

LIFE ON LIFE IN TWO MEANINGS OF THE WORD

Life on life because the cyclic renewal of living things decrees that after death a new life should emerge, nourishing itself on decay, fertilised by the very dead. Nothing is more natural than extinction when the deathbed is a springboard to the next shift, a new birth carrying things forward to the future. This is what the recent paintings of José Albelda bring to mind, springing up on the burnt crepuscular plane of yesterday's twilight plunging over the horizon: fractured pathways, broken plant life, wounded mountains.

But also life on life because the smallest of the small germinates, grows and feeds on the not quite so small. Our ill-treated planet hosts infinite forms of life, and many of these carry other smaller creatures in a chain of cooperation that also includes (or should include) human beings and their commitment to their habitat. Thus the importance of attending to the minor, the apparently insignificant —things that require careful, close attention even to be discovered at all. This discovering the small, the tiny things we might step on if we didn't look, the things we would not see unless someone points them out, brings about an enhanced sense of perception, and as we should all know, increased perception results in increased consciousness, and helps to expand our world. If our eyes are tossed about on the winds of generality on the far-off horizon, on the vagueness of distance, the magnifying glass of closeness brings precision in detail, nearing the most direct and imminent of knowledge —that of touching with the hand. And touching what we see implies a qualitative transformation, going one step further into the perceived. José Albelda takes this step forward, bowing down to the ground to discover adventitious plants —random, spontaneous seasonal herbs— to discover the beauty and uniqueness of this humble form of plantlife which so many consider as mere weeds: anonymous and pertinacious flowers of the wayside, whose strong stems only obey the power of well-pumped sap to stand straight and tall. He comes close and looks, touches and then paints, to convince us to look at the small and subtle, teaching us to perceive the unperceived from the micro-pictorial viewpoint and his intense, analytical powers, and he does so following in the aura of a tradition for detail that links Fra Angelico to Dürer, or the vegetation on the ground of Roger van der Weyden's *The Descent from the Cross* (whose styling has recently influenced Albelda) and the minute plant details of the Pre-Raphaelites ("God is in the details", as they were sermoned by Ruskin). However this may be, these flowers and plants would amount to little if Albelda were not so masterfully self-aware of the revelatory power of the specifically pictorial, the significant potency of material; if he did not so ably teach us, for example, how the metallic splendour of gold leaf reinforces the paleness of watercolour, keeps delicate elements from falling and wraps them in a tight embrace of its own; how the paintbrush brings a simple stroke to life with the fluid beat of its strands, or how a thin stem seems to advance, turn and fall back depending on the density of its patterning. And how precisely his gold leaf, symbolising the Gothic lux of truth and knowledge, seems to doff its connotations of ostentation and richness to shine on as a background to the naked mystery of the sacred, the sacred nature of the mystery of life in any of its manifestations, and particularly the smallest and most adventitious —those that happen accidentally, unexpectedly or fortuitously, those that come into our realm by chance, resistant and obstinate; and those with which the painter, now replete with pictorial élan, feels fully identified.

The teachings of the adventitia. This exhibition should not be understood simply as progression of themes from the inert to the vital, from the nature of mountains, rocks, smoke and water to the redemptive germination of herbs and plants to cover the

earth's unsheltered skin. There is really no more beauty in the living than in the inert in the representation of the world through painting. Both inert and living are intertwined in the continuous polymorphic cycle of nature to which we belong. But why paint adventitiae, and stop at such insignificant herbs and flowers? Especially after Dürer, Fra Angélico and Botticelli. Apart from those few rare works, such as Dürer's well-known adventitiae studies, in which the paintings' main motives were the actual herbs and diminutive plants, these elements in centuries before us were more wont to circumnavigate the main composition and colonise the corners of canvases. They answered the calling they had been given: beauty of a complementary kind around the periphery of a painting, but with the same painstaking production process as that employed for lacework on dresses or chiaroscuro on faces. Are we, then, to revert to Dürer's herbs? For what purpose? I am no man to emulate or pay homage, nor do I think this is the purpose of painting. On the contrary, I consider myself a modest apprentice of the maestros of the mountains and the adventitiae, of Friedrich, Patinir and Blossfeldt; a man who wishes to continue the task of painting with the selfsame prowess whether the subject be large or small, to show equal and identical value for all. My wish is to recreate the miracle of the adventitiae that carpet each spring the apparently sterile ground with the most beautiful and spontaneous covering of living polymorphic yet fleeting splendour. The most emphatic metaphor of life in which I believe: Watchful of their job of being, with no vain questions on the short fullness and rapid decay. A part of the beauty which we perceive in it comes precisely from the fleetingness —and fleetingness understood as a plus, not as a defect. Just enough life; neither too long nor too short. Just enough to grow, offer themselves, allow the bees to gather their nectar and disperse a seed or two. There is no better composition than that which is spontaneously offered to us by the adventitiae, with all their intertwining vines and infinite overlaps, nuances and contrasts impossible to perceive or represent in all their complexity. The coexistence of the poppy with the thistle and the hawthorn, rue together with camomile and *Launaea arborescens*. Unpredictable, hazard-wrought life, with no other purpose than its fully dignified brief omnipresence. And adventitiae, for whom? For themselves only. Their very existence is an expression of absolute gratitude, of the mystery of life and its cyclic nature, offering us the privilege of beauty of a kind that is hardly ever appreciated. The teachings of the adventitia. Whoever learns to admire, paint, and bow down before the adventitiae will have understood something of paramount importance. To learn to lower one's gaze, or better yet, abdicate from verticality, incline to their very same level, and place our visual plane at the height of their stems. To continue to live in their own time, contemplating the calyx and the seed, and thistledowns as they fly. When we do arise, we will no longer be quite the same. Our perceptions of scale, our hierarchy of values, will have transmuted into something, perhaps, decisively different. We shall never again be above the adventitiae, nor all that which they symbolise. We will have taught our eyes to accept decline, we will have learned to perceive all the doings of our undoing. They are also beautiful when their sap is drained dry, when their stems turn fibrous, when their heads hang to earth, bringing birth and death, like the dorsal columns of vanquished mammals. In just a few weeks the soil will have engulfed once more all the rampant biodiversity it once produced and the ground will be impregnated with millions of seeds. Is perchance the cycle of the adventitiae any different from that of the stars, from humans, from the sequoias? Apart from time and scale, the essential is common to all. And indeed the truly essential are those threadlike strands that link us all together, movements that always bring about change without regard to duration, well knowing that totality can be summed up in the suspense of space containing no hierarchies, where large and small are dissolved, and the human is intertwined with the stars. Mountain and herbal life are twinned in the language of painting: The rock is no larger than the cloverleaf, nor is the flower more beautiful than the peak. Painting the portrait

of an adventitia with all the dignity of the human face, and offering it the same position as once was done with gold leaf, is only reserved for the powerful and sacred. Both, whether it be herb or mountain, deserve the privilege of the painter's gentle brush, the same oils and finest essence of turpentine. May the same hold true in our lives: the teaching of the adventitiae: Listen to those almost imperceptible moments, avoid carelessness due to surfeit, remain humble, and learn to live with an awareness of the essential. It is the task of the adventitiae, the task of all humans: to fulfil our cycles with propriety, and remain conscious of the fleeting privilege of existence.