

## RESPITE

Fernando Prats sets out on an intense journey towards the void, travelling through the conditions of ritualisation provided by models of suffering and asceticism taken from Christianity. Yet his entire oeuvre, as well as the recent journeys he has embarked upon in his paintings and Actions, both towards the interior of the human body and towards the interior of the Earth, assume and benefit from the sense of interiorising and respite stemming from this spiritual immersion, without establishing any direct tie to the sacred. His connection with absolute reality does not seek divine transmutation as it appears in Christianity or even in Zen Buddhism; his experiences delve into the dark side of all sublimations, and witness the tortuous zone of all revelations.

The concept of transubstantiation of the body of the artist – and of the body of painting – provides an opportunity for a new mystical moral conscience in post-war Europe, from which we should rescue Yves Klein and his monochromatic works of incomparable intensity, who acted as an alchemist and master of ceremonies before his early death in 1962. Klein had taken into consideration the relationship between the physical body and real substances (pure pigments, the architecture of air, the possibilities of fire and rain) in search of the pure union of Zen matter through the universal strength of their essences. He did so however, driven by a Western attitude of a crusader, with the persistent objective of a new spiritual man.

The Chilean artist seems to connect to this mystical journey of total surrender of corporeality to the Absolute Void. Yet for Fernando Prats to abandon the body means to see the light and feel rent, to experience the light as a painful spark only to reap the fruits of the experience and freeze them. It implies drawing close to the absolute without believing it will make us better or worse, without hoping to attain an effective elevation of the spirit, merely an alteration of the matter we consist of. He thus approaches the great beauty of this experience of emptiness, aware that it is contaminated with distress, brushing the sublime as a horizon of perplexity rather than as a search for an extra-reality, captivated by the preceding fears, shadows and anxieties. In this situation the body cannot dissolve into divinity; on the contrary, it is swept along as an indispensable commodity, alternately charged with and relieved of violent energies. It would then be much closer to the idea that seems to underlie the oeuvre of Francis Bacon, according to which all absence from ourselves implies a distortion. In common with Bacon is the brutality that embraces images of slaughterhouse bodies, disarmed by the explosion of strength of their inner vectors. Deep down in his oeuvre Fernando Prats draws us close to a similar monstrosity of stifling of the soul.

How this young artist brings all these considerations – which are nonetheless open to new displacements – to the present is easier to see bearing in mind the noteworthy fact that his painting is not a sum of marks deposited on it (as in the case of Yves Klein), nor does it stem from the fury of the paintbrush as an annihilating weapon (as in that of Francis Bacon). Prats' painting also works with "traces", yet it operates by elimination, not by addition. Surfaces are subjected first of all to a process of general smoking, followed by a game of subtractions, tears and erasures of the first impregnation of smoke, to prevent

the pictorial surface being receptive to incorporated images.

On the contrary, the pictorial plane itself is treated as a bodily recipient, as a bereaved skin; traces are understood as internal signals instead of external images.

In order to absorb the white joy, light appears on the other hand from the interior of the darkness itself. This explains why its splendour is more opaque than mesmerising, more irritated than softened, more dirtied than extolled. The multiple nuances of black, white or grey emerge from the treatment given to the residual dust produced by the fire, from the roaming of its particles thrown into the air. Colour and image struggle within thermal tensions that do not stem directly from the purifying flame but from the drift of their ethereal dirtiness in connection with other chemical reactions. On top of the layers of smoke obtained, ranging from dazzling white to total black, Fernando Prats arrests dilapidated marks of trails (the sweat of bodies), of spilling (oil), or of corrosion (salt). The surfaces saturated with colour thereby release their own energy, forced by the material contacts based on erosion, and open up to their own inner light in a disturbing transmutation. It is the material event itself, devoid of all other mediation, that which produces this iconography of a frayed, dilapidated pictorial body.

His previous works with consecrated bread had the same meaning. The artist arranged this white element in transparent urns, packed and stratified to the point of saturation. This is the bread through which, in sacred Christology, we attain divine transubstantiation, yet Fernando Prats employed it as an organic element acting like the telluric strata of the Earth, like nature about to overflow. He deprived the sacred bread of its universal materiality, refurbishing it with the dangerousness and distortion of an unassuming materiality subject to its own unleashed force.

He has similarly used bread in his Actions, thus confronting us with other forms of overflowing of the divine symbol. In his experiences, divine flesh in contact with human flesh produces an extreme effect, disorientation, a deadlock of the body until the expulsion of harmful

fluids. The reaction of these two materialities (divine and human) provokes a stomachic and respiration collapse. The rôles are thus reversed; human nature is contaminated, transmuted in vomit and asphyxia, as bodily functions come to a stop. Such expulsions could refer metaphorically to the impossibility to withstand pure spirituality.

In the recent Action that has led him *Del Cardener a la Antártida* (From Cardener to the Antarctic) he has covered an interesting path from the interior of the body (symbolised by the unique sculptural image, half medulla, half heart muscle) to the interior of the glacial ice. After an initiation ritual designed basically to capture the light of the river in amphoras and then taking these to his studio, the artist submitted himself to an extreme experience with them during four days in the same cave in Manresa where St Ignatius Loyola received divine illumination. During this period of asceticism he incrustated these formless muscles that define our more reduced corporeality into the fissures in the cave, lining its interior with rows of fine yellow sealing tape stuck together to form a double inner skin of the cave, like a poor womb of blinding yellow light. Later on, driven by his Latin American condition, Fernando Prats decided to extend the Beuysian conception of the cross that united North and South, East and West even further south (which led him to perform the well-known *Acción Manresa* at the Schmela gallery in Düsseldorf on the 15th of December 1996). And he moved to the Antarctic, where after walking for hours over the Collins glacier, dragging that enormous layer of tape reduced to a succinct item of yellow luggage held by black straps, he stopped to open a hollow in the snow in which to deposit the item for ever after. So the cave experience was transferred to the glacier, thus attempting to freeze the experience of the sacred in the South Pole. The double light, symbolically captured in the river and in the cave, was introduced into the preserving ice.

No doubt it all embraced the experience of abandoning oneself to the void as a form of paralysis rather than as one of warm mysticism. The contact with Emptiness that Fernando Prats presents in such works generates remains, falls, tears, fulminations and collapses. His experience of the sublime is at once cool and searing.

Teresa Blanch