

El laberinto
de la brújula
CHEMA
de la COBO



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COBO

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Art Coming Ambiguously, 1990
Oro sobre negro. 210 x 190 cm

El príncipe rana:

son chistes malos. Lo que parecía ligero empieza a convertirse en una pesada carga para el espíritu. Lo que parecía encantador empieza a convertirse en una trampa, y conforme pasa el tiempo, somos cada vez más conscientes de las sombras y de la falta de certezas que la obra encierra. La rana, que casi nos había convencido que era un príncipe, se convierte en un sapo. El hechizo deja de parecer bondadoso y se convierte en cruel. Y en su crueldad reside cierta verdad.

Me siento a escribir este artículo mientras contemplo con ojo atento a una rana pintada por Chema Cobo. La rana está en cuclillas sobre un nenúfar geométrico y tiene un aspecto diabólico y cómico a la vez. Los ojos de la rana destellan blancos rayos que atraviesan el espacio azul pálido que la rana habita. La geometría del nenúfar es un poco indiferente y sin duda ambigua. ¿Tendrá algún significado religioso? ¿Científico quizás? En la parte superior e inferior del cuadro, se encuentran dos pequeñas espirales, pequeños remolinos que enturbian la superficie. Están situadas en la parte izquierda de éste y crean una columna invisible. Al fondo del cuadro Cobo ha escrito con letras pequeñas: "artilugio menotécnico para olvidar". ¿Representan estas palabras una pista que nos permita acceder a las imágenes reunidas en el cuadro? ¿O bien se trata de otro chiste astuto de Chema para hacernos perder el equilibrio?

Esta acuarela es típica del trabajo de Cobo. Está llena de luz. Está llena de encanto. Hace sonreír a nuestros labios y alegria nuestro corazón. Y aun así, aunque el mirarla nos produce gozo, también comienza a inquietarnos. Nos ponemos a buscar su significado y todo lo que encontramos

apuntes sobre la obra de Chema Cobo

Thomas Latvson

de su realización. Pero pronto, esto se convirtió en lo auténtico. Un nuevo grupo de artistas, más modernos, decidieron que podían interrumpir el espectáculo convirtiéndolo, utilizando las imágenes y los signos contra ellos mismos. Durante un momento vertiginoso, se pensó que tal estrategia podía funcionar, que se podía abrir una especie de agujero negro de terror, desgarrar la tela de la imagen del decoro. Pero rápidamente nos dimos cuenta que tal estrategia sería un cuento de hadas, y de que el terror tan sólo se convertiría en otro episodio de una historia más larga.

Esta fue la situación que heredó Chema Cobo. El arte parecía algo sin vida, y la pintura parecía estar definitivamente muerta. Felizmente, ello significaba que el ser pintor, un fantasma en el mundo del arte, propiciaba el convertirse en un ser particularmente libre. Todas las reglas podían dejarse de lado. Ahora, un pintor podía deslizarse y resbalarse entre formas y lenguajes de manera más vertiginosa que cualquier otro artista. Ofrece representaciones abstractas de lo sublime junto a notas garabateadas desde el inconsciente, y junto a dibujos profanos de animales y objetos del mundo. La pintura se situaba en los márgenes y así se convertía en el comodín de la baraja, un vehículo perfecto para Chema Cobo.

Desde principios de los noventa, Cobo realizó una serie de obras utilizando el comodín como chiste corriente. Dibujos, pinturas e incluso una gigantesca instalación con

jokers-maniquies de tamaño real. Es fácil decir que el comodín, la carta salvaje, se refiere al artista, pero ¿qué significa? El joker también puede ser alguien que mira al arte y quiere corregir sus errores, un crítico. O quizás un coleccionista que quiere rescatar la obra del artista, asegurarse que cuenta con un hogar para la posteridad. O quizás el comodín es la persona que se pasea por una galería de arte por error, para seguidamente sentirse engañado por las pretensiones del arte. Sea lo que sea, es el pretexto para contar historias sobre la naturaleza de la representación en el mundo moderno y una forma de hilar madejas sobre la importancia del arte en dicha discusión.

Una obra dentro de dicha serie se denomina *Art Coming Authenticity*. Es grande, de formato casi cuadrado y en su mayor parte está pintado en gris. En él vemos pintada la ejecución de una moneda, una caprichosa muestra de una moneda de veinticinco centavos americanos tal y como la vemos en un espejo distorsionado. Las palabras "libertad" y "confiamos en Dios", están hacia atrás y en lugar de la sobria faz de George Washington, un payaso de sonrisa tonta nos contempla. El payaso a su vez tiene un agujero en la oreja y a través de ella un brazo vestido de muchos colores ha conseguido garabatear un mensaje. También está escrito al revés y dice "Esto no es una falsificación." Quizás no, pero con sus oblicuas referencias a Magritte, la obra está ansiosa de que sepamos que no es lo que parece. Esta honrada duplicidad es la que le da su fuerza. La moneda del cuadro data de 1992, sin embargo el cuadro está fechado en 1990. Todo él está construido sobre arenas movedizas. No puede descansar, sino que se desliza entre percepciones y conceptos equivocados. El título juega con la clase de juego de palabras malo que nos advierte de su intención para perturbar su recepción. ¿Te lo tomas a risa o le quitas importancia? ¿Te enfadas o lo dejas estar? ¿Por qué las palabras del cuadro están escritas al revés? ¿Por qué el arte le muestra un espejo a la vida? ¿Pero cual es la auténtica representación de la vida: la moneda grisácea o el brazo lleno de colorines y su atrevido graffiti? ¿Se puede crear una

experiencia auténtica? ¿Y si es así, cuánto vale, sólo veinticinco centavos?

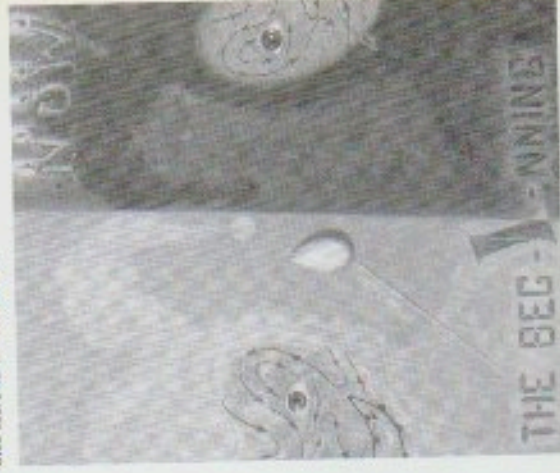
Pero el dinero es sólo una parte de la historia. El artista también tiene que tener en cuenta temas como el sexo, la muerte, la risa y las lágrimas. ¿Y cómo es esto posible? En la serie de acuarelas titulada "On the Stage off the Stage", Cobo propone una narrativa épica, un diario confesional que se niega a revelar nada. La obra incluye ciento cincuenta piezas separadas, mezcla de mitos y chistes, lenguas y estilos que sugieren una historia que puede llegar a convertirse en un autorretrato, o podría simplemente colapsarse bajo el peso de una parodia autorreferencial. El terror coexiste con el humor, la filosofía con la escatología. Los cuentos de hadas fueron, una vez, esta invocación extraña y mágica de deseo y temor. Pero han sido capturados por Disney y otros "imaginadores" como él, convertidos en algo seguro que contar a la hora de dormir, convertidos en algo dulce, infantil, blandamente colectivos. Cobo resucita lo muerto en una locura de textos, uno encima de otro, sin principio ni fin.

Así que los cuentos de hadas de Cobo más bien podrían llamarse cuentos desde la cripta; son historias de horror de una vida de zombi. El comodín siempre fue una figura de miedo a la vez que de diversión pero ahora vuelve como un muerto viviente. En *Now the beginning* vuelve para merodear como una sombra de su ser anterior, partido en dos por la mano imperiosa del artista que reclama un momento de lo real. La obra está partida en dos, luz y sombra. Una comedia burlona de verdes ojos chispeantes que replica reconocimiento mientras que la tragedia de ojos rojos quemaa las velas de la desesperación. Mientras tanto el huevo como el ego añejan a duras penas buscando un balance entre el caos y la reconciliación. En parte imagen de sueño freudiano, en parte carnaval, el cuadro brilla hacia nosotros, nos desafía para que nos hagamos seres completos, a la vez que reconoce la imposibilidad de tal desafío.

El trabajo de Cobo es ejemplar. Reconoce el deseo de que el arte haga del mundo un sitio mejor, pero a la vez es

plenamente consciente de que tal deseo nunca será posible. En su lugar Cobo hace arte de la percepción de ese desengaño y mientras lo hace, nos da placer. Se propone decirnos cosas serias e importantes, pero se encuentra con que primero nos tiene que contar un chiste. Y este chiste engendra otro chiste y así sucesivamente hasta que el proceso completo de contar chistes se convierte en más importante que las cosas importantes que quería decirnos. Y después el chiste se hace amargo y por ello nacen malos entendidos, y esto lo convierte en algo más importante. Y así el proceso continúa hasta que Cobo ha llegado a una forma de decirnos las cosas importantes que siempre quiso decirnos, cosas sobre nuestra vida emocional. El artista se viste de comodín para jugar a un juego de autenticidad para entretener lo que ya de por sí es oscuro. Pero al final nos dice la verdad: ¿quién ríe el último el príncipe o la rana?

Now the beginning, 1996
Óleo sobre lienzos, 119 x 108 cm



Prince Frog: observation on the work of Chema Cobo

Thomas Lawson

I sit writing this essay with a watchful eye on a frog painted by Chema Cobo. It squats, part demonic, part comic, on a geometric lily-pad. The frog's eyes glare, white beams piercing the pale blue space the frog inhabits. The geometry of the lily-pad is a little nonchalant, and is certainly ambiguous. Might it carry religious significance? Or mean something scientific? At top and bottom of the picture, creating an invisible column down the left hand side, are two small spirals, little whirlpools disturbing the surface. Underneath the bottom one Cobo has written in small letters, "memonic device to forget". Is this a clue to give access to the collected images, or another sly joke, another trick to keep me and you off balance?

This watercolour is typical of Cobo's work. It is filled with light. It is filled with charm. It brings a smile to the lips and joy to the heart. And yet, as you enjoy looking at it, the contradictions in the picture begin to ensnare you. You find yourself looking for meaning, and all you find are bad jokes. What seemed light begins to weigh heavily on your spirit. What seemed charming begins to look like a trap. In time you become more aware of the shadows and uncertainties. The frog, having nearly convinced you it was a prince, turns out to be a toad. The spell cast no longer seems benign, but cruel. And in that cruelty lies a kind of truth.

We all know too well that we live in a global culture of misrepresentations. Political power is wielded by sleight of hand, economic power moves by distraction. The trade in images, beguiling and deceitful, is part of the landscape we inhabit. Stories are told us, and we accept them as versions of the truth, even though we do not believe them. We are trapped in a net of signs, slipping between meanings, bought and sold with complicit ease. And somehow we have come to expect artists to show us a way to negotiate this situation, give us back a feeling of worth. This expectation is a great burden, but most artists this century have felt compelled to take it up.

Once upon a time artists dealt with this problem by refusing to take part in the story telling and image making. They claimed to find an authenticity in simple material presence and the moment of its being. But soon that became nothing more than the real thing. A new, hipper group of artists decided they could interrupt the spectacle by co-opting it, using images and signs against themselves. For a vertiginous moment it seemed that this might work, that a kind of black hole of dread could be opened, a tear in the fabric of seamless image slip. But in no time we came to understand that this was going to be a fairy tale, the dread would simply become another part of the larger story.

This was the situation that Chema Cobo inherited. Art seemed a lifeless thing, and painting definitely dead. Happily, this meant that to be a painter, a ghoul in the world of art, was to be particularly free. All the rules were pushed aside. Now a painter could slip and slide between forms and languages in a more dizzying way than any other artist. Abstract representations of the sublime next to scribbled notes from the unconscious, next to profane drawings of objects and animals in the world. Painting was on the margins, and so became the joker in the pack, a perfect vehicle for Chema Cobo.

Beginning in 1990 Cobo made a series of works using the joker as a running gag. There are drawings, paintings, even a huge installation piece with life size joker mannequins. It is easy to say that the joker, the wild card, stands in for the artist here, but what does that mean? The joker could also be someone who looks at art, and wants to correct its mistakes, a critic. Or perhaps the collector who will save the work from the artist, ensure it has a home in posterity. Or maybe the joker is the person who wanders into the gallery by mistake, and then feels cheated by the pretensions of art. Whatever he is, he is the pretext for telling stories about the nature of representation in the modern world, and a way to spin yarns about the importance of art in that discussion.

One painting in this series is called *Art Coming Authenticity*. It is large, near square in format, mostly painted in grey. In it we see a rendition of a coin, a freakish rendition of the American quarter dollar as if seen in a distorting mirror. The words "Liberty" and "In God We Trust" are backwards, and instead of the sober face of George Washington, a goofily grinning clown stares out. He in turn has a hole in is

ear through which an arm dressed in motley has reached to scribble a message. This is also written in reverse, and says, "This is not forgery". Maybe not, but with its skewed references to Magritte the painting is frantic to let us know that it is not what it seems. It is this honest duplicity that gives it strength. The coin in the painting is dated 1992, but the painting itself is said to have been made in 1990. The entire work is built on quicksand. It cannot rest, but slips between misperceptions and misunderstandings. The title plays with the kind of bad pun that signals its intention to unsettle reception. Do you laugh it off, or shrug it off? Get annoyed or let it go? Why is the writing on the painting in reverse? Because art holds up a mirror to life? But the which is the true picture, the grisaille coin, or the colourful arm and its cheeky graffiti? Is it possible to create an authentic experience? And if so, what would it be worth -only a quarter?

But money is only part of the story. The artist must also consider sex, death, laughter, and tears. And how is that possible? In the suite of watercolours called "On the Stage, Off the State", Cobo proposes an epic narrative, a confessional diary that refuses to reveal anything. The piece includes 150 separate parts, mixing myths and jokes, languages and styles to suggest a story that might develop into a self-portrait, or might simply collapse under the weight of self-referential parody. Here terrors coexist with humour, philosophy with scatology. Fairy tales were once this strange -magical invocations of desire and dread. But they have been captured by Disney and other such "imagineers", turned safe for bedtime, turned sweetly infantile, blandly corporate. Cobo resurrects them, reanimates the dead in a frenzy of layered text and image without beginning or end.

So Cobo's fairy tales might better be called tales from the crypt; they are horror stories of a zombie life. The joker was always a figure of fear as well as fun, but now he returns as the waking dead. In *Now the Beginning* he lurks as a shade of his former self, sliced in half by the imperious hand of the artist reclaiming a moment of the real. The painting is split in two, light and dark. Grinning comedy with its sparkling green eye begs for recognition, while red-eyed tragedy burns the candles of despair. In the meantime both ego and egg totter in the balance between chaos and reconciliation. Part Freudian dream-image, part carnival, the painting glowers at us,

challenging us to make ourselves whole again, while recognising the impossibility of that challenge.

Cobo's work is exemplary. It acknowledges a desire that art make the world a better place, but is fully aware that this wish can never be. Instead Cobo makes art from the recognition of that disappointment, and gives us pleasure by the way. He sets out to tell us grave and important things, but finds he must first tell a joke. And this joke engenders another, and so on, until the whole process of joke telling becomes obviously more important than the important things he meant to tell us. And then the jokes turn sour, and breed misunderstandings, and that becomes more important. And so the process continues until Cobo has arrived at a way of telling us the important things he always meant to tell us, things about our emotional lives. He dresses up as the joker to play a game of authenticity, thinking to queer the pitch. But in the end he tells us the truth. So who has the last laugh, the prince or the frog?

Six Ribs

Six commentaries on Chema Cobo and Neither Living nor Dead

Pedro G. Romero

Sixth left true rib

He was a cuirassier in Cromwell's guard and many lives were lost at his hands. A skilled swordsman, his leading physical feature was his powerfully made hands, with fists of steel and knuckles like nails. He was capable of crushing the head of a youth with his massive paws, and if his victim was a child he could squeeze the chest to a pulp. As a torturer he excelled at tearing the sufferer limb from limb without spilling a single drop of blood. He could bend a sword as easily as other men draw back the string of a crossbow. He outlived his chief and went on soldiering until the age of seventy.

To state, like Juan Bautista Amorós, that it was Silverio Lanza who entrusted him with the posthumous publication of his complete works is not just to reaffirm the literary will of the author, who has endowed his heteronym with a sufficiently well defined and self-sufficient personality, but to deem his writing worthy to be read as literature, and not as a mere event to be recorded for the historical record, a stylistic anecdote or a literary curiosity. Beyond any hagiography –and I take it that nobody who has read the character sketch in the *rib* printed above would dream of writing one– when the identity of a heteronym is revealed, the effect produced is always a falsification of everything it stressed. Even in a case like Antonio Machado's Juan de Mairena, with the shadow of Lanza hovering above, and in which the splitting of the personality remains always in evidence, it is important to retain the distinction between the authors whose names appear on each work. And when we're reading Pessoa, for instance, it's more important to be clearly aware of who Álvaro de Campos is than to know whose hand is behind the writing. This heroics of impersonality is a crucial cleavage across which to confront any work of art. And though its chief value is the affirmation of the autonomous status of the work, its utter independence of the author and its dependence on language, it enables us to approach the author's identity with the same autonomy without forcing us to turn

it into the life of a saint. These prefatory remarks were an essential introduction to the lines on Chema Cobo which follow, the reason being that our business now is not to discuss somebody in particular, not even a series of character-names dressed in a specific costume. The only incursion we can make below the surface of his works will produce merely a kaleidoscopic interplay back and forth between various selves. This yo-yo game, which the personalist school of psychology derives from the popular children's toy [and from the Spanish first-person pronoun yo-yo = "I-I"], is emblematic enough for it to be worth our while to try and define it here and to trace its development in the clinical practice of psychology. It will be best to focus on the image of the toy itself in action –though I'm not aiming to hypnotise anybody. The continuous spiralling movements it makes as it spins up and down conjure a sharply focussed image of the characters as the object they are, the yo-yo, the I-I, and the number of occurrences of the personal pronoun could be increased to add to the expressiveness of the phrase. That said, it's easier for me to slip Chema Cobo's name into the text, as a watermark identifying the oeuvre as a whole. And first, a contradiction, a parenthetical comment of a personal kind, a gesture of pure friendship. When I first began to visit Chema Cobo at his home in the late eighties, the experience, for someone aspiring to Being in the role of an artist-character, was distinctly Heideggerian, and the joke is not without point here. I recall that when a group of us –Abraham Lacalle, Juan del Campo and myself– arrived in Tarifa, we were working against the clock because all the pieces I'd been working on for an exhibition in the Fúcares Gallery in Madrid had been destroyed in a fire, and with only a month to go Norberto Dotor, a youngster who directed his own gallery, and who was keen to provide an alternative, gave us the unconditional run of his premises and a date for my show. Chema Cobo was a friend, but also, in our eyes, a complete artist-character. He agreed, without raising any objections and with distinct enthusiasm, to do a piece for us. It was included in the show, and Juan not only provided the title for it, but received all the honour as well. The days we spent in Chema Cobo's house were far less rich from the creative point of view than in terms of other more ordinary experiences. Needless to say, we abandoned our original assumption that an artist-character could ever be complete. I learned enough about