

Reconstructing everyday life

Around 1717, the French painter Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) painted a group of four oval paintings depicting the Four Seasons. They were probably used as doors for the dining room at the Paris hotel, which was situated on Rue de Richelieu and property of the rich banker Pierre Crozat, a great patron of the artist. Although Watteau's work is often associated with the category of paintings known as *fête galante* and the decorative preoccupations of the Rococo, it is the innovative combination of reality and artifice that makes Watteau's work so significant. Only one of the four original works has been preserved, the painting entitled *Ceres or Allegory of Summer* (oil on canvas, 141.5 x 115.7 cms), which is on display at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. *Spring* was destroyed by a fire in 1966, *Autumn* disappeared over two centuries ago, and the whereabouts of *Winter* has been unknown for more than a century.

However, we do know the details of the four original works by Watteau from the engravings that were made around 1740. Two of the engravings, specifically those portraying *Ceres or Allegory of Summer* (engraved by Marie-Jeanne Renard du Bos) and *Autumn* (the work of Etienne Fessard) were made to illustrate the first volume of the book by Émile Dacier and Albert Vuaflart entitled *Jean de Jullienne et les graveurs de Watteau en XVIIIe siècle*. These are the two original engravings that have been used by Carmen Calvo for two of the works now on exhibition for the first time. In one of the engravings, Summer is portrayed by Ceres, the Roman goddess of agriculture and grain, holding a sickle and sitting on the clouds amongst sheaves of wheat. The figures around the goddess are two fair-haired twins carrying sheaves, a crayfish and a lion, which represent the symbols of the zodiac (Gemini, Cancer and Leo) that correspond to the summer months. On the other hand, Autumn is represented by the Greek god Dionysius (Bacchus in Roman mythology), a lazy and androgynous figure holding a spear, while a faun pours him a goblet of wine. At his feet, two semi-naked women are enjoying the occasion.

Carmen Calvo has taken these two engravings and turned eighteenth-century images into a modern and completely new expression. The complex and comprehensive allegorical vocabulary of both engravings has led Calvo to simplify her intervention to a few eyes in one case or a gold thread unobtrusively introduced in another case. She also illuminates parts of the engraving with colour, giving it the look of a retouched photograph from the end of the 19th or beginning of the 20th century.

She uses the same chromatic resource in the five picture cards that depict drawings of the anatomical study of the digestive system (large intestine, pancreas, kidneys and colon) and the respiratory system (lungs). But this is where the Valencian artist uses different elements to represent these scientific images, objects that enable her to decontextualize the material in order to reveal her own particular universe.

Four engravings from the end of the 19th century depict different scenes of the everyday life of the upper-class -one in which children are playing and the other three of different moments of courtship- are a base for Carmen Calvo to colour and work upon, turning them into modern pieces of art. The biography theme constantly reappears in her work, lying in the selection of the objects she introduces by way of collage: elements related to education, objects associated with children either in the strict sense or in the sense that they are reminiscent of childhood, other elements

related to the passage of time, the animal world, her spiritual disquisitions, and her personal observation of reality. They are recognizable everyday objects that have been abandoned, worked upon, interpreted, adapted and given a new life, turned by the artist into works of art.

All of the work now on display to the public are new creations by the artist. Nevertheless, she has not given up in her determination to construct a personal recognisable universe with the language she uses in addition to her constant fantasies, concerns, dreams and worries. They are nothing more than a continuation of what Carmen Calvo has always expressed (on occasions with clay, on others with glass, rubber, wall hangings and gold leaf), forever faithful to her interpretative discourse on education, family, love, religion, sex. In short, on life.

On the other hand, the group of seven sculptures created by Calvo for this exhibition is quite intriguing. The pieces rest upon gold leaf plinths and are protected by a glass urn or bell jar, just like the marvellous bouquets of flowers from the Isabelline age, made up of sea shells and other marine objects. Inside she uses the artistic process of *assemblage* to achieve three-dimensionality by positioning different non-artistic objects, all of which have something in common: the fact that they have not been designed for an aesthetic purpose, but have been rediscovered by the artist. The origin of this technique can be found in the small works made with butterfly wings by Jean Dubuffet (1901-1985) in August 1953, although both Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) had previously worked with this technique.

Created to transmit a message or emotion, these pieces represent a monkey with its reflection in the mirror of a powder compact; a wax heart from a traditional votive offering with eyes, which rests on a porcelain hand; the innocent figure of Pinocchio with his eyes blindfolded and an open knife at his feet; the wooden head of a dummy upon which an armchair rests, along with two fish-shaped hooks, a toy horse, a small chair and a shoe; a wax head (also from a votive offering) with two tears falling from both eyes, and upon which a candelabra with five candles rests; a display case for necklaces made of velvet with numerous eyes laid out on display; and finally a rusty iron structure with two plastic wheels on top of which sits a golden object with shiny dolphins. Carmen Calvo repeatedly uses metaphors in her work as her narrative is a diary of concerns, joy, hopes, sadness, dreams, losses and encounters.

We began by alluding to Watteau's eighteenth-century depictions of the Four Seasons that used a cultured, allegorical vocabulary, and the language used by Carmen Calvo is nothing more than an adaptation of those expressions to the present day, through her personal vision of the present, her thoughts, her concerns and unease, which are shared by all human beings and which Calvo turns into inspiring and intriguingly evocative works of art. Her work is full of nuances, in a constant search to find herself, the complexity of which lies not so much in finding a correct interpretation of her work, but letting oneself be seduced by her play-on-images to be able to understand them.

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