

The matter of landscape

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1

"Painting ought to be direct enough not to be a slave to itself. The transforming of materials arranged on a surface is something which gives us, in plain language, the key to an emotion. The transcending of the purely craft or artisanate in order for the reason to be questioned by thought, and thought by painting itself and by what we call sensibility." Thus commences a text written by Joan Hernández Pijuan in July 1992, in which he takes stock of the course he had taught several months before in Artekelu. The text brings together what we might consider as being spiritual keys to his painting: the zest for action, for the act of painting, for an intense and continuous engagement; the pursuit of simplicity, of clarity, of order; the primacy of the emotion, of the senses, and the respect for that mystery which is, in the end, what imparts a special breath of life to the work of art.

The text reflects other equally fundamental features: a certain apprehension of painting as a space equidistant between thought and sensibility, between analysis and emotion, between the reflective and the intuitive. Painting as a means of transforming the material, of translating an emotion. This way of understanding what he does situates Hernández Pijuan's work in a unique locus, a work that is an encounter between formulas that are starkly different in spirit: the taste for compositional order against a devotion to gesture, even the brief gesture of a short, insistent brushstroke; the austerity of resources and materials against the sensuality of the images; the tonal silence of the pictures against their evocative character; the rigour with which they display their mental quality against the facility with which they reveal their origins. Painting referred to a landscape that has no need to depict in order to name: an internalized landscape, converted into the matter of painting. A matter that is dense, opaque, full of murmuring sound.

2

Hernández Pijuan is generally considered as a cheerful, even confident, painter, this being essentially a response to the sensuality of the work from the mid-eighties, or to the elegance with which he situates himself in painting. The subsequent, and all but inevitable, classification is that of a lyrical painter. All too frequently, the qualification is drawn yet again from appearances, with no attempt to analyse the meaning of the painting or the depths from which it emerges. The colours, the dissolution of the elements, the route it marks out before arriving at the image, make Hernández Pijuan a more lyrical painter than many of his contemporaries or predecessors, concerned as these are to give form to narrative

aspects or to lay bare the physical qualities of matter. Very often, the presence of the Mediterranean and the proximity of Tàpies act as definitive arguments in the acceptance of this warm, lyrical inclination in his work.

There are, nevertheless, decisive arguments which indicate that this is not so much a reason, an ultimate objective, as a distinguishing feature. Fundamentally covert arguments which in effect serve to situate him in his true position. Far from seeking the poetic pulse in the finished appearance of his canvasses, this is to be found in something that is by nature firmer, more solidly rooted: the attitude. For all that it might seem somewhat contrived, I believe that his approach is not so very remote from that of Philip Guston, of Morandi, or of the later Mondrian, to give examples that are diverse enough to help us arrive at effective conclusions.

If Guston's attitude is that of one who knows himself to be inescapably trapped by painting, who comes to the studio as to the one space in which everything is governed by that pulse, Hernández Pijuan seeks a more open setting, a different landscape, a horizon without bounds, and this is what he finds in the Segarra, in Lleida, in the vicinity of the Folquer farmhouse.

The Guston image is that offered by a 1969 picture, "The studio": a small canvas, handled in the classic manner, which marks out two fields, one occupied by the figure of the artist, wrapped in a hooded cloak, holding in one hand a brush with which he traces the outline of a self-portrait on a canvas, and in the other the sempiternal lit cigarette. The pots of paint, the easel, a window, a clock and a lightbulb are the elements that identify what space, time and spirit are captured in the painting. The clock, the lightbulb, the disproportion of the hands and the way that everything is brought into the foreground serve to emphasize the inevitable character of the action: independently of whether or not Guston experiences it as a drama, he is aware of his situation, and portrays it in an act of nakedness and consciousness.

Something similar happens to Hernández Pijuan, with the difference that he does transmit a certain spirit of confidence, to which his innate elegance adapts itself well. The counterpoint, however, is provided by the photographs which portray him in the act of painting, or in the motives around which his painting revolves. To say nothing of the portraits in which he appears in front of a blank canvas, alongside pictures that have been turned to face the wall, or in the midst of the landscape, marking out a particular distance. The photographs in the studio show him poised before the picture, looking pensively at it; it is not hard to see them as evidence of an interior relationship, of an exterior silence. In

effect, there are few paintings of which it can be said – as of his – that they contain a natural inclination to observe, and not merely to be observed. The image of solitude is strengthened on noting that the themes which provide the referents for his latest works are highly particular elements: a cloister, a cypress, an isolated house. He is separated from Guston by the chosen setting and the formal resolution of the painting, but the attitude is not so far distant. Both know that they are engaged in an undertaking with no possible end, in which all that is left them is to bear witness to their continuance, to their existence. Those who see in Hernández Pijuan a happy, confident painter ought not to forget that this confidence stems from the perception of the order that holds sway in his pictures, but that these are the product of a far from accommodating tension.

Nor are the examples of Morandi and Mondrian very far away. Like the Italian, our painter needs only the slightest of pretexts for commencing a picture, he sees no need to introduce variations, and the only changes he admits are almost spiritual, as in the conversion of a landscape into remembrance, and the last in the series of remembrances into memory, undoubtedly one of the most felicitous transformations in his painting. The formal treatment is similar, at least in the last ten years: if the themes are excuses for the painting, all that the painter need do is select those which provoke him most forcefully, those which from their temperature he feels to be closest. If Guston's choice was spatially more restricted and emotionally more expressive, Morandi reiterates the affection for contained spaces, but their resolution speaks less of spirits than of orders: the interior as against the excess. For Hernández Pijuan, landscape is at the source of the act of painting: the sight of it, its closeness, provokes the sensations he seeks to reflect in each of his works. From that moment of warmth he moves on to a more contained attitude when he begins the picture. As with Morandi, the theme, dissolved in the painting, no longer exists as an autonomous reality. The idea of the landscape has given way to the reality of the picture.

Mondrian sketched out, in his time, one of the most drastic processes for the annulling of all formal excess. Scarcely to be suspected of figurative complacencies, he has left us in his writings some of the most beautiful reflections on motive, on theme. Obsessed with transcending physical appearances, in order to arrive at the inner order of things, he set himself to realizing a painting that would not be "the reflection of the egoistic sentiments of our little personality". Hernández Pijuan also posits his endeavour in terms of the transcendence of the motive, although his form of transcending it may be

said to be warmer and more gestural. The one aspires to the concept, to embracing the totality through the line; the other focusses on the details, from which he contrives to extract the particular and the collective, without recourse to the cold touch of Mondrian's flat washes. The asceticism of the latter stands in contrast to the overflowing painting of Hernández Pijuan; the forms in contrast to the manner, Central Europe in contrast to the Mediterranean. And yet at the same time an identical consciousness of the mysterious quality of the painting.

Morandi, Mondrian, Guston, Hernández Pijuan, attitudes which approach each other in the spiritual: they are conscious of their solitude, immersed in an endeavour of which it is impossible to demand proximate goals, merely the continuance of the inevitable voice, reason and act.

3

In setting out to review his progress as a painter in the form of a retrospective, Hernández Pijuan has opted to link together painting and landscape. He did so a year ago, in the Centre Cultural Tecla Sala, in L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, and he does so now in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. We ought, nonetheless, to recall that his point of departure is located, in the early fifties, within that expressionist pulse with which many young painters seek to reaffirm the vocation for which they were born. It did not take long for an organizing spirit to make its appearance and, perhaps most important of all, a sobriety to which he has remained faithful, even in his moments of greatest sensuality. With the advent of the sixties, after a sojourn in Paris, he entered on a painting of informalist effects, with a tendency to mark tension with gesture and to resolve the picture through the reduction of the colour. Those canvasses (amongst which there are pieces of undeniable quality, as is the case with those belonging to the institutional collections of "la Caixa" and the Juan March) reveal evident differences from the languages championed by groups such as "Dau al Set" and "El Paso". Hernández Pijuan prepares his backgrounds in such a way that the informalists' traditional coup de matière is transformed into a fragment and an element of tension. A subtle touch which, with the passing of the years, permits a rereading that is equally landscapist. This amounts, in short, to the positing of the relationship between a uniform background and a handling of the brush which in its intensity endows the object with quality.

With the end of the sixties and the start of the new decade, the reorganization is clearly apparent. Apart from a "Homage to Lucio Fontana" (1971) that indicates which way his interests

are progressing, the compositions from this period reflect the artist's doubts as much as the search for a discourse of his own. These are canvasses in which some have sought to discern metaphysical elements, although perhaps it would be more logical to see them in terms of a rereading of painting whose solutions bring him closer to the Italians, from the primitives to Fontana. The distinctive characteristics are unmistakable: the order, the gusto, the balance, the elegance, and the introduction of an element that shatters that stability or reaffirms it as it imposes itself.

Moments which the painter has made precedent to the landscapist revision of his work cannot hide their quality of difference, their solitary vocation and, especially in the latest pieces, the subtle irony with which they contrive to bear this tendency towards stability. In a conversation with Josep-Lluís Seguí, towards the end of the seventies, Hernández Pijuan took stock of this period in the clearest terms: "I moved from a figuration in the manner of Zabaleta, extremely hieratic, to freer ground, somewhere in the direction of gestural abstraction. I made my way little by little, because I go slowly, I have no idea how to leap from one position to another without intermediate steps. And this dedication to gestural abstraction enabled me to set about liberating myself of all the formal training I had had. On my own account, I began to discover – from those first gestural pictures, which had a little of Kline, some Saura, some de Kooning – that what I was interested in was the nucleus in relation to what was left void in the picture. After that came the discovery of what we now call space: the pictorial space, the surface of the canvas."

Void and pictorial space have since then been two of his principal lines of reasoning. The arrival, the discovery, have nevertheless been slow, if pleasurable: "In the teaching of Fine Art, in the art of those years, the void space counted for nothing: everything had to be filled with things; the composition called for the filling of every corner, all of the picture. Thus, over the course of a number of years' work, I have gone about discovering the void space. At the same time, I was starting to grow tired of the language of gesture, in that the work I was doing there had turned into a kind of self-referential studio painting. I was looking around for something else for a couple of years, and turning out these things in which the human figure appeared, prompted in part by Pop, until I realized that that gestural element which at a certain point in time was reduced to a very small gesture with a very large void could be replaced by a figurative element, and that was when the figure of the cup emerged.

Subsequently, through the same working process, the series of colours appeared, and I began to incorporate elements taken

from the process itself, and the scissors element came to be included, which was brought into the paintings as yet another figurative element, as an object..."

4

The way out proved to be a pursuit of measure, of proportion, which Hernández Pijuan has not so far renounced. Certain images still pertain in part to the previous phase, as is the case with "Double black space" (1972), but in others the surface is divided by the presence of a length of measuring tape or a ruler, which shows the larger dimension of the canvas. The effect is strict and severe in "Space with centimetre of 146" (1972), while in "Yellow ruler" (1972), horizontal in format, the solution is more subtle. The painter has maintained on a number of occasions that the system corresponds to the need to introduce the process into the final image, in a practice that might be indebted to aspects of surrealism and conceptual art, but also has much to do with an acute revision of the elements of his work.

It seems to be stating the obvious, but the nakedness to which he subjected the support, the colour, the impulse or the light – both as concepts and realities – at this time, effectively determined the subsequent evolution of his painting. The discovery of the picture as a space, of the landscape as an emotional reference, and of paint as the material with which to give an image of that emotion is as sincere as it has been slow and measured. Before 1980 there are no pictures where the colour bursts forth, the lower layers vibrate and reel, struggle to come to the surface, in effect occupy it. Like the fisherman in Poe's famous story of the Maelström, who recounts his fall into the currents of Lofoden and Moskoe, ("the noise (is) heard several leagues off, and the vortices or pits are of such an extent or depth, that if a ship comes within its attraction, it is inevitably absorbed and carried down to the bottom, and there beat to pieces against the rocks; and when the water relaxes, the fragments thereof are thrown up again") and his subsequent salvation after observing the inner workings of the phenomenon, Hernández Pijuan spent the seventies learning the mechanism of the new space. He observed, noted and acted in consequence, as he was to demonstrate in his canvasses of the eighties when, having become the narrator of his tale, conscious of having found a path of his own, he installed himself in it and set about interrogating it.

On the occasion of the presentation of his Doctoral Thesis, in 1988, he reviewed the trajectory with which he was happiest, the last twenty years of his painting, and recalled the landscape which immediately assumed the central place in his

adventure. His way with words is as meticulous as his painting is, and produces an analogous effect; it looks descriptive, but constantly introduces sensations, interrogates itself, and finds the answers in the milieu, in the choice of surroundings: "Our farmhouse in Folquer (La Noguera), between cultivated fields of corn and in a landscape parallel to the neighbouring landscape of La Segarra, is an enormous warren of a place, with a ground floor and two upper storeys, at the top of which I installed my studio. From the middle of this the eye dominates two vistas – open space and intimate space. From one, looking south, through an arcade enclosed behind great windows, the landscape, immense, is terraced, slipping away in a completely open, infinite space until it arrives at the distant Serra de Prades range. The other, to the north, is seen through two small windows, traditional in the north facades of the country houses in the region, and due to the fact that these windows are set low down, the view from them is immediately cut off by the Serra de Comiols. This is an intimate, closed vista. We have virtually a bird's-eye view of the cultivated fields. The little window frames the countryside, leaving it without sky, without horizon, with no limits other than those of the frame of the window itself. The landscape takes on the frontal character of the picture and only the rich monochrome of the colour and the surface which this occupies give it its element of image and expression. These two aspects – intimate and open – have played a large part in configuring the comings and goings of my painting." For the painter, the effect of these surroundings has not ceased to be magical. If Barcelona is the place where things happen at a rhythm of reality which painting aspires to arrest, in the Segarra the opposite occurs: painting makes real the sensations provoked by a landscape that is generous with these, but arrested in time. The work of these years is an intensive analysis, without concessions. The condition of the surprising "Small double landscape" (1972) and the "Triptych I" (1977) is analogous. The former (a 33 x 24 cm. canvas) has the quality of one of those short poems which, for all their metrical strictness, strike us as rounded and immediate. On the face of it, everything about it would seem to relegate it to a place of purely secondary interest: the dimensions are smaller than the other pictures of this period, and its language still retains ephemeral details, as in the way of duplicating the image, or the lines and annotations which cut across it. Yet the balance, the perfect gradation of the colour, the intensity of the light and the rhythm let us know we are in the presence of one of those key, determining works to which a painter will return when he wants to recapture past situations. "Small double landscape" is a discovery; as is, in its way, a

later yet parallel watercolour, "Two holm oaks" (1975): the study of the light, the degradation of the colour, the significance acquired by a motive when superimposed on a nuanced background; and, alongside so many other intermediary qualities and insinuations, the rotundity of a holm oak, an element that has been incorporated into the painter's own personal iconography.

During these years, Hernández Pijuan frequently turned to millimetre-squared paper as a support for prints and watercolours. A time, then, of observation and measurement, of unhurried noting and sketching. In painting, as against the handling of the watercolours and prints, the exercise allowed a greater distance. In the recollection of a half-seen landscape, of a certain light over a field of wheat, Hernández Pijuan pursues not motive but sensation, and so the result comes out freer and its interpretation lyrical. On occasion, the final exercise of putting the emotions on the canvas is mediated by complex mechanisms, such as the gradation of colour on the basis of lines, the overlaying of schemes with very pronounced rhythms, or the emphasizing of certain effects through the sharpening of the formats. During the first half of the seventies, the subtlety of the chromatic solutions is pointed up by minimal annotations which can be interpreted as evidence of an ongoing process ("Landscape with marginal note 0-135", 1974; "Five golden spaces", 1976). As we move on through the second half of the decade, the pictures evolve into coloured forms, through the intensified focus on their dimensions ("Vertical-light", "Vertical-shadow", 1977; "Horizontal", 1978), or the fragmentation of their surfaces ("Triptych I", 1977; "Diptych II", 1978).

The temptation when considering these works is to refer them to Rothko and to the minimalists; just as in those which immediately succeed them we can discern reminiscences of Monet and the Impressionists. Hernández Pijuan has shrugged off these readings, even at times when they implied a signal modernity of approach. His work, he confesses, is a response to the spectacle presented to him by the light on the fields of the Segarra. In consequence, his painting has gone on acquiring a cadenced rhythm, as if reflecting fields of wheat swept by the wind. The delicate layers of paint are laid one on top of the other in a gradation that simulates a slight yet stable movement. It is possible to search out affinities with painters such as Rothko, but the encounter must take place on the basis of perceptual hypotheses, such as the potential for mysticism which can be gleaned from the paintings. The informing spirit, nevertheless, is quite different. As is that of the minimalists, however much Hernández Pijuan may deliberately reduce his colours and strive

to retain what is essential to the particular moment. The American legacy does not exist; nor is there any concern with occupying spaces, delimiting colour fields or openly confronting the large format, on the basis of a painting of ample gestures. During these years, his approach is painstaking, slow, with short and insistent brushstrokes arrived at through analysis and persistence. A painting that is uniform in appearance, very gradual, tending towards the serial. The Segarra is still present, a territory to be explored, a first image: the general impression, the light, the colour, the movement, are enough to determine the response of the painting. The response provoked becomes entirely different when recollections are added to these, and especially when both situations are transformed by memory, periods which correspond to Hernández Pijuan's subsequent framework, plastic and theoretical.

5

The measured approach to the landscape, its analysis, takes place along two paths which have become indissociable in his work. On the one hand, the temperamental; on the other, the reflective. That the former ultimately comes out on top is apparent in the resolution of the pictures. When he opts for monochrome surfaces, the colours chosen are those of nature: green, yellow, ochre. An impression of light, a temperature, are employed to evoke the sensations produced by the changing reality of the landscape. In certain cases it would be possible to recompose the light and the moment caught there, by analyzing the layers which make up the painting. The exercise proves particularly appealing in those canvasses where the extreme fineness of the layers has caused the colours to merge together, blurring their limits in subtle vibrations. Paintings of motiveless murmurings where the colour breathes and the space indicates a movement, a direction. "Like the breeze that the blood breathes over the darkened field of battle": thus begins one of the most startling verses of Bécquer, a poet whom I have no idea whether Hernández Pijuan finds close to his heart or not. The paintings, and above all the watercolours, of the seventies, do nothing to discount the possibility. The works which mark the close of the decade introduce slight but significant variations. The first is the establishment of a new relationship between support and painting, given concrete expression in the lengthening of the canvasses. Coinciding as this does with a period of pictorial nakedness, of the elimination of the merely accessory, the results are coloured forms in which the material occupies the space with an equal degree of precision and care. Pictures which act as scales and refer to their time, very much worked over, resolved

in a surface that ends up signifying itself as a cultivated field or as a kind of skin, at once sensual and strict.

Nothing is accidental: not the dimensions, nor the characteristics of the support nor the material employed. The painter goes back to the pencil, in a short, rhythmic movement that is very sustained, when he wishes to emphasize the gesture (in these cases, in not occupying the entire surface of the paper, for all its density the image is left free to breathe); where the sensation is less energetic, more stilled, he uses watercolour, diluting the presence of the colour, in line with the landscape being evoked, to simulate perspective. On the canvas, the superimposing of layers serves precisely to reaffirm the presence of the form itself, of the scale, of the measure, especially in those works marked by their verticality (the two versions of "Untitled", 1978).

In the large-format works ("Triptych I" and "Triptych II", 1977; "Diptych I" and "Horizontal", 1978), the surfaces make allusion to an idea of silence, of the void, in absolute coldness. A single tone dominates these pictures, but the vibrations of those that have been covered over can be perceived. It could be said that they represent carefully united silences, with the intensity and the imperceptible framework that are implicit in this system. To continue to draw parallels, they are the image of the activity of Heinrich Böll's Dr Murke, who devoted himself to collecting silences, splicing together the pauses in his recordings of radio broadcasts.

6

To unite silences and elaborate out of them a work of art can never be other than a difficult task. Hernández Pijuan must have felt something of this when, as the seventies made way for the eighties, he reviewed his painting with now notorious misgivings and attacked it with exceptional critical acumen. What is particularly curious is that his most drastic reflections coincide with his being awarded the Premio Nacional de Artes Plásticas, in 1981. The award was made in recognition of a trajectory, a process of evolution, but the man who received it was dissatisfied as a painter. He laid bare the grounds of his complaint in his Doctoral Thesis, in 1988, in a text that has never ceased to surprise on account of the methodical dissection to which he subjects himself; and of his capacity to analyze his own work as if he were at once inside it and outside it. After noting the dissatisfaction which his work during the late seventies produces in him, and insisting that the way forward can lie nowhere but in a deeper exploration of the most personal aspects of his language, he confesses: "The fact of trying to move on from images produced with small, soft brushes; images which the very

nature of the space, image and texture that I was trying for required to be configured through small brushstrokes superimposed almost systematically, since they were a function of that same 'non-expressiveness', and the desire to find a way out obliged me, moreover, in addition to all that it might mean conceptually, to cast off that gesture that had lost all meaning and had already started to impress me as much more 'systematic'. I could say, then, that at that moment the tools themselves opened up new avenues for me. And if my interest in drawing had been left somewhat on the sidelines by the fixing of that atmosphere more than of any image, in returning to a gesture with greater visual scope, more marked by the brushstroke, the will to draw returned."

The confession is uncompromisingly drastic, and does not stop at merely enunciating the situation: "In order to describe this process towards the immediate I will have to refer back to the works I produced in the early eighties. With one or two exceptions, they sketch out for me a crisis, slack years of complacency and self-satisfaction. This was the point at which I went from large surfaces, hard and tense, to visual itineraries which, as such, are preserved in paintings of light, superficial touches, airy, where the gesture, the imprint of the path travelled, rather than running deep, possesses itself of the surface. Less than brushstrokes charged with intention, these have become touches, the itinerary becomes banal and the painting goes soft." The rejection of a certain facility in the exercise of the craft reflects, nevertheless, other more powerful reasons: "I was moving from a colour and a surface that had some significance to a colour that was not mine, to a colour and a light that I imagined were atmospheric, more impressionistic, and which in fact I cannot have understood and which, moreover, in view of the hardness of my landscape cannot have been right for me. From the hardness of 'my landscape', then, I shifted to a visual exploration of a landscape I had not personally experienced." This is the declaration of a problem: he cannot be convinced by the results because they are the product of an unaccustomed situation, of his having allowed himself to be carried away by painterly effects, by their invitation to play, their seductiveness, and his neglect of the motive, the circumstance that sets the process in motion.

It is likely that a less self-critical painter would have recalled the discoveries made during this period and, perfectly plausibly, inclined towards favourable readings, such as were put forward by those who saw in his work one of the few points of contact between Spanish painting and "minimalist" practice outside Spain, or who analyzed it in American terms and went round mouthing platitudes about his attachment to

"all-over" surfaces. Hernández Pijuan rejected these interpretations, no doubt because he was aware of the real motives that actually guided his steps; as he had never ceased to be a solitary painter and since, although far from arrogant on this score, he knew what the painters round about him were seeking to do, he thus felt himself bound by an obligation to set himself apart, to reaffirm his difference. In facing up to this challenge, the solution seemed to become clear: that which is meaningful at a given moment (the degradation of the colour in order to evoke the impression created by the landscape), begins to lose its validity as it moves further away from its true source. The self-criticism was thus directed at complacency, the loss of radicalism, the absence of tension. The overlaying of fine layers of pigment led him towards a kind of painterly effectivism. He rejected this as evidence of a facility that results from stagnation and remoteness from a vision of the source: the pictures of this period have ceased to be a reflection of this vision, and become instead an all too comfortable pictorial resolution of it. The seductiveness of the pigment tempted him to stray beyond the colours of his first choice, inspired by those of the landscape (yellows, ochres, greens). In the midst of this crisis, he realized that his way of handling these pictures (small brushstrokes, a little material applied in successive layers) had abandoned gesture and drawing. The option now was to recover these, and this led him to a rapid reordering of the picture, to a reaffirming of a more vital pulse in the action of the painting.

Ultimately, what we are witnessing here is a debate between vitalism and the tendency towards systematization, towards an approach based on mental hypotheses. Hernández Pijuan decided in favour of the first option, convinced that that is his way of being as a painter, in painting. At the moment that he made this decision, he was conscious that for a painter of his technical skill, with such a facility for the use of colour, the path he was turning his back on would not have proved sterile. He adopted – perhaps because this was the moment when the change of course was most dramatic – a drastic resolution. He had previously hinted at the possibilities of working on the margins, a possibility signalled by the watercolours and oils which take bougainvillaeas as their subject. It is the tone in which these are resolved that form a secure basis for relating his attitude to that of Philip Guston. The two versions of "Bougainvillaeas at Son Servera" announce the break. The more closed and compact resolution of the work from the late seventies (the "Triptych II" from '77, the "Diptych I" from '78) has lost its iron character, has dissolved away. The colour, and a brushstroke that draws itself out and undoes itself, are still dominant. The

impressionist effect is real, but the colours do not dissolve here as Monet's do; there is no danger of the image disappearing; the sense of earthiness persists.

7

The bougainvillaea paintings serve to bring to a close Hernández Pijuan's most systematic period. As if he were now fixing his gaze on the details, the subsequent works mark a different rhythm. The first thing to command our attention is perhaps the images' sense of exuberance, dominated by the presence of a motive drawn with a looser line or reinforced by blazing colour. For all their importance, these details are not unique: the painter not only selects the format but delimits an additional field in its interior. In "The blacks and the violet" (1983) this is achieved by means of a superimposing of layers, not in the gradual fashion of earlier years, but in a fuller and more sensual manner, preparing the contrast of the leaves outlined in violet. The solution that persists is the one adopted in pictures such as "Landscape" (1984): here the internal limit is signalled by means of a thick black line that intensifies the sensation of being in front of a window, and the determination to embrace the pictorial space as an autonomous reality is reaffirmed. This formula allows him to establish an engaging dialogue with the motive of the landscape, handled with an ample, expansive gesture, advancing out from the centre towards the edges.

The somewhat spectacular resolution of "Landscape" is an indication that the spirit is returning, that the crisis is passing, opening up new perspectives. The abundance, even the generosity with which the works of this period are handled ("Cypresses in the Segarra", "Landscape with black cypress, I", 1985), announces a significant opening out. The restrictions have been left behind, the pictures have something of the quality of expansive, loose drawings, showing a dominance not only of the material but of that way of defining in terms of the negative that is most characteristic of drawing. These are glorious years, full of zestful discovery, and this is reflected in the outdoor paintings; the interiors ("Transparent interior", 1985) reveal an almost obsessive insistence on illuminating a blurred, indistinct subject, rather in the manner of Giacometti's paintings.

If we compare the treatment of landscapes and of interiors, it seems clear that while the former announce the possibility of reordering the pictorial space, the latter adopt an insistent tone we might associate with someone in pursuit of an image. The reencounter with landscape is the determining factor: the concern now is no longer to salvage the sensation provoked by the colour of a field of corn, but to evoke the recollection of the

details of a lived environment. This mode of seeing landscape as recollection is one of the principal arguments for the process of renewal, but the definitive step is rooted in its conversion into memory.

8

The works of the second half of the eighties together make up the most solidly constituted whole within Hernández Pijuan's oeuvre. The attitude which informs his work is that of an assured painter who knows what he wants to paint and how to do it. A painter inevitably committed to painting, his confession leaves no room for doubt: "There are days when the decision to make a start proves difficult. Times when, in the studio, you feel yourself empty, without the necessary tension. I look, I arrange my papers, I commune with the finished paintings, work started or abandoned, I go through my notebooks, I walk backwards and forwards in 'my' space as if waiting for something to spark off the provocation. But I need to be there every day, without deserting my post, in order to try to set in train once again that dialogue with the picture, with its space, with its image, in order to provoke that crucial moment of beginning, which will generate in me the dialogue as an unforeseeable process. A dialogue in and on painting." The painter knows himself to be trapped and, far from concealing the fact, engages in that daily search. The painting is not slow to reveal to him his isolation, his dependence, that tense solitude from which the greatest achievements emerge. The Segarra continues to be his setting, but the painting no longer reflects the flashes of the seventies, nor even the more ecstatic outburst of the first half of the eighties. The Segarra is a space that has transformed itself into memory, a space that merges with the limits of the support for each work. The pictures then emerge singly, solitary. A cathedral, a cloister, a courtyard, a house, a cypress, a flower: the motives evidently repeat themselves. The variations are minimal, and affect a disposition, a balance, a control, a counterweight. They can never be other than excuses for the engagement in an act that transcends them, that overarches them.

The Segarra is a space, a reference, but the painter salvages it as memory, which makes his practice more restrictive. More denuded, more drastic; we know that memory is selective. The motives, inevitably, are concentrated. The cathedral, the cloister or the house tend to identify one with the other, like the space of a painter whom it would not be fanciful to see in the image of the cypress. The cypress in the cloister might well be seen as a metaphor for the painter in his studio: the attitude of watchful vigilance is the same. The house ultimately comes to stand as a reference for the pictorial space:

the drawing that engages in debate with the thick paint of the background, a scoring that pushes it up, converting many of the more recent canvasses into subtle bas-reliefs. A personal calligraphy over an opaque material, with no other elements than the strictly necessary. Silences of plenitude, with lines defining a space interior to the support, with a use of paint whose application suggests bodily effort. Layers that seek to occupy the surface in its entirety, leaving small openings that make it possible to see those that lie beneath them. A painting that is flat and at the same time gestural; neither concerned with qualities nor in search of the gradations of earlier periods: it reaffirms its situation, its power to summon up light, to reflect it. A light that slides over the canvas, exposing each painting to view, devoid of tricks and of chance, naked. Its complicity is not required to simulate atmosphere where none exists; the details of a landscape are of no importance when what is being striven for is its memory. A painting that is dense, in plenitude, almost corporeal.

There is a continuous succession of works of the first order of magnitude in these years. Initially, the pictures transmit an affirmative plenitude, sensual in the abundance of material, in the strength of the colour, in the nuances provoked by the thickness with which it is applied. A drawn motive (so schematic as to be almost sketched) ends up giving the work the tension and the equilibrium it requires. This happens with "Green, black, white" (1986), a major work from this period, amongst those that reaffirm their faith in the material, in the firm belief in the exercise of painting. If the painter had complained that in previous pictures he had let himself be led astray by a certain sense of aesthetic comfort, he is now concerned to give greater stability to the image, before going on to take pleasure in effects that adapt perfectly to his objectives. A rectangular format, common to most of the works he undertakes from this time on, whose implications are reinforced by the green border which signals its limits; an opaque interior space, apparently flat but tremendously rich, extracting maximum benefit from the flow and abundance of the paint, the way in which the material gushes forth. The enigma of that mysterious, dark, black surface is subtly counterpointed by rippling greens and, to a fundamental degree, by the inclusion of two floral motives, positioned with a symmetry that is by no means rigid. A plenitude of enthusiasm, "Green, black, white" suggests a parallel with the "Landscape" of '84: the time and the sense of security have changed, but both are significant, central works.

Within a short space of time, Hernández Pijuan evidences both that intensification of spirit and the tenser tone manifest in "Closed black landscape", behind which it is easy to make

out a different spiritual condition, or "Cathedral" (1986), an image handled in a more drastic fashion, a foretaste of how his subsequent works are to be, following the painter's habitual way of progressing, marked by his determination to distance himself from any system as soon as he intuits the first trace of condescension.

In "Cathedral", the architecture has been transformed into lines of reference that affect not only the reality they denominate but also — and perhaps above all — the pictorial space. The next step is visible in "Ochre landscape 2" (1987), with a charged, material background that recurs in all the finest pictures of this period. The process bears little relation to the systematic precision of the seventies: the control that was exercised there, based on the division of the canvas, is replaced by an almost turbulent action; the paint inundates the canvas, leaving the marks of its passage plainly visible. The layers of colour battle with each other, but there is no pursuit of facile effects, and in fact the way of painting tends to annul these, invading as it does virtually the entire surface of the canvas. Pictures such as "Ochre landscape 2" (1987) or "Comiols II" (1988) link up with the finest innovative spirit of the Spanish painting of these years, to which Hernández Pijuan contributed not only as a painter but through his work as a tutor at the Escola de Belles Arts in Barcelona. His teaching activities began in 1976 and, unusually for a practising artist, have continued ever since. It is significant that his students have the highest regard for him, expressing gratitude for his capacity to transmit a firm, confident attitude towards painting that has no need to resort to irony to stimulate their work. "I confine myself to correcting faults of orthography", the painter remarked in a recent interview. "The most frequent of these in Art Schools, if not amongst the students themselves, derive from emphasizing a painting that is already finished. I feel that the students should discover their own language and not paint in ways that have been done before." An attitude that is simply the continuation of that which he upholds in his work.

In the last few years, Hernández Pijuan has referred in the same terms to painting and to landscape; it is not for nothing that capturing the latter is the aim of his painting. The brushstrokes transmit a spirit that is happy, but at the same time tense and full. As if they composed, as a body of work, a subtle description in which the detail and the whole are united as one. "Annotated landscape" or "Ochre space" (1989) are empty spaces whose drastic character announces a revision of intentions that becomes evident in canvasses such as "House and cypress on white" or "Landscape with house and trees" (1989), where, after touching the mythical degree

zero of painting the void, his work opens up to broader landscapes, translated into his own personal iconography.

9

The eighties ended in abundance: a solitary cypress, a rounded holm oak, a house, the lines that delimit the memory of the landscape dominate the cleanest and most austere of the canvasses; in others, generally where memory is at work ("Memory of the Segarra", 1989; "Memory of Evora I", 1990), he divides the space, occupying it by making it, in characteristic fashion, more descriptive. In the nineties, the landscape draws new life from the appearance of clouds and changing lights. The first of these elements are silent forms, announcing that the action continues, from the enigmatic simplicity of "Cloud and rain 5" (1990) to the density of "Pink cloud" or "White cloud 2" (1991); the second allow him to look afresh at the function of colour, demonstrating his perfect mastery, in spite of acting on the basis of strict selection and using dark pigments. This period also sees a resurgence of the drawing, the line, whose arabesques occupy almost the whole surface of a number of canvasses (the series "Morocco", from 1991-92).

10

Any review of the last twenty years of Hernández Pijuan's work makes it necessary to posit a number of considerations which could as easily be starting points as conclusions. It is noteworthy, for example, that in a context as strict as is the Spanish scene when it comes to grouping artists together, he remains the sole defender of a particular project. Even a convention such as that which links him with Ràfols Casamada as constituting the most colourist branch of their generation loses its validity if we analyze their actual practice (in Ràfols Casamada the lyrical is more animated, while in Hernández Pijuan it is an almost intuitive response). Hernández Pijuan's solitude is also apparent in the matter of his heirs: there is no one who seems guaranteed to pursue his line of inquiry, for all that there are many who seek to adopt his spirit. Our painter, possibly in consequence of the intensity with which he appeared on the scene and the forcefulness of his subsequent self-interrogation, is one of those artists who tend to exhaust the territory through which they pass. At the same time, while his is by its very nature a lonely domain, he belongs to that special group of painters who enjoy the respect of their peers, and this as a result not just of the quality of his images but of the rigour of his undertaking and the imperturbable equanimity of his attitude, to say nothing of

the silence with which he presents his achievements.

There is another resonance which affects him, one consistent with his being seen as a Mediterranean painter. Having said this, we ought to make it clear that where this has a bearing on his work is in terms of the cultures of the region, rather than the maritime environment as such.

Hernández Pijuan cannot deny his classical vocation, his taste for measure, for harmony. This offers the justification for his involvement in processes of formal restriction, although as soon as these start to take on the attributes of a system the vitalist side of his character rejects them completely. The basic references would seem to be Italy in painterly terms (the colour surfaces, the contact with the material, the way of covering the surface, the palette of colours, the presence of a schematic drawing that is clean and full), and the Segarra as landscape (the cornfields rather than the water).

Measure and scale are arguments which order virtually all of his pictures. Few painters bestow such importance on the format of a canvas, or on its qualities (the roughness, the grain; or the weight of the paper). In extending slightly the longer axis of a picture, he contrives to make the vision more uniquely his own. In subsequently delimiting, albeit never rigidly, an interior space, he increases the tension of the few elements arranged within it.

It would be no extravagance to look in his painting for an equivalence to the classical orders; nor would it be inappropriate to interpret his iconography in more or less symbolic fashion, beginning, for example, and not solely on the basis of appearances, with the proximity of the self-portrait and the figure of the cypress. It would be legitimate, too, to insist on the importance he concedes to the drawing and the colour, or on the influence his dedication to his graphic work has on his painting. This is visible in the bas-relief quality of many of his latest compositions; when he gouges up the material to draw an outline, this seems to be the direct cause of the conceptual cleanness and sureness with which he addresses his canvasses.

With regard to the drawing and the colour, their presence has been crucial since the early seventies. The drawing serves as a support in moments of doubt; and in the eighties is incorporated with conclusive force. As for the colour, it is enough to recall its importance at the moment of reflecting the impression provoked by the landscape. What is significant is that this has retained its rotundity despite the fact that in the canvasses the support is minimal, and the paint has become increasingly dense and opaque. Colour converted into the matter of painting.

M.F.-C