

## PRISON AND REARGUARD: A READING ON THE SERIES *LA COLONIA* BY MARIANA NAJMANOVICH

I

Painting to preserve the absent body destined to death. Painting to deceive and surpass nature in its perfection. Painting your own hands leaving their marks on the walls of secret shelters. Painting for nobles, kings, bishops, bankers, militaries, politicians, plebeians. Painting for the id, the ego, and the super-ego. Painting so to register the passage of time.

Each the forms of paintings is tied to its predecessor, overlapping layers, exceeding the previous layer, although the oldest will always and inevitably prevail, not giving up its presence willing to be erased or disappear into the background.

Light brushstrokes of smooth glaze, thick and bold stains of light and volume; small, medium, and large paint brushes and canvas; pure or mixed colors.

For Alberti, painting was supposed to narrate heroic actions by the nobles as tragedy according to Aristotle; for Leonardo, painting was a technical and intellectual tool with which reality could be explored; for David it was a way of publicly saying what many times rhetoric was unable to articulate as a Jean Paul Marat but with oil painting; for Géricault or Goya, it was a manner of representing the terrible incidents society has suffered.

There isn't a moment in history in which painting was just about a whim, neither a task done as an errand or out of boredom. Vast and free in Pollock; biting and mystical in Rothko. The same goes for Tintoretto or Masolino. It was always a manner of doing and a manner of being-in-the-world in reference to Heidegger. It is a manner of feeling the body in the space of the studio, of occupying space among artifacts, tools, utensils, supports, scents; that is, a manner of articulating both image and technique. The documentaries *The Quince Tree Sun* by Víctor Erice that shows Antonio López's artistic process, and *Secret Knowledge* by David Hockney, that studies the origins of the camera obscura. It is a manner of being with others, of placing along with others the canvas as extensions of the artist's voice and presence in the social and collective space today we would call that a statement. Painting has always being generous on leaving those traces that allow us to follow the path an artist has made, so to access to a contingency, to the heat of the moment, to that fire that antecedes the company of Rembrandt's *Night Watch*.

Images always have a social function sociology of art's pleasure although most of the time their function is opaque, rotten, and unfinished; a function of distortion, of parody and satire, rarely acting as a mirror (because mirrors show what is unattainable to the glance, as in van Eyck and Tiziano). The search and longing for a direct continuity between reality and representation is just the first impulse that all of us have had at seeing a painting; the subsequent surrender and consummation is a sign that in many occasions, illusion is a real incitement to support and understand reality.

## II

*La Colonia* by Mariana Najmanovich is a series of paintings that translate to the world of the representation some of the faces of the group of Germans from Colonia Dignidad, of these people that were still filled and disturbed by the euphoria and the consequent catastrophe of the Third Reich epic. When the long night after the post-war still colored the European skies, this group of Germans arrived to Chile settling in the illustrative landscapes from the central zone of the country. Illustrative indeed was how the cultivation of the arid lands of this region was left to the mercy of God. The Divine, then, was not the punishing or mystical plan from the Nordic romantic painting (Martin or Friedrich), but the generous result of the pastoral adjusted to the hand and view of the humans, the beautiful English landscape painting (Reynolds or Constable).

Maybe the Eternal wanted the natives from the central zone to learn what persistence and effort meant in the old *wastelands* from the Andean foothills. What the divinity couldn't have guessed, even in all its omnipresence, was the excessive conjunction of power, economy, violence, and secrets they had at Colonia Dignidad. That is, the secret stains that this «State inside a State» left.

With their shiny blue eyes and nice manners, Aryans and Christians, these “Paul Schäffer’s children” knew how to inhabit a new promised land under their own terms, in a sort of second colonization, this time using with state decrees instead of real ones, making of Chile’s innocence the perfect location for future sequels of Michael Haneke’s *The White Ribbon*.

While Najmanovich was shutting herself up in the long process that resulted in the paintings, hollywood clip trailers started to show up. With these, the memory of the few articles, books, or news that have shed some light to the hidden life of the German colony.

When film has faced issues as this one, it usually uses classical dramatic structures: the tale of a hero's journey in their pursuit to expose the truth and restore the lost order. Documentaries and photojournalism are more sensationalist in their forms, but identical in their structure: they all rush to the climax through the inflict of shock.

Painting is slow, arduous, and timeless. It can't and it shouldn't compete with these kinds of representations. The temporary nature in Mariana Najmanovich's case, is absolutely independent from the vertigo from Youtube and the searches on Google, and outside the voracity of the insatiable consumption for cybernauts. In this manner, she suspends the continuity with these times, a present that is too accelerated, media and immaterial (and in which networks can travel faster than people). Her work translates the spectator to the lethargy and the calmness where the only background is the absolute certainty of normality, of the every day life, of the calm with which life can go on in even the most tragic circumstances.

That mystery that is in the resolution, and that is perceptible to the fine layers of pigments with which the faces are suggested in Mariana Najmanovich's paintings, is one of the most sensible ways to put mimesis into the surface, or that «banality of evil» Hannah Arendt was

talking about during Eichmann's trial. There is never astonishment from contemplating the inhuman — what H.P. Lovecraft was looking for —. But there is stretching and twitching on the faces when assuming different faces of their humanity — the silence from the people of Holcomb when they watch Dick & Perry, in Capote's *Cold Blood*. That is, the most extreme point of the identical, not the Other. Therefore, it is not about Bacon's distortions, those points where the body bends or breaks, which seem to interest Najmanovich, but the ways in which the body rests or moves along its daily life, as in Lucian Freud.

### III

Two genres of art history are present in the series of paintings *La Colonia*. The picture of history and of portrait. Both understand subjectivity as the result of the development of great social events by the biographical bodies and vice versa. Thus, rather than *The Spears* from Velasquez or *The Disasters* by Goya, what is present here is the operations painting has performed to represent the power in the portraits of *Conde Duque de Olivares*, *Papa Inocencio X*, or *Fernando VII*.

What vision of history, of the human, and of the biographic does the series of Mariana Najmanovich give us? How can the contemporary viewer feel and live the heartaches that emerge from her paintings?

To enter into the images of *La Colonia* is to exit the present time, its urgencies and requirements. Such operation, that nowadays is practically an outdated action, supposes the acknowledgment that the past appears from a patina and a register of images that confuse and impose an irreconcilable distance with the apathy of today's pixels.

This goes for aspects that are outside the technique. The pictorial resource is, above all, a formal resource that, even considering that some of the compositions show photographic signs, they remind the historical paintings accounts. As such, Mariana Najmanovich has wanted to put the spectator in a problem: the viewer will have to review his images library to set himself as an observer of the galleries at the Louvre, and not as a used passer-by in a cosmopolitan metropolis. From this perspective, history appears as a strange and distant metaphor not only of what happened, but of the manner in how the world was seen in past times.

The value of the narrative, the story, the anecdote, and of literature, is overwhelmed by a strange feeling of unease, product of two complementary effects: the ambiguity and the everyday. Both surpass the dramatic elements and the heroic disposition of some of the most important of the historical scenes. Or rather, they put their eyes in areas where the naturalness of life runs by itself smoothly. In this, history is a story that the viewer must rebuild by fusing the nuances of the paintings: the presence of groups of children and women, hospitable or celebrating scenes.

While the historical scenes involve a hierarchy that orders primary and secondary characters, portrait is a prison genre. The portrayed characters feign a freedom and an independence, while they are actually subject to the solitude of being confronted to the limits that imprison and isolate them from reality. As such, portraits come to us in even a greater violence. The

subtly present in the compositions that picture groups is interrupted by the direct confrontation you face at contemplating the nurses portrays or the fantastic *Doctor H.*

The nurses, a procession of followers or companions of the main picture, play a crucial role. They antecede or even welcome the terror of the close-up, of the sinister look. At looking at them, attention is slightly diverted to those not in the front, but towards those almost unnoticed characters emerging before your eyes. They are looking at you with certainty and hardness. The definition of *staring* has never been more accurate.

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