

MEMORY AND THE DREAM OF WATER

At his Madrid debut in 1979, Alfonso Albacete spoke of the fear of contemporary artists to base their work on nature and almost completely lose the relationship with the model, which was one of the fundamental features of Matisse's art. His words at his "En el estudio" exhibition were not, however, a demand for the mimesis of realism in the sense of the mechanical recreation of something as if it were a given truth. Rather, Albacete was calling for "art created in a manner similar to natural phenomena", that is, art in genetic form. Albacete's pictorial landscapes lie in the permanently tense middle ground between imagination and abstraction in the plein air view and the dissolution of the representational motif reminiscent of Baroque abstraction as practised in the 90s. Albacete's unmistakably Mediterranean art is, in one way or another, clearly influenced by the teachings of Cézanne, Diebenkorn, Matisse and Motherwell. These artists were capable of achieving geometrical natural art without renouncing the contours of passion or spontaneity. Albacete, who is a consummate master of colour, often allows his imagination to drift to aquatic subject matter, as in the waves in *El Huerto n° 25* (1995), which evoke thoughts of a display of fantasy. The identity of the piece is poured into the water and can be perceived as a sonorous passage or as the collection of liquid in glasses as if intangible or wraith-like elements could form a solid figure. Albacete recurrently plays with deceptive transparencies and opacities, and to use Bachelard's terminology, his work unifies water and air in the same way that his fascination of light leads him to investigate the potential of shadow. Francisco Calvo Serraller considered the series *Calles* (1986) to be a condensed form of melancholy and the rebellious soul. Moreover, the series *Ángel* (1998), with its central motif as Dürer's stone of melancholy, portrays a fixed idea, an enigmatic, earthly strength and the certainty that we do not possess universal mathematics that can free us from our anguish. Juan Manuel Bonet remarks that "there is a dark, baroque side to Albacete which likes greys, darkness and mystery and which is attracted to Plato's cave, but also to Motherwell, stairs, tunnels, fanlights and all things "enigmatic and terrible" [...]". These renowned shadows are evident in what the artist himself calls subterranean art, created in a semi-basement studio which became a powerful fountain of inspiration. Albacete's exhibition at the Ginkgo Gallery (Madrid, 1993) consisted of a collection of works grouped under the name *Jacob*. These pieces completed a series of images which had also been on show at the Maeght Gallery in Barcelona and at the Nieves Fernández Gallery in Madrid. Francisco Jarauta emphasised the painter's devotion to aesthetic nomadism by reflecting on the subject of the painting "along with the interior perspective, through which the painter's point of view can be seen". The spaces he paints have a metaphysical element, and, in reality, they are taken from his everyday work environment, Light acts on the architecture of the painting and marks an essential absence. Rather than recreating romantic motifs of the subjectivity that in solitude is formed by abysses or the vertigo of a bourgeois style, Alfonso Albacete's expression can be found in a state of absolute orphanage: there is no interior in which it can be protected, and even in the most extreme enclosures, forces intervene which communicate with other happenings. Albacete turns to the theme of Jacob's Ladder with the angels ascending and descending in his dream. In modernity, this theme inevitably connects with Kafka's *The Hunter Gracchus* or, more correctly, with Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*. However, in this case, rather than an ascending or descending figure, the staircase itself produces the illusion of detention, and at the same time, presents an impossible journey. In the Ginkgo Gallery, Alfonso Albacete recreated the "estudio" (studio) by painting it on the wall and including visual tricks in the form of angles or stairs projected onto the ceiling. Light from the windows is collected like tinned randomness. Here, time is the underlying motif of this strategy of

illusionism: a detained drop above the waves drawn on the glass, the hints of light converted into enigmatic signs.

The painter creates a space which conveys an air of anticipation, or which at least acts as a testimony of his careful attention to the signs of light in this darkness, which might just enshroud truth. Albacete alludes to the dark journey, and the struggle with the angel within the painting portrays indignation at the nature of the unknown. There are neither conclusions nor guiding words which offer something which can be likened to "artistic truth". His *Conferencias de arte* (1997), inspired by the theoretical activities of the Cruce alternative space, present a claustrophobic and grey space with black subjects and silent contours, though occasional white points serve as an allusion to clarity. Some of the most intense moments of Alfonso Albacete's painting career can be found in his still life, or even better, in his flower vases. The painting *Arcángel verde* (1998) shows a distinct chromatic luxury and incredible plastic density. The orange blossom and the fruit are painted with an inexplicable carnality, and the surface becomes a struggle of gestures, stains and liquids which flow and leave trails. Once more, this painter demonstrates that the essential or basic factor is not loyalty to the original subject, but that the world within his work is another nature altogether. The fascinating series *Doce pinturas básicas* (1999) is a certain *mise-en-abyme* of the act of painting, an insistent and reterritorial exercise. Rather than moving towards transparency, they penetrate the nature of liquids, solids, water and glass, painting and the model. Time settles here and transforms the still life into a landscape that gives rise to deep and philosophical questions. After all, this painter, who on the one hand remains loyal to the Mojacar landscape or to a handful of flowers, but on the other is able to convert the Annunciation into a multicoloured network (the great gift of ornamentality), knows that a bed of roses is also full of thorns. A rare musicality can also be found in silence and calm: melancholy is nothing more than the opposite of boundless lust for life. As Juan Navarro Baldeweg states, the works of Alfonso Albacete undoubtedly contain a "permanent bond with figurativism", even those which seem to derive from abstractism. The desire to recreate his view coupled with luxurious details which function as "precision" is always present in his magnificent pictorial imagination. Concerning the inspiration behind the intriguing series *El mar de china*, the artist refers to an ephemeral vision from an aeroplane: thousands of boats in the dark sea below, a mysterious and complex universe which literally leaves a deep imprint on the memory. Albacete splendidly recalls his fascination of this situation, which is, to use Bachelard's terminology, just as much an imaginary aquatic scene as an aerial fantasy. Instead of inventing a new metaphor for a shipwreck or delirium, this intense painter creates a regalement of colour in which the canvas yields to the magical counterpoints of the floating houses, incredibly, however, without trace of human "figures". In reality, Albacete does not attempt to present allegories to social factors at the moment of dislocation (which was typical during the Age of Panic), nor is he interested in what the mass-media might refer to as "human drama". Rather, he aims to reinvent a mythical territory by letting himself fall and at the same time, flying over the "oriental tides". "Water, the waters", wrote Mariano Navarro "are the dominant motifs in many of Alfonso Albacete's works": sea water, rain water, running water, frozen water, water in a vase [...], including water in the shower, with which, to my mind, he painted one of his best pictures". Water penetrates the images with its purifying and deep symbolism. This portrayal of the China Sea, which is perhaps more dreamt than seen, fascinatingly combines an extract of everyday elements and the poetic nature of the memory. The celebration of colour, the fluidity of depth and the magic of minimal appearance serve both to draw us closer and to distance us from these landscapes which in every sense contrast with the banality of the present. In pre-Socratic post-modernist fashion, Alfonso Albacete reminds us that water is alive, that it

“swarms with the deceased”, but above all, that this type of painting pulsates a life that still has the power to bewitch us.