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XAVIER GRAU

THE CEASELESS MORPHOSIS

by Andrés Sánchez Robayna

When faced by a painting by Xavier Grau, more so when faced by an entire exhibition of his work, an immediate consideration, albeit brief and of a purely preliminary nature, arises concerning the possibilities of painting. I say 'possibilities' and not 'validity' or 'current relevance', fully aware that today we need hardly deal with, except in a very indirect way, what, in recent decades, has become something more than a theoretical problem and ended up being confined to the less

than stimulating sphere of a controversy almost always weighed down by deeply entrenched dogmas and postures. To speak of the 'possibilities' of painting is to recognise the many and varied ways in which it manifests itself today in our most immediate present. It is also to understand the highly diverse languages that painting contains within itself and which it is able to develop with an expressivity that could be considered unforeseen were it not for the fact that this expressivity had

already clearly manifested itself in the great painters of the 20th century and in the experimentation which led them to renovate and enrich, from very disparate positions, the reality of painting. From Giorgio Morandi to Luis Fernández, Zoran Music to Cy Twombly, Milton Avery to Blinky Palermo and Gerhard Richter, could it have ever been in doubt that painting is far from having played out its role, completed its historical trajectory or done nothing more (as has often been stated) than repeat its laudable discoveries? We now realise to what extent the content of those pronouncements was due entirely to fashion, self-interested opportunism, and the intentional distortion of a reality that, far from being played out, continually rediscovered its significance and even formulated, almost unexpectedly, new and seductive combinations of different materials and techniques.

For reasons which are too involved to go into here (and which, I should mention, I outlined on a previous occasion for the exhibition *Pintura dels setanta a Barcelona. Superfície, color* (Painting from the 1970s in Barcelona. Surface, Colour), held in the MACBA in 1997) I had the opportunity of witnessing the inception of Xavier Grau's work or, to be more precise, its first public appearances. Referring to this time seems unavoidable since it was crucial not only for the painter himself and the group of which he was part, but also for the development of the artistic languages current in the Spanish culture of the period. I have a very vivid memory of the twenty or so paintings and handful of drawings Xavier Grau presented in *Per a una crítica de la pintura* (Towards a Critique of Painting) in the Maeght gallery in the spring of 1976. As I write this, I have stopped to consult the exhibition catalogue in my library and, on leafing through it, the simple act of recollection has caused me to relive what in those days was, primarily, an atmosphere. I should say it was, strictly speaking, as much a cultural atmosphere as an atmosphere of actual pictorial action or creation. Regarding the first, what the cultural atmosphere afforded was at the same time the need for and the effect of a transformation in the conditions of the practice of art, doubtless due to the closing, in 1975, of an entire historical and political chapter. It became necessary to question the existing languages, to revise them or, as the title of the Maeght exhibition in Barcelona put it, to critique them, and this is exactly what *Towards a Critique of Painting* did; it proposed the critique of the activity of painting in order to reinvent or remake it. As for painting itself, the works by Grau and his colleagues created, above all else, an atmosphere. An

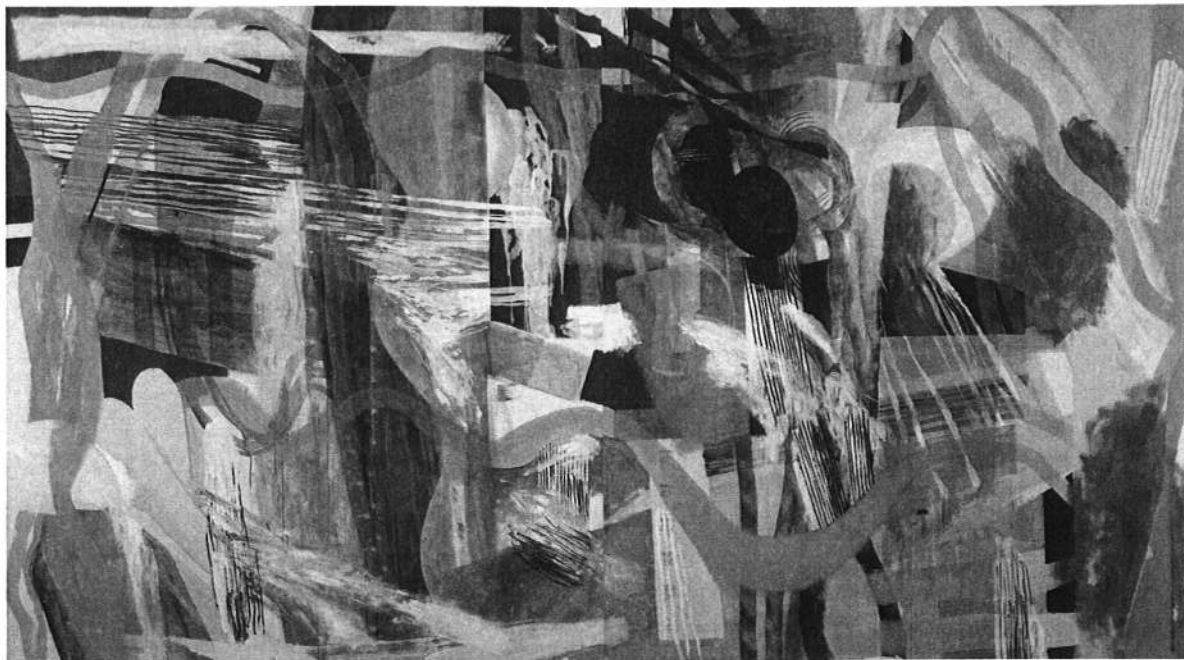
atmosphere of action as much as contemplation, completely free of contradictions. Grau's paintings, all untitled and simply numbered, clearly display this desire to create settings, surroundings, spaces for contemplation which, in a work like *Pintura n°11* (Painting n°11), were also spaces for action, as they were for De Kooning. To look at a picture in that exhibition was to penetrate that atmosphere and explore the infinite possibilities of painting. How well-put (and also how typical of the at-

titudes which then determined and produced the gaze) was the conclusion of the essay *Los miedos de la pintura* (The Fears of Painting), a text with which Xavier Grau contributed, in the exhibition catalogue, to the discussions aired in the magazine *Trauma* (and, incidentally, one of his few pieces of writing), 'The teaching of painting is only just beginning'.

Between these two poles of contemplation and action (always nurtured, needless to say, by the ceaseless, endless recommencing of the *teaching of painting*) is where Grau's work has always in fact moved. I am reminded of what Tomás Llorens said in reference to a broad sector of modern painting and the sense, or rather the spirit, of its creative enterprise; that it is painting marked by the 'epistemological precedence of contemplation'. This is not of course a spirit exclusive to a significant sector of pictorial modernity, but I would say that it is one of its most characteristic features. It is what distinguishes it and at the same time defines it, especially in the case of the languages of abstraction, so varied and metamorphic. Also, obviously, in the variant of abstraction practiced by Grau, since its inception until today, he has demonstrated immense loyalty to his artistic project and, despite the distinct phases or periods that can be discerned in his project, he has always had its roots very much in mind, delving into them time and time again. And via these roots he has explored a unique and unmistakable territory; the vibratory spatiality, the cosmic

nervures, like graphic rhythms or pulsations moving across the surface of the canvas which, capturing our gaze, carry it to a realm where frenzy and quietude ally.

After the rather severe and stripped-down early pieces from the 1970's, of an almost ascetic bareness and an occasionally disconcerting simplicity, Grau's work soon turned towards areas of vision, of contemplation and action, that were no less appealing but certainly more complex. The picture space began to fill with lines and criss-crossings, as if the pictorial action needed to transpose itself into visual rhythms. It is true that a large part of abstraction in painting tends to configure itself as musical movement, and that Kandinsky was very explicit about this when he spoke of the 'abstract interior sound' of forms associated (or identified) with sensations. 'The world rings with sound'. Yes, and the painter does nothing more than bring the interior sounds to colour and form, the sensations that pulse in the multiple elements that constitute visible reality. Each painter listens with their eyes to these elements and transposes them into strokes, marks and signs: movements whose harmony is of a musical nature, and each painter combines and recombines them according to their personal capacity for listening and also in accordance with their explorations and expressive requirements. It is no surprise then that Xavier Grau himself spoke once, back in the 1970's, of 'the wounding splendour of the signifier'. I believe that this



last point is, in a certain sense, of the same order as the above quotations from Kandinsky; for Grau strokes and lines are also 'signifiers', since referring to them, that is to say the material component of the sign, the phonic image, refers us equally to the sound.

Xavier Grau's later career has been marked, in my opinion, by two complimentary creative directions. The first is a rigorous exploration of what one critic has called the 'palimpsest effect', meaning 'the retroactive effect of the avant-garde on itself', in the words of Rafael Santos Torroella, and an emphasis on the re-reading of the trail left in its wake. Indeed, how can one not see in this body of painting a judicious assimilation of some of the most dynamic languages of the avant-garde together with their revitalizing regeneration? Everything invites us to look at Grau's paintings as if the language which arises here and becomes visible, the set of 'sounds' it incorporates, were part of a long chain of expression that will not, of course, end with him. Grau's is a body of work which has proposed, definitively, since the 1970's, to look deeper into some received languages and from them explore new artistic realities, 'to go further into the undergrowth', to use Juan de la Cruz's fine expression.

The other direction I refer to is none other than the work which has led Grau to the very signs that characterise this painting, its discoveries, its distinctive notes (in the musical sense too, of course): its world. The

floating forms, the knots, tensions and filaments that cross the space of the canvas and populate it with resonant figures, 'sensations' configured by masses of lines and colour in a strangely harmonious creation, give body to painting of a clearly cosmic vocation which, unlike other painters sharing this concern (Roberto Matta, for instance) configure an artistic universe that appears in *statu nascendi*, forms that may be called autogenetic, forms in morphosis, inexhaustible, in continual movement, and yet, paradoxically, immobile on the canvas.

Let us observe, in the self-propelling space of these canvases and drawings, the unmistakable space of the paintings and drawings of Xavier Grau, the frozen whirlwind of an enchanting world; the exquisite lesson offered by painting, its unquestionable teaching, and yes, that teaching which is only just beginning.

Tegeste, Tenerife,
20th November 2013.



Can Framis' AØ Space will hold Xavier Grau's exhibition 'La morfosi sin fin' (The Ceaseless Morphosis) from the 13th of January to the 6th of April 2014.