

1.

In a brief career now stretching out to a decade of public appearances, Simón Zabell's critical reception has located his work in a unique relation between visual art and literature, with the commentators showing a certain preference to emphasize the latter. Although this emphasis is strictly correct, I feel it neglects the sum of the various elements that actually make up his work.

First of all, Zabell's work shows a permanent concern for space or, rather, spaces, leading to an equally permanent questioning of the space corresponding to the piece itself, the space that creates or acts as a catalyser in the exhibition space and even the exhibition space itself, in both its merely physical features and those affecting its social function or its capacity for creating metaphor. Not to mention that what he basically extracts from his reading are places, descriptions of places and the motifs confirming those places.

Secondly, we find a re-reading of the codes created by a minimal consideration of both the work itself and the behaviour imposed by that consideration on what we see as real. We might say this reinterpretation is sister to that of the texts chosen.

Thirdly, there is an availability and understanding of the practice of painting that is ultimately defining of his other artistic practices, whether they be photography, printing computer-generated images or installations. This is an idea of painting that determines some of his criteria and much of his critical consideration of the re-reading of the minimal as mentioned above.

The earliest work I know of by Zabell is *Theseus + Hippolitus*, a series of photographs on card dating from 1998 that reproduce the chairs of a domestic environment. The title refers to the characters of a tragic myth commingling misogyny, the temptation of incest and, inevitably, death. Zabell himself said at the time that his reference was Racine's play *Phèdre*, written in 1677, which brings out the concupiscence, the feelings of shame, the secrets and revenge of the members of a family – a plot resolved by Zabell in the furniture of a petit bourgeois home, or perhaps I should say mock furniture, for their skin is mere cardboard and their being the flatness of the photograph.

Apartment, presented the following year, is an even more explicit testimony of Zabell's fundamental play with space, for he spread the different pieces of the work, consisting of printed photographs either falsely piled up or hanging from the wall, throughout the Condes de Gambia exhibition rooms, reproducing or, once again, simulating a 1960's apartment with which the artist was very familiar, as it belonged to his girlfriend Elena, and of which he portrayed its most intimate corners (the toilet, for example), as well as the penury of some building materials and the regularity of their repetition. One of the pieces in fact repeated the furniture of *Theseus + Hippolitus* that seemed to escape from the wall. Another simulated a lampshade by the simple technique of rolling up its flat image to reproduce the shape of the object.

One of the first theoreticians to take an interest in the work of Simón Zabell was Eduardo Quesada Dorador, who found an initial reference in *Apartment* in the famous *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* by Richard Hamilton, as well as earlier ones from the domestic interiors of Vermeer, Velázquez and Rembrandt or even Antonio López, and mentioned some details I cite inasmuch as I share his impressions. His tone is "somewhat distant, somewhat cold, with no excess of warmth or passion or anything, moderate, ordered, systematic, rather indifferent, as corresponds to the look of a person and visual artist on whom photography, film and, above all, television have had their inevitable influence."¹ We can say that this manner of behaviour, rightly described by Quesada Dorador as "impersonal" has continued until the present.

Likewise, his "at present especially intense interest in scenography, for such is the course of study Zabell has been following since last year at the Slade School of Art in London [...]. This interest in scenography is the origin of much of a new component in *Apartment* – a certain air of slight mystery, foreboding, imminence, expectation, the possibility of unknown or unforeseen presences and actions, generally speaking, something unwanted." This inclination towards scenography has gradually increased, to date reaching a climax with the incorporation of the most varied disciplines, including painting, sculpture, photography, lighting, etc.

Finally, Quesada Dorador reproduced part of a letter by the artist, whose capacity for synthesis and exactness of description has not been sufficiently underlined. I take two or three

fairly explicit points from this letter: "The installation attempts to deal with the contradictions between illusionist spatial representation (photography, painting, etc.) and real space, while at the same time recreating within the exhibition space another space, that of the apartment where Elena lived in Granada on Avenida de la Constitución, just as one might do in a scenography. [...] so that the arrangement of each image was just as relevant as the image itself. What I mean is that, instead of placing the photographic images in the room so that they were easier to see, I'll place them so that their very arrangement adds information on the photographed reality to the information achieved by the image itself. [...] The end result should be a rather empty room on first sight, although, as the spectator enters it, it should offer little flashes of a different reality, so that the viewer would in a way occupy the space of the apartment."²

This manner of occupying and at the same time dynamising the exhibition space turned into the container of an absent and remembered real space, become, as it were, a foresight of the real, and that places the spectator inside a place is the device used by Zabell in *Bathroom Drama* (2001), the sarcasm implicit in whose title will not escape the reader, and which, on the other hand, continued the plot of *Theseus + Hippolitus* and the dramas of Euripides and Racine.

The first pieces by Zabell that I saw in person and drew my attention were a set of large scale (160x180x200 cm) paintings done in mixed technique on canvas that he used to compose an installation called *The Sunday Morning Story* (2001), which recreated the spaces (sitting room, corridor, etc.) of a common, vulgar house by means of fragments – a door frame, a radiator against the wall, etc. Amazingly, they were made of stippled plaster!, the same material a house painter would have used. They were, moreover, almost monochrome in the chosen colour of any run-of-the-mill houseowner!³

The same or a very similar method had given rise to the *N15* series (2000) and *Historia de lo mismo* [History of the Same] (2002-2003), which also introduced the human figure from a subjective viewpoint, as if both the artist and we ourselves were looking at things from above and in this way the floor took on special relevance – a simulation of tiny terrazzo or parquet.

Later, in *y octubre* [and October] (2003) he painted a Carl André-like false floor as if it were one of those horrible plastic adhesive ones used in the houses of working-class areas in the 1960s and 1970s and a strange reflection. "*y octubre* arises out of a cross between the floor pieces of Carl André and the representational ingenuity of Eric Rohmer in *L'Anglaise et le duc*. The floor is physical and can be inhabited, but it is at the same time illusory, using pictorial lies to show us where the lamp is that lights up the room. except there is no lamp," writes the artist.

Philosophers suggest we should contemplate the permanent, unknown self that lies within the self we know. Rather than giving us it to see, Zabell pushes us to discover our concealed selves in the most ordinary, vulgar corners and details. As Francisco Baena comments, he shows "them as hypertrophied signs. But, for the same reason, the pity inspired by their bearers or inhabitants."⁴

The literality of the everyday is transfigured by an ironic illusionism and a desire to theatricalise the exhibition space. It is a conception that some of his commentators have tried to base on the illuminism of the Age of Enlightenment put to the test by the discretionality of the modern.⁵

2.

In 2004 the radical incorporation of narrative in Zabell's project gave a turn of the screw to the proposals stated up to now and created an ongoing process whose latest link is the installation and the pieces making up this exhibition *La casa de Hong Kong* [The Hong Kong House].

This process has had two literary references: the absolutely predominant one of Alain Robbe-Grillet, one of the instigators of the *nouveau roman*, and Jorge Luis Borges, in a vicarious fashion, for none of his texts have every really figured in Zabell's works. I would also venture to say two major pieces and two other physically smaller ones, although not less interesting.

In *Le Voyeur* (2004) Zabell made use of a title by a French writer for the first time. A photographic montage whose images preserved the passing of each frame brought together the different ways of holding and turning the pages of the novel, suggesting or simulating the act of reading. I believe the choice of title is in now way ingenuous and that *The Voyeur* is a voluntary hint that locates the viewer.

The two chapters of *El año de algo* [The Year of Something] – the second of which was chosen by María Corral for ARCO'06 – are inspired by *Funes el Memorioso*, that stunted man

who alone had more memories than all men that have inhabited the world since its beginning, whose dreams are like a watch and whose memory is like a rubbish tip. Zabell resolves the image of Funes or of what Funes represents in an itinerant, mutating installation. A montage based on A-4 sheets, printed with text and modelled and worn to create the illusion that they are from an old novel entitled *El año de algo* that has come apart. The text is the description of a house made of memory by an observer as implacable as Funes, but that only took into account what was visible, not words or stories. Moreover, the folios have been cut into the silhouettes of the furniture, the lamps and other foreseeable, detailed objects.

"In *El año de algo, capítulo II*, which, if I remember right is the second instalment after *El año de algo, capítulo I*, it's as if I had torn the pages out of an old novel entitled *El año de algo*, written by a sort of cross between Funes el Memorioso and a student with attention span problems. The pages of the 'novel' are spread over the walls making the exhibition space into a visual recreation of the space described verbally on them. The shapes removed from the masses of pages reveal the silhouettes of the furniture and lamps described in the minutest detail in the text. We are installed at the point where visuality and literature cross and we are forced to feel identified with what is described there, that is so ordinary it could be considered as belonging to anyone. That is my intention, at least," Zabell wrote in 'El Cultural'⁶ to explain his project.

However, it was his only work of 2006 called *La Jalousie* – the same title as the novel by Robbe-Grillet – that he brought together a numerous set of pieces in an installation that brought Zabell's project to the dimension I imagine he desired.

While Zabell's intention is, as he himself states, to "visually narrate in first person the story of someone reading a novel", that visuality must have a place to occupy and therefore needs to be built. Just as the moving eye must find its anchor points that respond more to an experience of the present than a verbal memory.

Here installation and painting make up their own space, which, moreover, admits different montage proposals. "This is highly visual literature in which the reality is described of a couple living on a colonial banana plantation; this reality is given form by my project starting with the pages of the novel itself in its original edition and which are used as material to represent the plantation, and then describe the paintings inside the house in a very particular manner, perhaps the way a jealous man would see them," Zabell wrote on the occasion of his presentation at the 2006 Altadis Award of which I was curator.

Once again the pages of the novel are reproduced larger than life and uniformly cut away to take on the shapes of the foliage in a plantation and stuck to the walls of the exhibition room, which they transform into an enclosing space through which one must pass.

Earlier I pointed out that the third point of Simón Zabell's artistic conception was his understanding of pictorial practice. It should be said that his birthplace of Málaga (1970) resides within his painting, if we understand this from conceptual standpoints that both expand it beyond mere visibility and involve it in possible discourses explained in other contemporary practices.

Whether done on paper or canvas, the paintings of *La jalousie* represent both the interior of the dwelling – an interior I must immediately say is composed exclusively of plays of colour and light, that has scarcely any representation and what there is oozes ingenuity – and also the pages of the novel, or rather, the idea of what could be the double page of a book.

Three views of the same room (in large scale pieces, 160 x 200 cm), its elements reduced to a picture whose only image is of an idea or concept of a picture, a framed rectangle of colour, a floor lamp (later we shall see how this insistence on lamps is the result of his concern for light and not for the object itself) and the growing reflection of irradiated light filtering through the Venetian blind, a sort of inversion of its slats. Mere sketches, supports for colour.

In the same chromatic series two more, flat abstractions of the colour and tone of the interior or, more acidly, like the slats of the blind, the inverted image of the painting within the painting, exhibiting its vacuum, the absence of any descriptive or natural element.

A second series of only two even larger canvases (180 x 220 cm) represents what could be pages of the book. One reproduces the entire text of *La Jalousie*, superposing page upon page until the end result is absolutely unintelligible, a black stain, first made by scanning the pages and then superposing their projection on the canvas which is, nonetheless, painted by hand. The other flatly represents the empty box of text, the heading and the page numbers. In any case, in both pictures the idea and image are reduced to a pure visual pattern in which reading is impossible.

According to Chema González: "Zabell's mimetism, the canvases with single planes and neutral treatment, cold and far removed from industrial materials, seems to almost

(counter)illustrate the famous dictum of F. Stella: 'What you see is (not) what you see.' The superficiality of the support, the anti-illusionism, the reductive simplifying language of post-pictorial abstraction, of K. Noland's targets, of Stella's meshes, of Ryman's monochromes are conceived in literal, narrative terms. The apparently abstract canvases recreate a spatial reality, a scenography reconstructed by the subjective eye of a presence passing through the space,"⁷ He adds, a little later: "Observing Zabell's canvases organized like stage machinery, thinking about Greenberg's purism, one perceives a subtlety capable of breaking such aesthetics by its foundations. the analytical treatment of the support *qua* object and the freezing, inexpressive climate are now a *trompe l'oeil*; they act as referents for a tangible space, like narrations, like simulations of real time. The strictly spatial gives way to the temporal. Art and theatre are combined."⁸

I have recorded the dimensions of the pictures because they contribute to the decisive fact that the spectator invariably finds himself surrounded by a place, an atmosphere, an experience that refers to reading, but likewise a spatial comprehension and a location in time.

Another artist, Jesús Zurita, who knows him well has said: "Simón Zabell's work is located in a strange terrain within the possibilities of narrative. He offers images that are as everyday as they are intimate, but with not poetical or categorical intention. His aim has always been to make a plastic reform of the image he starts with so that its constituent elements create a new scene. There is no need for a literary plot or an array of symbols, only a description in the corresponding context and that context can only be aesthetic. Specifically, in a vast visual syntax that Zabell has developed with minute precision in the most coherent professional career I know of.

"Thus the famous pictorial 'pregnant moment' collapses in his pictures, giving way to a sort of 'present continuous' where the actual look and the represented look converge and create a film frame. Narration is finally frozen to do away with external artifice and empower the internal, that is, with its own plastic values."⁹

In his comments on the novel, Mario Vargas Llosa explains that in *La Jalousie* "an essential ingredient of the story – no less than the central character – has been exiled from the narration, but in such a way that his absence is projected onto it so that it makes itself felt at every moment. In *La Jalousie* there is not really any story, at least as is traditionally understood – an argument with beginning, development and conclusion – but rather the signs and symptoms of a story we do not know and are obliged to reconstruct.

"Who is that invisible being? A jealous husband, as suggested by the title of the book with its ambivalent meaning (*jalousie* is a Venetian blind, a barred window, but also jealousy), someone who, possessed by the demon of mistrust, minutely spies on all the movements of the women of whom he is jealous without her noticing. The reader does not know this for certain; he deduces or invents it lead on by the nature of the description, which is that of an obsessive, unhealthy observation dedicated to the mad, detailed scrutiny of the slightest movements, gestures and initiatives of the wife."¹⁰

I believe something similar occurs to us, the jealous viewers of art, obsessive and inventive of meticulous enthusiasms.

As already suggested, one of the main constituent elements of Simón Zabell's work is light. And light is now determining in his latest project to date – *La casa de Hong Kong*. His referent is again a novel by Robbe-Grillet, *La Maison de rendez-vous*.

As early as 2002, Zabell's intervention on the church of San Francisco in Como, Italy, titled *In extremis*, consisted in projecting two very similar slides onto two blind windows of the inside of the church, so that the viewer thought he was seeing through them the ceiling and lamp of the dining-room in the flat where the artist was living in that Italian city. It was as if he simulated the angle of an apartment seen from the street. I have already mentioned the non-existent lamp that nonetheless shed its light on the parquet floor of *y octubre*. More recently, in 2005, the metallised acrylic paintings of *1981* represented the shining brilliance of a set of lamps and, as already said, that same element has a parallel role in *La Jalousie*.

In *La casa de Hong Kong* light is the protagonist. First of all, because it is meant to create the atmosphere occupied by the pieces, whether framing and individualising the pictures, or bathing them in an overpowering, almost blinding brightness, or, finally, by the fluorescent yellow colour in which the pictures are painted.

These are figuratively more complex pictures than those of *La Jalousie*, including branches of trees, chairs in waiting, the blurred text of the story and an open stage reminding us that we are present at the representation of a performance. As I see them they are less cold in composition and presence and, at the same time, lacerating, as if the reason of painting were

dislocated by some excited presence. These are pictures that twist the very foundations of painting, leading it invisibly to its extreme.

In a private letter to me, Zabell said: "*La casa de Hong Kong* proposes a voyage from reading into space, a space illustrated by painting and materialised by sculpture.

"There will be a large sculpture representing at almost life-size the surface occupied by the main room of the house, on which texts taken from the novel are found, attempting to narrate everything in the exact place where it occurred.

"There will also be numerous paintings where fluorescent yellow will gradually predominate as the spectator moves into the exhibition. In these paintings there is an evolution from the image occupying the field of vision of the person reading the novel to a very schematic representation of the reality of one room, constructed with impossible perspectives by which I mean to suggest the way images of realities unknown to us and of which very little has been described to us are formed in our minds (I think Robbe-Grillet himself has never been to Hong Kong).

"What I think will make a big difference as regards other previous works of mine is the way the project is presented and, above all, illuminated. Taking advantage of the characteristics of the church, and the presence of a theatrically trained lighting technician in the team, the idea is to start with a completely dark church and train theatre spotlights on the pieces to mark out their shapes, so that the space will be dark with the pieces shining."

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1. Eduardo Quesada Dorador, "Apartment. El piso de Elena", catalogue *Apartment*, Diputación de Granada, 1999.
2. Eduardo Quesada Dorador, op. cit.
3. The original installation also included two slide projectors showing the passage of one person, in subjective camera, through a house and indicated to the viewer that the pictures derived from those images.
4. Francisco Baena, "Simón Zabell," catalogue *Simón Zabell. La Jalousie*, Placio de los Condes de Gabia. Diputación de Granada, 2007.
5. Chema González, "Subversiones escenográficas," catalogue of the *XLI Certamen de Artes Plásticas Caja San Fernando*, Obra cultural, Caja San Fernando, 2002.
6. 'El Cultural', "Dieciseis por dieciseis. El año de algo, capítulo II," 9 February 2006.
7. Chema González, op. cit.
8. Chema González, op. cit.
9. Jesús Zurita. Press release for the Exhibition at Galería Bach 4, Barcelona, 2006.
10. Mario Vargas Llosa.