

«Quiero ser el mejor artista, e intento convertirme en eso»

«I WANT TO BE THE BEST ARTIST THAT I COULD BE, TO TRY TO BECOME THAT» PAGE 149

Coincidiendo con la apertura de la muestra *Jeff Koons: retrospectiva* en el Museo Guggenheim de Bilbao, organizada por el Whitney Museum of American Art en colaboración con el museo bilbaíno y el Centre Pompidou de París con el patrocinio de la Fundación BBVA, el artista nos concede una entrevista en su estudio de Nueva York para hablar de sus inicios, presente y futuro.

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TEXTO ANA SOKOLOFF | FOTOGRAFÍA KOITZ

EL ESTUDIO DE JEFF KOONS EN NUEVA YORK, un edificio de ladrillo pintado de blanco sin ningún letrero salvo la dirección, ubicado en el noroeste de Chelsea, resulta ser un lugar tan acogedor como ajetreado. Con un *look* 'preppy', voz amable de ritmo pausado, tono erudito y sobre todo calculador, Koons hace repaso de su trayectoria y nos habla de *Puppy*, una obra convertida en referencia del museo bilbaíno desde su inauguración en 1993 que, además, resulta ser la única pieza del artista exhibida pública y permanentemente.

– **Estuvo usted presente el día de la inauguración, ¿verdad? ¿Qué recuerdos tiene de aquella experiencia?**

– Me entusiasmó que el Guggenheim Bilbao tomara la decisión de adquirir *Puppy*, incorporarlo a su colección y contar con él en la apertura del museo. Fue importante que Frank Gehry aceptara la obra y pensara que podía honrar al edificio.

– **¿Puede hablar de su relación con Frank Gehry?**

– Frank estuvo fantástico. Visité el terreno y estuve ahí mientras levantaban las vigas. Frank estaba entusiasmado con todo el trabajo que habían hecho con los ordenadores y algunos de los sistemas que había creado, esos sistemas CAD, y encantado de poder hacer un edificio así y de la precisión con que estaba saliendo todo lo que había planificado. Le encanta la gente y se muestra generoso con ella a través de su arte.

– **Hablemos de su propia generosidad. Usted habla a menudo de ser generoso con su obra... ¿no es así?**

– Siempre me ha encantado estar al servicio de mi trabajo. Me educaron para ser autosuficiente y atender a mis necesidades. Siempre he tenido trabajo y cuando te educan así aprendes automáticamente a cuidar de ti mismo. Y luego quieres expandirte y participar más en tu comunidad intentando en todo lo posible crear un marco o liderar algo.

– Mi abuelo materno fue político. Ocupó el cargo de Tesorero Municipal en York, Pennsylvania, donde crecí. Él y sus hermanos eran comerciantes y creo que yo he heredado este aspecto de querer implicarme en la comunidad, ser todo lo generoso que puedas con ella, intentar liderarla. De manera que quise participar en el mundo del arte, en la idea de la vanguardia. Quiero intentar ser el mejor artista, e intentar convertirme en eso. Si hay generosidad en mi vida se refleja en ese acto, en querer hacer todo lo posible para compartir con el público las experiencias de trascendencia que he aprendido sobre el arte.

– **¿Cuándo hizo su primer viaje a Europa y cuál fue su primer contacto con el arte clásico en los museos?**

– No viajé a Europa hasta mi primera exposición en Lyon, Francia. Tenían allí un museo de arte contemporáneo que sobrevive hoy. Estaba cerca de la estación de tren y yo participaba en una



exposición que se celebraba en un gran espacio. Recuerdo que Jonathan Borofsky también estaba en aquella exposición junto a mí y otros jóvenes artistas de Nueva York.

– ¿Ya como artista?

– Sí. Crecí en la América rural, en Pennsylvania. La primera vez que volé en avión tenía 18 años, con motivo de unas vacaciones. Cuando era más pequeño solíamos viajar por los Estados Unidos, pero no tenía una perspectiva internacional.

– Usted estudió en el Art Institute de Chicago. ¿Se familiarizó allí con la historia del arte y los maestros antiguos?

– Crecí y aprendí estética, y comprendí lo que son los sentimientos y sensaciones visuales a través de mi padre. Nunca leí nada de historia del arte o de lo que significa comprender la historia del arte. Tenía una tía que vivía en Filadelfia y me llevaba al museo de la ciudad. Allí veíamos los cuadros y entré en contacto con el sentido de la historia. Creo que una de mis experiencias más impactantes fue la de subir hasta la cima del ayuntamiento, donde hay una escultura del abuelo de Alexander Calder. Esta pieza de William Penn es realmente grande, creo que tiene unos 30 metros de altura. Recuerdo que caminé en torno a la base de la escultura. Era posible rodearle los pies y estaba situada en la punta del edificio. Desprendía una gran sensación de poder y de historia. Fue una experiencia muy conmovedora para mí. De manera que lo que me aportó esa experiencia con William Penn fue el aspecto de cómo el arte te permite viajar en el tiempo, de lo que significa ser humano y experimentar la comunidad cultural, el poder...

– ¿Fue su primera sensación de impotencia frente a una obra de arte?

– Sí, fue ante esa escultura. Pero no pensé en ella como obra de arte, sino más bien como si se tratara del propio William Penn. Es como la *Estatua de la Libertad*, ese tipo de pieza pública que es imponente y conmovedora y que combina tamaño e historia. Recibí clases de dibujo y pintura desde niño. Sabía dibujar elipses y vidrios transparentes. Pero no comprendí el poder que podía tener el arte hasta que fui a la escuela de arte y estudié Historia del Arte. Él me mostró una imagen de la *Olympia* de Manet y comenzó a hablar de cómo las imágenes tenían diferentes significados sociológicos dentro del París de la época, dentro de la cultura, o cómo quizá el ramo de flores tenía un cierto significado, el hecho de que la mujer no llevara ropa, y cómo se relacionaba todo eso con otro artista, en referencia a Goya. De repente me sentí la persona más afortunada del mundo porque había encontrado lo que quería en mi vida, esa emoción intelectual y física. Pensé: «¡Esto es!». Pensé que esto era lo mío; no supe hasta entonces qué había estado haciendo todos esos años mientras aprendía este oficio de creación de ilusiones ópticas.

– Habitualmente titula sus series con palabras que engloban los diversos significados de su trabajo. ¿Podría explicar su elección con algún ejemplo?

– De acuerdo. No me gusta la ficción, lo que realmente me gusta es la no ficción. Me gusta la filosofía. La base filosófica de mi

« CRECÍ Y APRENDÍ ESTÉTICA, Y COMPRENDÍ LO QUE SON LOS SENTIMIENTOS Y SENSACIONES VISUALES A TRAVÉS DE MI PADRE »

obra está en Nietzsche, Platón, el existencialismo, Kierkegaard... *Equilibrium* intenta abordar la cuestión del tiempo, cómo con el arte se viaja a través del tiempo para crear un estado del ser que es previo al nacimiento; debe tener algo del presente pero también es previo al nacimiento y posterior a la muerte, porque es la forma de lo eterno y la experiencia. Lo mismo sucede con ese trabajo; yo quería decir a los artistas que lo intentarían. Les hablaba del acto de intentar lograr algo, de manera que también establecía un paralelo entre los estados filosóficos del ser y esas diferentes polaridades, y de lo importante que es ser consciente de las polaridades y abrazarlas.

Necesitaba establecer un paralelismo entre cómo sentía en ese momento que los artistas blancos de clase media usaban el arte y la forma en que otros grupos étnicos han utilizado quizá los deportes, personas diferentes en tiempos diferentes. Los artistas deben ser conscientes de lo que hacen e ir a por ello. Yo decía que lo suyo no eran más que posturas, que actuaban como una sirena, como si hubieran logrado algo cuando en realidad no habían logrado nada. Lo que importa es intentarlo, no el estado final, ni el producto finalizado.

– ¿Algún otro ejemplo?

– *Banalities* fue otra palabra importante por mi implicación con el mundo del arte y lo que he aprendido de la investigación artística y filosófica. En la vida, al final, todo se reduce a la aceptación. Si eres capaz de estar abierto a todo

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Large Vase of Flowers. 1991. Madera policromada. 132,1 x 109,2 cm. Edición 1/3. Colección particular. © Jeff Koons; **Junkyard.** 2002. Óleo sobre lienzo. 259,1 x 350,5 cm. Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York. © Jeff Koons; **Tulips.** 1995-2004. Acero inoxidable pulido con acabado espejo y laca de color traslúcida. 203,2 x 457,2 x 520,7 cm. Una de cinco versiones únicas. Guggenheim Bilbao Museo. © Jeff Koons; **Popeye.** 2009-2011. Acero inoxidable pulido con acabado espejo y laca de color traslúcida. 198,1 x 131,4 x 71,8 cm. Edición 1/3. Gagosian Gallery. © Jeff Koons; **Puppy.** 1992. Acero inoxidable, sustrato, tela geotextil, sistema de irrigación interno y plantas en floración. 1240 x 830 x 910 cm. Guggenheim Bilbao. © Jeff Koons; **Gazing Ball (Ariadne).** 2013. Yeso y vidrio. 112,7 x 238,4 x 93 cm. Edición 3/3. Monsoon Art Collection. © Jeff Koons.





y aceptar todo como es, puedes inspirarte y ese 'todo' está a tu disposición. Si participas en juzgar las cosas, en segregaras, acabas distanciándote y perdiendo la oportunidad de utilizar e incorporar cosas diferentes; diferentes formas de información dejan de estar a tu disposición y eso crea ansiedad.

– **¿Le importaría que hablemos de Dalí? Al igual que usted, Dalí supo gestionar a la perfección su proyección pública, además de su trabajo...**

– Mi primer libro de arte fue *La persistencia de la memoria* de Dalí. Era una edición especial. Recuerdo que me lo regalaron mis padres, probablemente, por Navidad. Yo tenía entre 9 y 11 años. Siempre me ha encantado la obra de Dalí y pienso que es importante para un artista aprender iconografía personal. Y la forma de hacerlo es ser capaz de acceder al propio interior. Debes aprender a confiar en ti mismo y a seguir tus propios intereses. Conseguir esto te lleva a un estado muy metafísico. El surrealismo es ese proceso por el que viajas a tu interior y aprendes a confiar en ti mismo y a analizarte, a analizar lo que soñaste la noche anterior. Una vez que consigues confiar en ti mismo tienes el deseo de salir y aprender a confiar en otros. El arte es una metáfora de ese proceso.

Crecí en una generación muy obsesionada por Duchamp. Me encanta su obra. Allí atrás hay un botellero elaborado siguiendo las especificaciones del que está en el Norton Simon Museum y junto a él tengo una bola de cristal. La utilizo para contemplar la forma en que él contempla la rueda de bicicleta sobre un taburete. Todo esto son referencias a Duchamp y para

mí son piezas para la contemplación. Es maravilloso entrar en contacto con los sentidos, y el arte es tan inspirador en ese sentido porque te permite entrar en contacto con lo que se siente siendo un ser humano, estar vivo en una experiencia dionisiaca, ¡y eso es fantástico! Me encanta esa experiencia. Tanto el surrealismo, como el dadá y todos esas experiencias acentuadas, son muy importantes.

– **¿Habla de surrealismo, dadá, Duchamp y el pop?**

– De nuevo, se trata de una metáfora de este proceso. Se trata de las cosas externas. Tienes que buscar y pensar en el objetivo. El objetivo es externo, no interno... no tiene nada que ver con la vida interior. Es un objeto encontrado (*ready made*). Pero se trata solo de una metáfora para los otros. No nos importan los orinales, no nos importan las vacas o las latas de Coca-Cola y los objetos banales. Al final lo que nos importa son los demás.

– **¿Algún artista contemporáneo le inspira esa sensación?**

– Mi propia obra.

– **¿Nadie más?**

– He aprendido a mirar al mundo de los viejos maestros en busca de ese tipo de gozo absoluto que deriva de ser humano y tomar contacto. La consciencia es referencia. Cuando haces una referencia a algo, eso es la consciencia. El arte se basa en las referencias y, por tanto, en un determinado momento comencé a sentir que perdía mi libertad como artista siguiendo esa ruta objetiva externa hacia el arte. Comencé a sentirme libre de nuevo cuando fui capaz de entrar en contacto con la obra de Picasso de una forma nueva. Siempre he disfrutado de su obra;



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El proyecto tecnológico más importante de divulgación del patrimonio español



trabajé en el Museo de Arte Moderno de Nueva York y todos los días observaba el *Guernica* y pasaba junto a la colección. Pero realmente lo comprendí a través de su obra tardía, al entrar en contacto con la referencia y el poder de un individuo de 88 años que, allá por el año 1969, era capaz de generar la obra que estaba generando. Y me di cuenta de que está muy estratificada. Que en el proceso intuitivo de añadir capa tras capa, cada gesto tiene muchas referencias múltiples y profundas a lo que significa realmente tomar una posición y esculpir la vida.

De repente comprendí que solo el proceso intuitivo de seguir tu propio interés y centrarte en él te lleva a un lugar metafísico que te conecta con un vocabulario universal. Es a través de este proceso como él [Picasso], haciendo referencia a un elemento físico interno, acaba por acceder al mundo universal de lo objetivo y su poder y significado. Basta con cerrar el círculo. Su metáfora en el mundo de lo objetivo es tan poderosa como este mundo externo que mi generación ha considerado un símbolo de la ilustración. Llegué a eso tras cerrar el círculo.

– ¿Y la fabricación de sus obras? Son tecnológicamente muy complejas, como lo fueron el Guggenheim de Bilbao y los programas CAD en su momento...

– La tecnología es una herramienta. Lo que yo admiraba de la situación de Frank no era la tecnología, sino que era como una herramienta que había creado para que este edificio pudiera existir. No habría podido existir sin esa herramienta. Aprendí muy pronto, diría que cuanto tenía vientitantos años, que la tecnología no es un fin, y esto es algo que he intentado comunicar también a otros artistas. Se equivoca todo artista joven que recurra a la tecnología más reciente pensando que al hacerlo su obra será nueva, fresca, interesante, una verdadera representación del momento. No comprende que será muy temporal, que no tendrá ninguna profundidad. En realidad, lo realmente nuevo en el arte es la honestidad, y allí es donde reside el poder del arte. La novedad no desempeña un papel importante, salvo por lo que tiene de refrescante la honestidad.

Creo sistemas que me ayudan a garantizar que cada gesto, cada aspecto de la superficie de una escultura o de una pintura –o cada color, el detalle más diminuto–, sea exactamente como lo pensé desde el principio, porque para mí es importante trasladar al espectador que puede confiar en la experiencia. Tengo este aspecto muy duchampiano, que es cerebral, de pensar previamente con exactitud lo que quiero hacer y elaborar ese molde. Picasso era muy libre en su manipulación de la forma, del material. Saber lo que quiero hacer antes de hacerlo.

– La tecnología que utiliza le permite trabajar en ediciones. ¿Cuál es su posición frente a las obras múltiples?

– Recuerdo mi punto de vista original sobre las ediciones cuando tenía en torno a 20 años. Siempre quise elaborar suficientes obras que tuvieran un impacto político y con las que propagar mis ideas; pero, al mismo tiempo, siempre quise dejar que el espectador supiera que lo importante era la idea, no la distribución, y que si querías llegar a todo el mundo debía afectar a

«**COMENCÉ A SENTIRME
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idea. Por eso, si se trataba de una exposición de escultura, quizá preparaba unas 20 obras, en una edición de tres, más una prueba de artista. Pero entonces me detenía y me retiraba y pasaba de hacer aspiradoras, que no eran una edición, pero hacía unas 20... pasaba a hacer mi *Equilibrium*... Hacía unos bronce y un conjunto de obras y pasaba a otra cosa.

– Pero algunos materiales son más aptos para ediciones múltiples, como el bronce...

– Creo que es importante poder hacer obras que puedan colmar tus ambiciones y los materiales son importantes porque comunican ideas. Al mismo tiempo, quieres poder afectar a la vida de todos. Quieres poder llegar a algún artista joven que tenga curiosidad por el arte. Por eso, quizá deseo mantener las cosas abiertas, aunque, al mismo tiempo, hay algo bello en intentar preservar las cosas. Hay belleza en el hecho que los seres humanos hallen un sentido de la responsabilidad; eso es importante para nosotros... intentar hacer del mundo un lugar mejor nos ayuda a sobrevivir y a ver la vida de una forma mejor. El hecho de querer preservar esto es como una forma de espiritualidad.

Una de las cosas que realmente me gustan del arte es la sensación de familia que crea, y que el arte tiene un paralelismo con nuestros propios genes y nuestro ADN, con cómo están entrelazadas las cosas, como una doble hélice en el ADN. El arte y los artistas hacen lo mismo. De manera que cuando Picasso hace referencia a Goya, Goya a Velázquez y este a una antigua escultura de Ariadna, podemos remontarnos en el tiempo casi hasta el Paleolítico. Todo ello está entrelazado y modifica realmente tus genes. Han descubierto que las ideas modifican momentáneamente los genes, así que es cierto que el arte evoluciona en paralelo con la biología. Creo realmente que la única narrativa fiel que tenemos de la historia humana son nuestros genes. Y el arte discurre en paralelo. Tengo un gran sentido de la familia y soy un ser humano diferente desde que aprendí a apreciar a Manet, que a su vez es un ser humano diferente desde que aprendió a apreciar a Velázquez. Esto cambia quiénes somos y las posibilidades de trascendencia de lo que llegaremos a ser, de los gestos que somos capaces de concebir y las cosas que somos capaces de hacer como seres humanos.

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working independently. Once they had left the studio, they clearly distanced themselves from the master's work. Although they retain some common features, they have very different sensibilities. Examples of how that personality was recovered can be seen in Ignacio de Ries or the brothers Francisco and Miguel Polanco. Ries's work, well known thanks to Navarrete's monograph⁵ as well as Delenda's original contributions, reveals a freedom of composition, a use of light and a disregard for proportions that are not so clearly tangleable in the works in which he intervenes while at the studio. The Polancos also take another path from their master once they leave the studio, as may be seen in some of the paintings on show. But perhaps the most interesting example is that of Juan de Zurbarán, son of the master and a painter who specialised in still lifes. His short life does not allow for a complete analysis of the development of his work, but it is possible to appreciate the mastery with which he executed his compositions on canvas. In *Pears in a porcelain bowl* (around 1645), housed in the Art Institute of Chicago, Juan shows himself to be the heir to his father's simplicity, but incorporates a delicacy in the contemplation of the whole, which he conveys with the aid of a subtle technique, quite removed from the world of still lifes cultivated by his father. This painting, more ethereal and closer to the world of the other great still life painter, Juan de Campobin, is shown to be a painting of a more Baroque and theatrical, less Naturalist conception than that of his father and master, but of no less quality for all that.

Certain individual traces in Francisco de Zurbarán's work are absent from the contributions of the studio. Traces that refer not only to the skill possessed by the painter from Fuente de Cantos but impinge on other, more profound matters. This involves the process by which he conceives of a painting in general and its individual depictions in particular. The artist understands painting as an exercise in approaching reality from the description of the actual qualities characterizing materials, details he reflects with consummate care, whether a clay pot or brocade chasuble with silk shading embroidery. This careful description of the elements is what makes up his personality and technical ability, beyond the reach of his disciples and observable in his mastery of still lifes. When we look at *St. Ambrose* (around 1626) which he made for the sacristy of the Convent of St Paul, nowadays housed in the Museum of Fine Arts in Seville, the painter leads us to observe the qualities of the chasuble, as well as its intense red and gold tones. Wisely, he guides our gaze through the light that bathes and rests on the wide pleats. On the other hand, he leaves part of the face in shadow, without the painting losing any of its interest.

The master's ability to plunge into the subject and the personality of the objects is essential to his work. In fact, it is not just one more feature of his work, it affects the very basis of his painting. For the artist, it is the accidents, in the Aristotelian sense, that make up the essence of the being of things. For this reason, he can be more discretionary with other apparently fundamental questions, such as spatial representation through perspective. In this way, the reading of his work sometimes becomes somewhat intuitive. Intuition and evidence are an unregulated medium without which the essence of his painting cannot be understood.

The master's ability to compose is a particularly noteworthy characteristic of his very personal way of presenting the solid, monumental figures in a neutral, darkened space, barely outlined by soft lights or shadows projected onto nothingness. This way of presenting the figures is possible thanks to the effective use of light and shade to configure volumes and, as his palette becomes lighter-coloured in the course of his career, this quality will lose its impact on his work.

Zurbarán's way of composing was also used by his disciples and his studio in the series of saints, but without the forcefulness of the master. Composition, understood as the way characters, objects and space are arranged on the canvas, presents the painter with a challenge that he must face throughout his life. If, as we have already indicated, Zurbarán creates a highly effective mode of expression with the simple appearance of a single character, when he has to deal with scenes that narrate episodes in which several figures appear, the painter tries to simplify (sometimes with the aid of prints) the main lines of the scene that is unfolding. This is the case of two of his earliest known compositions, one of them *The Miracle of St. Dominic in Soriano* (1627) in the parish church of St. Mary Magdalene. The scene, widely disseminated in engravings, is composed of different characters positioned vertically, with no communication between them. This particular way of resolving the composition, rigid, but very effective in narrative terms, will be a constant feature of his production. However, the Madrid phase, which involves a turning point in his work, is characterized by the development of devotional themes, usually in small format, and implies a substantial change in the way he conceives scenes. As opposed to the rather disconnected composition of his early works, the later characters (including numerous scenes of the Virgin and Child) show a common feeling, a relationship of affection that is quite obvious. One of the works most recently acknowledged as belonging to the master, *The Mystical Espousal of St. Catherine of Alexandria* (around 1660-1662, now in a

private collection), is a happy demonstration of how his composition has developed from the formal point of view and from the perspective of expressing sentiments. His production during his last years in Madrid is a very personal kind of painting, in which hardly any commissions are known, and he may possibly have painted these without the support of assistants. This is a work that has clearly developed in respect of his years in Seville, where the shadows are softened and lightened, the colours become clearer and more brilliant, and the feeling of an emotive religiosity dominates each painting.

Zurbarán must be understood as a painter who reflects the view of life that existed in the society of his times. He was not a cultured artist. His training, limited to three years in the studio of an unknown painter, was the norm at the beginning of the 17th century, but in his case it fell to a craftsman who had the gift of visual poetics. For that reason, he must be evaluated in his context, as the product of the society of his time, a way of thinking and a shared visual culture. Although he did not enjoy the artistic fortune that surrounded figures like Velázquez or Murillo, this native of Extremadura expressed in a personal way, without adjectives, the feelings of Spanish society in the first half of the 17th century: its symbolic visual culture and profound religiosity, as well as the role of painting as a means for transcending reality, for becoming a vehicle for knowledge and emotiveness. What remained were the means to achieve it.

By **IGNACIO CANO**

¹ DELENDA, Odile, with the collaboration of ROS BARBERO, Almudena. Francisco de Zurbarán. 1598-1664. *Catalogue raisonné*. Madrid: Hispanic Art History Support Foundation, 2009. ² Zurbarán (1598-1664) could be viewed in the *Galerie d'arte moderna e contemporanea* in Ferrara from September 14th, 2013, to January 6th, 2014. It then travelled to Brussels to be shown in the Palais des Beaux-Arts (Bozar) from January 29th to May 25th, 2014. ³ NAVARRETE, Benito. *Zurbarán y su Obrador: Pinturas para el Nuevo Mundo (Zurbarán and his Workshop: Paintings for the New World)*. Exhibition Catalogue. New York: The Spanish Institute, 1999-2000. ⁴ *Santas de Zurbarán: Devoción y Persuasión (Zurbarán's female saints: Devotion and Persuasion)* was held in the old Clarissan Convent in Seville from May 3rd to July 20th, 2013. ⁵ NAVARRETE, Benito. *Ignacio de Ries*. Madrid: Fundación de Apoyo a la Historia del Arte Hispánico, 2001.



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JEFF KOONS ARTIST

«I want to be the best artist that I could be, to try to become that»

JEFF KOONS'S STUDIO in New York, a brick building painted white without any signage except for the address in the north-west of Chelsea (almost bordering on the Highline), proves to be as busy as welcoming place. With a 'preppy' look, a friendly tone and a slow cadence in his speech, the erudite and especially calculating Koons reviews his career and speaks of his *Puppy*, the work that has now become the hallmark of the museum since its inauguration in 1993, as well as being the only work by this artist on permanent public display.

– **You were present at the inauguration, weren't you? What memories do you have of that experience?**

– I was really thrilled that Guggenheim Bilbao made the decision to incorporate *Puppy* and acquire the piece, have it in their collection and to have it for the opening of the museum. It was important that Frank Gehry accepted the work and thought that it could grace the building.

– **Can you tell us a little about your relationship with Frank Gehry?**

– Frank was wonderful. I visited the site and I was on hand when the beams were going up and Frank was so excited that all the work that they had done on the computers and some of the systems that he created- these CAD systems, to be able to even make a building like that, the precision, that everything he planned was working out. Frank loves people and he is generous to people in his character, in what he has to offer them, and through his art.

– **Let us speak of your own generosity. You have often spoken about being generous with your works, haven't you?**

– I always loved to be at the service of my work. I was brought up to be self-reliant and to take care of my needs. I always had work and when you are brought up to be self-reliant you automatically learn how to take care of yourself. And then you want to expand and be more involved in your community and participate to

the best of your ability trying to lay a framework or to lead in some manner.

My grandfather on my mother's side was a politician. He was City Treasurer in York Pennsylvania where I grew up. He and his brothers were merchants and I think that I picked up this aspect of wanting to be involved in your community, to be as generous as you can be within your community try to lead. So I, I wanted to participate in the art world, I wanted to participate in the idea of the Avant-Garde. I want to be the best artist that I could be, to try to become that. If there were generosity in my life it would be through that act of –to the best of my ability, to share the experiences of transcendence that I have learned about art with the viewer.

– **When did you first travel to Europe and what was your first contact with Classical art in museums?**

– My first trip to Europe wasn't until I went to France for an exhibition in Lyon. They had a contemporary Art Museum, which is still there. It was around the train station and I was in a large, long space, in a group show. I remember Jonathan Borofsky was also in that exhibition along with myself and other young NY artists.

– **Already as an artist?**

– Yes, I was brought up in rural America, in Pennsylvania. First time that I flew on an airplane I was 18 years of age. We took vacations, when I was younger we would drive within the United States. But I did not have an international perspective.

– **You studied at the Art Institute in Chicago. Did you become familiar there with art history and the old masters?**

– I grew up and I learned aesthetics and I learned feeling, visual feelings, and sensations through my Dad. I never came across art history and understanding of art history. I had an aunt that lived in Philadelphia and would take me to the Philadelphia Museum. We would look at painting and I would come into contact with a sense of history. I would think one of the most powerful things that I experienced was going on top of City Hall there is a sculpture by Alexander Calder's grandfather. And it's a really large piece; I am going to estimate that the sculpture of William Penn may be a hundred foot tall. I remember walking around the base of this sculpture, you could walk around its feet and it was up on top of this building a tremendous feeling of power and a sense of history and power. That was very moving to me. So the aspect of how art can let you travel in time to what it means to be human and feel a sense of cultural community, power ... would of been that experience with William Penn.

– **Was that your first sensation of helplessness when facing a work of art?**

– Yeah, this would have been a sculpture. But I wouldn't of thought of it as a work of art. I would have thought of it as William Penn. It is like the Statue of Liberty, it is that type of public piece that is grand and moving and incorporates scale and history. I had drawing and painting lessons since the time that I was a child. I knew how to draw ellipses and I could draw a glass that could look transparent. It wasn't until I went to art school and had art history lesson that I understood what the power of art could be. And it was my art history teacher; he showed an image of Manet's *Olympia* and started to speak about how the images have different sociological meanings within Paris and that time, within the culture, or how maybe the bouquet of flowers would have one meaning, the woman not having the clothes on, how would that have a meaning and how that would be relating to another artist, to making a reference back to Goya. All of the sudden I felt like the luckiest person in the world because the type of belonging that I wanted in my life, that intellectual and physical excitement; I felt like wow this it, and I just fell into this, I did not know what I was involved with all these years through learning this craft of creating optical illusions.

– **You generally title your series with single words that sum up the different meanings of your work. Could you explain your choices with an example?**

– Ok, I don't like fiction I really like non-fiction. I like philosophy. The philosophical base of my work is: kind of Nietzschean, Platonism, Existentialism, I love Kierkegaard. So *Equilibrium* is trying to deal with time, and how in art you time travel to create an ultimate state of being which is a pre-birth, it has to have an aspect of the present but also a pre-birth and an after death, because it is kind of the form of the eternal and the experience. In that body of work too, I was trying to tell artists to go for it. About the act of trying to achieve something, so I was also paralleling these kind of philosophical states of being and these different polarities and how important the polarities are to be able to embrace and be aware of.

I was trying to parallel how at the time I felt that white middle class artists where using art for social mobility the way maybe other ethnic groups have used sports, different times, and different people. So artists should be aware of what they are doing and they should go for it. I was saying that they were just posturing, that they were acting like a *siren* that they had achieved something when they really did not achieve anything, it is the going for it, not a finished state not a finished product.

– **Any other example?**

– *Banality* was another word that was important for me because of my involvement with art and what I have learned from art and philosophical investigation. It really comes down to acceptance in life. If you can be open to everything and accept everything for what it is, then you empower yourself and everything remains in play at your disposal to empower. If you participate in judgment, if you participate in segregation, you end up alienating and losing the opportunity to involve and incorporate different things, different forms of information that are not at your disposal anymore and it creates anxiety.

– **Would you mind if we spoke about Dalí? Like you, Dalí was able to manage his public projection perfectly, as well as his work ...**

– My first art book would have been a Dalí book, *The Persistence of Memory*. It was a special edition I remember my mother and father giving to me probably for a Christmas one time. I was about 9 or 11. I always loved Dalí's work and I think it is important for an artist to learn personal iconography and the way you learn personal iconography is to be able to go inside, you have to learn how to trust in yourself and follow your own interests and if you follow your interests and you trust in yourself it takes you to a very, very metaphysical place. Surrealism is this kind of process of going inward and learning how to trust in and analyzing yourself, what you dreamt the night before. After you trust in yourself you automatically want to go outward and you learn trust in others. Art is a metaphor for that process.

I was brought up in a generation very obsessed with Duchamp. I love Duchamp's work. Behind there is a bottle rack made to the same specifications of the one at the Norton Simon Museum and I just have a gazing ball sitting there. It is just for me to contemplate the way he contemplates the bicycle wheel on the stool. These are all Duchamp references and these are contemplation pieces for me. It is wonderful to come in contact with the senses and art is so empowering that way that you come into contact with what it feels like to be a human being, to be alive in a Dionysian experience and it is fantastic! And I love that experience and Surrealism, Dada all these type of accentuated experience are very important.

– **You are talking about Surrealism, Dada, Duchamp and Pop?**

– Again it is a metaphor for this process. It is externalized things. You have to shop and you think of the objective. The objective is external, it is not inside ... it doesn't do with internal life. It is a ready made of some type. But it is just metaphor and metaphor for others, we don't care about urinals, we don't care about cows or

coke cans or banal objects, we care about other people at the end of the day.

– **Is there any contemporary artist inspiring that sensation in you now?**

– My own work.

– **Nobody else?**

– I have learned to look at the Old Masters' world for this type of absolute joy in being human and making contact. Consciousness is reference. When you can make a reference to something that is consciousness. So art is based in referencing and so at a certain point I started to feel I was losing my freedom as an artist following this objective external route to art. And I began to feel really free again when I was able to come in contact freshly with Picasso's work. I always enjoyed Picasso's work, I worked at the Museum of Modern art and I looked at Guernica every day and I walked through the collection every day. But it really came to me through his late work. Just coming to contact with the reference and the power of an individual at 88 years in his life – like in 69, to generate the work that he was generating. And I realized that the work is so layered. That the intuitive process from layering and layering, every gesture has so many multiple references and profound references to what it really means to stake out and carve life.

All of a sudden I became aware that just the intuitive process of following your interest and focusing on those interests takes you to a metaphysical place that connects you with a universal vocabulary. It is through this process that he (Picasso) is making more reference to an internal physical type of thing but could go full circle and you enter this universal realm of the objective and it's power and its meaning. Its metaphor in the objective realm is as powerful as this externalized world that my generation has found to be a symbol of enlightenment. It just came full circle for me.

– **And regarding to the production of your works ... They are technologically complex, like Guggenheim Bilbao or CAD systems.**

– It's a tool. What I would have admired about Frank's situation wasn't the technology but that it was as a tool that he had created that that this building would be able to exist. Otherwise it couldn't exist without having that tool. I learned very early on, I would say in my mid 20's, and I have tried to communicate to other artist too, that technology is not an end. Any young artist that tries to grab on to the newest technology and they think that if by doing so the work will be new, it will be fresh, it will be interesting, it will really be of this moment, it will be very temporal. Won't have any profoundness to it. Actually, what's really new in art is honesty and that is where the power of

art is. Newness does not play a big role other than it is refreshing to have honesty.

I create systems that help me ensure that every gesture, every aspect of the surface of a sculpture or the surface of a painting or every color, the most minute detail is exactly what I envisioned from the beginning because it is very important for me that I can convey to the viewer that they can trust in the experience. I have this very strong Duchampian aspect, which is cerebral, in thinking about beforehand in exactly what I want to do and almost doing that molding cerebrally. Picasso would have been very free in manipulating form, in manipulating material. I still have this very strong Duchampian aspect, which is cerebral, in thinking about beforehand in exactly what I want to do and almost doing that molding cerebrally. Know what I want to do before the actual creation.

– **The technology used allows you to work on editions. What is your opinion about multiple works?**

– I look back to my original point of view about editions back to my 20s almost. And I always want to make enough work that would have political impact that I could get the ideas dispersed but at the same time I wanted to always let the viewer know that it is about an idea and not about distribution and if you want to affect the world you affect the idea ... and so I would generally make for an exhibition if it is a sculpture show maybe somewhere between about 20 sculptures they would be and edition of three plus and artist proof. But then I would stop and I would retreat myself and I would go from making vacuum cleaners which were not an edition but I made about 20 of them ... I would them make my *equilibrium* ... I would make some bronzes I make a body of work and then move on.

– **But some materials are more suitable for multiple editions, such as bronze ...**

– I think that it is important that you can make work that can fulfill your political ambitions and materials are important in that they convey ideas. At the same time you want to be able to touch everyone's life. I want to be able to touch the life of some young person that may have a curiosity in art. So you may want to keep things open but at the same time something beautiful about trying to have things preserved. There is a beautiful thing when humankind finds a sense of responsibility that this is important to us an we think ... makes the world a better place, it helps us survive more and it helps us look at life in a better way. That we want to preserve this ... it is kind of a spirituality that I ...

I want to state that one of the things that I really love about art is the sense of family

that it creates and that art parallels our own genes and our DNA and if we look at our genes and DNA and how things are interlocked, like a double helix if we look at DNA, art and artists do the same things. So when Picasso could be referencing Goya and Goya Velazquez and Velazquez an ancient Ariadne sculpture and as you go back through time and you go back to the Paleolithic time, it is all interwoven and it does change your genes. They found that ideas momentarily change your genes and so it is real that art parallels the biology. I really believe that the only true narrative we have of human history is our genes. And art parallels it. I have a great sense of family and I am a different human being since I learned to appreciate Manet, and Manet is a different human being since he was able to appreciate Velazquez ... and it changes who we are, and it changes our possibilities for transcendence of what we are to become and the gestures we are able to conceive of and do as a human being.

By ANA SOKOLOFF



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In a Land of Giants

THE ORIGIN OF THIS MULTI-TENTACLED project lies in an interview with Jan Fabre in 2011, in which he stated that, if he had to steal one work from a museum, it would be *Pornocratès* by Félicien Rops. That watercolour enriched with gouache and pastel is one of the masterpieces of the Belgian artist kept in the monographic museum dedicated to him in his home town of Namur. A precursor of the Symbolist movement that was to come to a head in Belgium in the second half of the 1880s, Félicien Rops played the role of figurehead for a generation of artists who were soon to explore a new artistic path, going beyond Realism and Naturalism. *Pornocratès* or *La Dame au cochon* (1878) is Rops's artistic testament: a woman, her eyes blindfolded, leads a pig on a leash. This unlikely couple strolls along a small wall on which the Classic arts (sculpture, music, poetry, painting) are frozen in stone. The woman symbolizes modernity in art, an art that follows its instincts, without fearing to trample on tradition. Rops seeks to be the bard of that artistic modernity. «To paint the passions of our time, we need to find new verbs; to speak, to move the soul of modern men and to show them

their real selves, we need words that have not already been used and not the words whose freshness and virtue remain on the lips of the elderly.»¹ For this reason, no doubt, France's great 19th century poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), in reference to the academic post that Rops was never wont to obtain, wrote: «A dire là-bas [en Belgique] combien j'aime / Ce tant folâtre Monsieur Rops / Qui n'est pas un grand prix de Rome, / Mais dont le talent est haut comme / La pyramide de Chéops» (They say over there [in Belgium] how much I love that playful Rops, who may not have won the Grand Prize in Rome but his talent stands as high as the Pyramid of Cheops).²

Rops is acknowledged for the anti-conformist nature of his work, his rejection of bourgeois morals and his scandalous treatment of composition. It is this permanent aesthetic rebellion that Jan Fabre, at the time a student at the Fine Arts Academy in Antwerp, appreciated back in the 1970s. Two hundred years separate the two men and yet, very early on in his career, Fabre felt that potential affinity between his research and the artistic expression Rops gives his fantasies. Fabre appreciated this creative freethinker of the 19th century, a century turned upside-down by discoveries in the realms of science, technology, industry and social customs. He visited the «first Rops museum», located at the time in another part of town and prohibited to minors: «I found a partner in Rops: the way he managed to express his points of view through symbols and metaphors, his radical poetry of lust and desire, of unlimited dread.»³ During his training years in Antwerp, he was already producing drawings in tribute to Rops, arousing the curiosity of his classmates devoted almost exclusively to conceptual art. In the same way, and in the same period, he provoked the gibes of his peers by enrolling for an evening class in fashion design. His aim was to design dresses for his girlfriends, in imitation of Rops who produced over a hundred fashion sketches for his two mistresses in Paris, Aurélie (1852-1924) and Léontine (1849?-1915) Duluc. Moreover, on the occasion of the show in Namur, Jan Fabre has dug out several unpublished sketches among his drawings to present his clothing creations.

The design of the exhibition in the Rops museum follows the thread of the themes habitually discussed to present he work of this 19th-century artist from Namur: caricature, political engagement, night life, travel, nature, literature, eroticism, etc. In each section, Jan Fabre's works have been included to highlight the links across the centuries. As Joanna De Vos, an art historian and curator of the exhibition puts it: «Facing time means confronting time head on and realizing there is no way to grasp it. [...] Rops and Fabre suggest time is

both unique and universal, focused and diffuse, singular and plural. It is like a mirror of relativity where persevering invention reigns supreme.»⁴ This vision of time as universal and unique is expressed by each of them through their discourse. With his phrase sculpted on a glass coloured with a blue biro, «Ik ben een eenmansbeweging» («I am a one-man movement»), Fabre expresses his independence of spirit and his authenticity. «Rops suis autre ne veulx ester» (Rops will not be another) was the declaration of faith made by the 19th-century artist assumed entirely in his oeuvre and his life choices.

For both artists, time is also the artistic tradition that gives us our bearings, certainly, but also impresses us into paralysed fear. «(...) I suffer and tremble like a scrawny midget that the evil spirits have locked inside a giant's armour.»⁵, wrote Rops in 1883. «I am a dwarf in a land of giants»⁶, confesses Fabre in his *Journal de nuit*. Both perceive the genius weighing on the artists preceding them but each one strives to open up a new artistic path in his own way. «Rops and Fabre are two lone wolves who, in a spirit of passionate and poetic resistance, create a reality that is all their own, thus opening the door to unbridled imagination»⁷, says Joanna De Vos.

After spending his childhood in Namur, studying in Brussels and accepting a bourgeois marriage, Félicien Rops was forever coming and going between the capital cities of Belgium and France. Driven by bitter resentment regarding his homeland and his love life, he settled definitively in Paris around 1874 «I created Associations in Belgium, I invented new processes, I have produced five hundred works without counting a thousand lithographs. The 'Belgian government' has never asked me for a single engraving, nor a drawing, nor any piece whatsoever. And no objection to the alleged immorality of my works»⁸, he wrote to his friend Camille Van Camp. In Paris, he surrounded himself with an impressive network of contacts: writers, artists and art critic rave about his production. He is fully occupied with the illustration of literary works, an activity he had taken up in Belgium in 1858. This career choice allowed him to make his iconography very widely known. Numerous lewd works, particularly those printed by Auguste Poulet-Malassis, Baudelaire's publisher, host engravings by the artist. Rops is also the caricaturist of Belgium's bourgeoisie thanks to lithographs published in the journal he himself founded in 1856, *L'Uylenspiegel, le journal des ébats artistiques et littéraires*. He depicts a funeral at which the faces of the ecclesiastic dignitaries are swollen up and indifferent to the pain of a little orphan. This ironic spirit was a constant