona. Superficie i color*, mounted by Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, and perhaps some other by "la Caixa". I have almost always worked in solitude with results which, for better or worse, have put me where I am. And I cannot complain. About that business of transcendence, I don't know, it does not worry me too much. I think a painting is a painting and that it will begin its "real" journey when it leaves the studio, as soon as, when it is on show, it "really" becomes a work and when time puts it in its place.

MdC: Which classic or contemporary artists have served or inspired you in your art, not only visually, but intellectually or for their attitude?

JHP: Classics, I don't know. Sometimes they have said that one reference may be Zurbarán. From contemporary painting, it is obvious that things have touched me very closely and at different times there have been artists who have interested or influenced me quite a lot. Like many people of my generation, in the sixties I was marked by Abstract Expressionism. Then much later when I began to be myself, I think attitudes like those of Fontana or Twombly, with that kind of "nerve" in the "making" of the picture, and perhaps Morandi, for his silence, have indeed marked my career. There is a marvellous photograph of Fontana, with his back turned, with a black waistcoat and a white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, with a cutter in his hand, standing in front of a white canvas, his feet slightly apart, which perfectly defines his "painting time". And with regard to my work, I can tell you that it is as if I were less and less interested in stretching out the making time, as if I were more interested in the moment of starting and finishing, taking advantage of that marvellous time of tension. Without being a connoisseur, there may be more references to the

primitive or popular arts in my work, which brings us back to the country again.

MdC: To return to what you said earlier when you say that what interests you is the started and finished picture, does that mean that you are not interested in the process? Since you paint with oil, which takes a long time to dry, your paintings have many layers of color and on them you draw in a very spontaneous, immediate way. How can you say that you are not interested in the process?

JHP: Well, yes, I am less and less interested in the process in the sense of the different sessions, of taking the picture up and taking it up again... I will try to explain: those large pictures over there have little material work time. As soon as I decide to begin to put color, I do so, because it already makes sense and then everything happens in stages and brought about by what is on the canvas, in snap decisions, until I decide, pushed by the material itself, on that drawing or that edging. And oil, because of its slow drying and pastosity, when you let one color penetrate another and I allow myself that incision with the charcoal or the spatula, is still my ideal material. I can say that I try to work on the tension of the painting time, that as soon as I leave the picture, there it is. That further thought, at another time, may serve only for me to stay with it or eliminate it and start over again.

MdC: And have you changed?

JHP: Yes, though not so much in attitude since the seventies. In the seventies I worked very slowly, what I was after required it to be that way, but I also had to start and finish the whole surface and the superimpositions had to be painted as well without letting the lower layers dry because of that penetration of one color into another. Perhaps I was trying to eliminate everything that could make the "process" visible to give an impression of naturalness. The visibility of the process has almost always remained on the margins, on the edges of the painting.

MdC: What has teaching meant to you?

JHP: Setting aside a few problems entailed by the organization of the university itself, I have to tell you that it was and still is – I am emeritus professor – a very nice time. First because I learnt a lot more teaching than when I was being taught. I have learned, I would say, because I haven't tried to teach any truth. As I have a passion for painting and the activity of painting, when I have been talking in the faculty studios I may have put passion into it and that passion may have been good for something for the students. For me personally it has served to learn to look and translate the look into words, that the word does not remain an empty expression. In the end, you know... space, texture, atmosphere... adjust the word and perhaps the silence to what "there is" in the picture. It has also helped me to meet a lot of people anxious to learn – I have many good friends among ex-students, some of them, quite a few, good artists. Others have taken up teaching and others are still in the fight. And I am sure that it has also helped me not to grow old too quickly.

MdC: What fundamental differences are there for you between painting, drawing and engraving, when it comes to using them to express yourself?

JHP: For me obviously there is a concept that may be the "mainstay", what holds everything up. All the rest are different techniques or different ways of coping with the change of technique, the change of surface. When I am in the painting I have to deal with the materialness of the paint, the color, the sensuality of the material, the hardness of the canvas and that other tension. In drawing there is more proximity and that other sensuality of the touch of the paper. What we have sometimes called "the skin of the painting". Engraving is different and although the concept and the image may be one's own, it has to keep its own technical qualities and not try to imitate those of painting or drawing. The engraving has another time, another medium, a less immediate technique and it is going to depend on printing later. And although it may seem like stating the obvious, painting must be painting, drawing, drawing and engraving, engraving.

Normally my engraving times are times of rest between the density of painting and perhaps the painting has been more influenced by engraving than the other way round. That small difference is, as usual, in the attitude with which you deal with the medium.

MdC: Space, color and light are the elements that interweave in your painting. Do you also consider them the basic elements of your art?

JHP: I would say that I often think my painting is halfway between what we might call figuration and abstraction, and oddly enough, without being a landscape painter in a traditional way, that abstract space I paint is recognized as a space of my landscape. And that space, whether the pictures are white, black, yellow, sienna or green, is recognized as belonging to that landscape. When Remo Guidieri was writing an essay on my work, he wanted to discover Folquer, he wanted to see "my fields". We were chatting in the car and when we got to Cervera, the capital of La Segarra, he said: "Oh, stop. I think we're in your territory." The same thing happened with the gallery owner Jutta Müller a couple of months ago when she came to select my works for Cologne. They are people from other latitudes, not at all familiar with that landscape, and they recognized the background of my painting in it. The same thing has happened with people from here. I would say, then, that space, color and light, though not imitative, do interweave in my painting and I would add other more abstract concepts such as tension, sensuality and tactility, concepts I also "feel" in that landscape. There is another reason, not much to do with what you are asking me, which may help to define it. It is something I thought of this summer when I was travelling around the villages of that area with my daughter Elvira: the landscape of La Segarra is mostly rolling, the villages are up on top and when I see them I remember the sunsets in Montoliu, my mother's village. The sun was setting on the horizon, lower than the hillock with the castle, and everything, in summer, was touched with a golden light, as in monochrome.

MdC: You've remarked several times that your motifs, the moments of the landscape that remain in your memory, not only seen but lived since your childhood and which you transfer to your paintings, are ephemeral. There is no question that nothing changes other than the green of the grass or the wheat when they start to grow, throughout a whole day, or the ochre of the ripe wheat or the parched fields after the harvest, but at the same time it is something that is reproduced in certain seasons of the year and has been practically the same for centuries. Are you interested in that permanence in time after the ephemeral instant?

JHP: Let's see, if we continue talking about the landscape I will say that for me that landscape I have traveled through, walked through and been in hundreds of times, remaining the same or identical, can always be different; there is always that moment when the light changes, when the horizon is sharper... There is a scene in the film *Smoke* that explains that very well. There is a character – the tobacconist – who takes photographs, photographs taken every day of the year at the same time and from the same spot. One day he shows them to another character, the writer, who looks at them and starts to go through them quicker and quicker until the photographer asks him: "Why are you going so quickly?" "Because they are always the same," the writer answers. "No," the photographer tells him, "they are all different because the light has changed, because there is someone else." Do you remember that scene? And moreover, to return to your question, I would say that a picture isn't ephemeral and that its permanence in time will depend not only on its quality but on its truth.

MdC: Do you want to reproduce nature or the emotions nature arouses in you, or are you more interested in creating your own nature?

JHP: I would say that I don't know if emotion can be reproduced, but I do believe that it can be present in a painting. There is something that is true and I think I told you before, it is clear that I have no desire to reproduce nature. I may want to try to put the emotion that nature arouses in me into the picture and perhaps that is why my painting may be landscape.

MdC: Are you interested in expressing or showing something precise? In the forms being clear? Or do you prefer to play with suggestions and try to arouse the spectator's imagination, to seduce him?

JHP: My aim is to be as precise as possible. What may be a clear result for me obviously may not be one for the spectator. But I would also say that the spectator can find it difficult to understand language, especially when the language is "very clear" and, like mine, does not allow for grandiloquent readings or searches for hidden meanings. However, I must say that, even if little by little, the spectator has entered into it and understood it.

MdC: People almost always talk about your painting as the painting of silence or silent painting and I have never understood that. For me it is overwhelmingly eloquent, not at all shrill, of course, rather it is a conversation in a low voice. It always inspires me with a need for dialogue, to share sensations, to live moments. Could that silence have to do with the difficulty of describing your work, or the impossibility of reproducing it?

JHP: I would understand painting of silence better than silent painting, but I prefer your definition of a conversation in a low voice, of sharing sensations, of living moments, concepts which, I seem to recall, you already said in an improvised presentation at the time of my exhibition at Reina Sofia, and I don't know if it is difficult to describe my work. What is difficult is to reproduce it. A reproduction would give the image, but not the tension or, most of all, the format, which is very important in my work. Often what they hang on you are labels that tend to stick. Perhaps the silence business comes from that exhibition at Reina Sofia, *Espacios de silencio*, and because a good deal of the painting of what we might call my generation has moved in noise, and I appear with very bare surfaces and, as you say, "conversation in a low voice", and from the conversation in a low voice to silence, if it exists, there is only a step. Perhaps I could define that question for you with a wonderful anecdote: a few years ago I had an exhibition in Chicago and on the

obligatory visit to the Art Institute a lady came up to me and asked if I was Spanish, since the language I was speaking with my wife didn't sound like Spanish. I replied that I was and spoke Catalan and then she asked me if I was a painter, as the day before she had seen my work at the Fair and my paintings were just like me. And yes, I think paintings are the same as the person who paints them. Mine walk leisurely, without making too much noise, they don't push and they have the same attitude to life as I do.

MdC: How do you feel about having been more appreciated and understood abroad than in Spain? Here your work and you personally have always been greatly respected, but it has taken your painting a long time to be understood and loved by the Spanish public and collectors.

JHP: All too often it has been said that Spain is a land of painters or a land of painting and I have always questioned that. The collector has looked too frequently for the picture he would have liked to paint, the one he already "knew", and that has conditioned a good many painters. It is true that now things have changed, changed a great deal. But in reference to my work, it is also true that abroad I have had and still have great understanding. I must say that I have always been respected here, especially by painters, including the painters from younger generations than mine, and that is very stimulating. And if it has taken time for me to be understood by the Spanish public and collectors, I also believe now that it is stimulating to keep growing at my age and in my own home without having renounced myself.

MdC: Tell me about your painting from the nineties, that insistence on the color white, about the borders of your pictures, whether done by the drawn line or the one apparently produced by the layers of paint that emerge on the edges, also about the use of lines, the furrows in the field, the roads...

JHP: I fell in love with white, possibly because I understood it and it excited me. That "non-color", its very hardness alongside warmer and more shiny or

suggestive colors. For being at the beginning of the "spectrum". I don't know, the fact is that I found it while I was looking for the silvers of the sun sinking low over the cornfields and I stayed with it, perhaps because it wasn't such an "imitative" color as the one I was looking for. The question of edges and enclosures has been a constant in my work for many years. It is like wanting to emphasize and give meaning to the void. Someone said that it was a protection against myself. There is also a matter of my own order. When I am in the picture I hardly ever "arrange" the ends, and that business of not reaching the edge, that leaving the "guts" of the work exposed at the edges, has been something that has gradually shaped what we might call my style. As for the furrows, the roads or any other "themes" of mine, they are just the transposition of my wanderings.

MdC: To what extent may other artistic disciplines like music, literature, poetry, theatre or film have influenced your painting?

JHP: I would say that literature may have influenced me, poetry and poetic prose. The literature I am most interested in is the kind which tells almost nothing, and does not aim to recount great things. It is the same thing, or something similar, with the cinema, though I am more of a filmgoer. I listen to music, but not when I am working, and as for that I could say the same as Paco Ibáñez the other day at a concert when somebody shouted that they couldn't hear: "I don't sing to be heard, I sing to be felt." I am also very sensitive to architectural space.

MdC: And does not living in the city affect you when it comes to getting into the studio and painting?

JHP: Getting into the studio and "waiting" for that painting time is my life and the city provides me, amongst other things, with the tension, the debate, and I would say a reality that are still necessary for my work.

MdC: And lastly, what is painting today?

JHP: Well a difficult subject, but I tell you it is there, it

will continue to be there and there will continue to be good painting. It is a language and as such perfectly valid. Perhaps the thing is that all too often painting is confused with the image. And since painting is an image, it mustn't be confused with what perhaps we now understand as an image. Painting cannot be reproduced and it is tactile, it needs to be seen first-hand itself and how it is said will always be more important than what it means. The how will be more important than the idea. It joins the manual and the intellectual and that has always created thought.

MdC: Painting will unquestionably continue to exist, but its language is more closed now, it usually talks about itself, about the fact of painting. The image (photograph or video) seems as if it could express more complex things or be more narrative. But lately I find many artists who use photography or video talk about painting, paint to a certain extent. It seems that painting or its language interests them, but they don't know how or don't want to use the traditional methods.

JHP: Those two last questions are the ones everyone always asks about painting now. I have never read an interview with people from other media whose medium is questioned from the outset. But it is true that painting today talks more about itself, but I don't think that is bad for it; on the contrary, since it places it where it must be, where it has always been, since, as I said before, how it is painted has always been more highly valued than what it expressed. I don't think it needs to be narrative, but it must arouse the feelings inherent to it. The image (photography and video) perhaps must and can be more complex and narrative, because it starts from other bases where I think the idea may be more important than how it is done.

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Paintings and Drawings