

A gap in the spirit

Juan Antonio Muro is victim of a Cartesian dualism. While he assures us he aspires to an incorporeal state, I think, therefore I am is obviously not enough for him. Even as he aims for the metaphysical, Muro shows himself to be an extremely physical painter. And this dualistic contradiction is precisely what sets the tone for all his work. Two elements, the material (that is to say, the tangible) and the incorporeal (thinking and consciousness) are in constant collision, carrying on a never-ending dialogue without any definite objective. Even should he aim to paint the purest, most perfect work he would be aware that it would be impossible.

Muro is contradictory even in his very Cartesianism. According to Descartes, material reality can be expressed through the language of geometry, but in Muro's work, it is precisely geometry that is used to express the metaphysical. Ornamentation and tectonic forms become for him characteristic of thought. Modes of thought almost in the sense of signs – secular traces left over from culture and history. The figure, the icon, becomes transformed into a symbol. In the same way, the painter's physical style, the aggressive way Muro spreads paint over wood for instance with a sander, is a signal for us. Even the work process itself seeks to control disorder and thus adds to the iconography. When opposing movements meet and produce a sufficiently intense pictorial tension, spirit and matter – soul and body – unite momentarily and the painting is born. But the union is, of necessity, only momentary as painting itself is the continuous striving toward something more significant. Something like the immediate and direct contact that the mystic seeks. "Mysticism is important. The mystic seeks out a gap in the spirit through which he hopes to find union with God. Perhaps in a way I do the same thing, although I don't pretend, at least not consciously, to communicate with God."

What exactly is this pictorial tension? It is the unity that comes out of the contradictory elements in a work when the background ceases to be background and the figure is no longer a figure. It is the place where the hierarchy of elements are transformed into equal features. As Muro puts it, it is "the tension that governs every living thing."

The dualism of spirit and matter in Muro's work finds its equivalent in the tradition of art history where concrete art is in constant combat with informal expressionism. His strongest influences came from American expressionism. Muro started out as a pure concrete artist but the pursuit of the incorporeal by

means of reduction, the journey towards emptiness did not satisfy him. He was not tempted to continue the journey toward the empty Black. In Muro's paintings Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko mix with Jackson Pollock. Muro is not a trendy painter and denies any interest in personal identity although it is easy to see his work precisely as a crisis of identity. As a child he thought of becoming a priest but was finally content to be an earthly player – he is a musician and painter. He is a catholic living in a protestant country – a Spaniard in Finland. In almost the same breath he admits that his work is his way of trying to come to terms with what is important to him. "The assurance that I think and feel."

The contradictions go on and on. "I don't want to communicate anything. Sometimes I feel I have nothing to say. If I want to express something I say it in words." What then does he pretend to do in his painting, putting them on public display? Muro's work might be seen as suggestions. "Perhaps I want to incite the viewer to an internal dialogue...I want to create an aesthetic and incorporeal space in which the viewer can communicate with himself."

In Muro's work the tension and the layers of the elements used – sometimes very concretely – create a drama in which he expresses, through purely physical means, the desire for something more immaterial: "There is no beauty without conflict". Muro himself uses the term 'drama' but denies wanting to relate anything. Even so, his work contains links to the great dramas – religious, mystical, philosophical, cultural or pictorial. "Perhaps that's how it is, that everything Man does tells a story..."

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from the book "Kosketuspintoja", Kustanus Oy