

Space, Surface, and Substance. Reflections on the Work of Hernández Pijuan

Arthur C. Danto

Excerpts

Rather than travel, I prefer to go back to a well known place. In that landscape, I go for a lot of walks. I find myself enveloped on all sides, rather than having that frontal view of the *plein air* painter

Hernández Pijuan

...Pijuan's surfaces are physical. They have meaningful underneath. Their physical thickness facilitates the metaphysical depth that belongs to the work. It is always possible for Pijuan to reveal the underneath, and it is important for the viewer of the work to experience it as opening into the undersurface. In a way, painting in his case is like ploughing, a physical intervention, a breaking of the surface. This gives Pijuan's paintings a natural earthiness. His surfaces are built up for the sake of disclosing what is underneath. And it gives them an intimacy of the sort that exists between the ploughman and the field. It is almost sexual. And this will be true even when the paintings are entirely monochrome, with no imposed shapes or images. They offer, one might say, a standing invitation to imagine their depths, even if none has been revealed by openings. The surface looks deep. It is, really, an Abstract Expressionist surface, which Rauschenberg undertook to oppose in the *White Paintings*. As a point of art history, the paintings of Pijuan, like those of his friend Sean Scully, are living embodiments of the deep and living surfaces that essentially belong to Abstract Expressionism.

Merleau-Ponty uses a poetic expression – the "flesh of the world". In Pijuan's painting, the surface is the *flesh of the work*. My sense is that there is an internal relationship between the range of images that Pijuan allows himself, and the way in which, as Hegel writes: *Innere und aussere Welt machen erst zusammen die konkrete Wirklichkeit aus*. The images, so to speak, are one with the paint. Or, since paint and space are one, space itself, in Pijuan's work, is image.

...Pijuan repeatedly distinguishes knowledge, as exemplified by the act of painting, and what he terms "communication" – and though, if space is protagonistic, there is a direct and immediate sense in which there is a kind of intercommunication between artist and space – as between the two partners in the act of love – it is not difficult to appreciate what he means. His claim is that the meaning of the paintings is not in his case linguistic or propositional – which explains his saying that he is more interested in "How I say it" than "What I mean". And this entails that critical explanation in his case must consist more in registering the terms of "saying" than the "content" of what is said. The balance is delicate in any given case, but it is clear that an entire style of criticism, which has been almost orthodox since the emergence in artistic discourse of a linguistic paradigm, to address paintings semiotically and syntactically, is radically unsuitable to Pijuan's work, as it was, really, in the aesthetic atmosphere of Abstract Expressionism.

The modality of mind that must be activated in responding to the work is the somewhat old-fashioned one of feeling – one must re-enact finding the forms that emerge from the space through the act of painting. We must, to take one of his characteristic forms, that of the cypress tree, for example, feel with the artist as the cypress takes shape with a certain inevitability, rather than simply note, as in an act of sign-reading, "Ah! –a cypress."

.....He would not dream of consigning to someone else-a "specialist" or an assistant – the work which is his own *raison d'être* for painting: of finding his own way, time and again, through the space of his landscapes. The spareness of his paintings no more makes them Minimalist than the way he uses paint makes them Abstract Expressionist: "My painting has never sought to give the impression of vast space, nor the 'all over' nor the 'dripping,' nor the gesture, nor the expression of American painting," he writes.....

Text for the catalogue of the exhibition "Tornant a un lloc conegut", at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, MACBA; Musée d'Art et Histoire, Neuchâtel; Malmö Konsthalle, Malmö and Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna.