



Foto: Jesús Ciscar

Carmen Calvo: from darkness to light

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Carmen Calvo's work stands out in the panorama of Spanish art today for the originality and coherence it has shown since she started in the seventies. In those years, instead of the conceptual art that prevailed in Catalonia and the new figuration in vogue in Madrid, Valencia tended to re-examine artistic disciplines in its art practice. Carmen Calvo recuperated the tradition of pottery, and turned it around 180° by using clay as though it were paint.

Later Carmen Calvo explored like no one else in our country the metaphorical possibilities of the object. Fascinated by the showcases in archaeological museums, she arranged her plaster moulds, found in the market or in shapes she herself invented, like new chambers of marvels. Or she laid out plaits, eyes, knives, dolls, buckets and corsets on blackboards or golden surfaces. Tied to the support with wires or hanging from a thread fixed by little nails, those works were rather like poetic votive offerings and individual symbols waiting to become universal.

At times, like in surrealism, the object condensed the wonders concealed in everyday life, revealed the

poetry in the banal and above all "associated what could not be associated". She also expressed with a single object a whole life or a character or a deed: a chamber pot with a trickle of blood, a suitcase and a watch, a crop of grey hair hanging from a dull old mirror. These synecdoches were reminiscent of cubism, which used to choose a part instead of the whole: the letters JOU for "journal", the waxed paper of a wickerwork chair instead of the whole chair.

Later Carmen Calvo began to manipulate old photographs, a sort of work very well represented by the images that appear in this issue of *Transfer*. They are photographs of the forties, fifties and sixties, that is, from the postwar years in Spain, characterised by the lack of political freedoms and, of course, individual freedoms. Morals were narrow-minded; a woman was expected to form a family; a man was expected to be a "real man", to be the breadwinner and give the Fatherland many children. The State and the Church controlled our lives. Citizens were anonymous, obedient beings, without any ideas of their own: that is why Carmen Calvo covers their faces in these found photographs (which she sometimes rummaged for in street

markets or *marchés aux puces*). But above all women were the victims of this strict code that involved denying one's own personality and sensual pleasure.

Thus we see how one of them has turned her face into a tambour frame for embroidery, one of the occupations of the traditional housewife, or the poor girls who became old maids, a social stigma at the time. A couple of lovers hide their faces behind masks or have only one eye between them: with wives condemned to follow their husbands everywhere and confined to their household chores, their personalities were often annihilated and it was often said that married couples who had spent many years living together ended up looking like each other (even to the point of sharing a single eye between them). Let us take a look at the dentures too; placed upside down they are not only surrealistic but express disgust and old age: an echo of Bataille's "shapelessness" and a sort of presaged vanitas.

Carmen Calvo is scathing towards the rites imposed by the official religion; the little girl taking her First Communion has no face, but a mass of pins or a shell (her sex); great metaphors for the sexuality that was attempting to emerge and for which she was punished. The nuns, for their part, have long beards: their lack of sexual life has made them masculine

and their metamorphosis comes straight from Buñuel, surrealism and popular art.

Carmen Calvo is one of the Spanish plastic artists, or should we say intellectuals, who best describe the effects of Francoist repression: one was Tàpies, in a subtle way, with his blank walls and his walls riddled with bullet holes; others could be Genovés or the early Canogar, but no one gives us a critical vision from a woman's point of view as she does. A gaze full of black humour and with a precise selection of images that pierces our spirit as efficiently as a sharp dagger.

But Carmen does not stop there; she explains to us the impossibility of love, the stories hidden behind the official history (there are drawings where we can surmise paedophilia or gender violence), the emptiness concealed behind uniforms, behind military decorations and handsome young men. Strong young soldiers have beetles on their faces and, like in a story by Kafka, the beetles end up covering their smiling faces completely: the heroes are not so heroic after all... A rope traverses the image of an uncouth man, a metaphor for his slavery, for his submission to a tough job, or does it forebode a whip that he will use on his wife in a scene of jealousy or an attack of anger? In any case, nothing is what it seems to be and thus was this double-faced world, which is beginning to see transparency only little by little ||