

## Josefina Guilisasti: life as a form of care and looking

*it is all  
according to the imagination!  
Only the imagination  
is real! They have imagined  
therefore it is*

William Carlos Williams, *The Host*

*I returned there  
where I have never been.  
Nothing has changed from how it was not-  
On the table (on the checkered  
tablecloth) half-full  
I found the glass  
Which was never filled. All  
has remained just as  
I never left it.*

Giorgio Caproni, *Ritorno*

### *Positioning*

Let me start somewhere before what is slowly becoming a dazzling body of work. I mean somewhere I don't have to justify since the world is a mysterious affair. So I'll begin with a poem of William Carlos Williams in which he is speaking neither about poetry nor about art. Nevertheless, when detached from their context, these words have become a manifesto. What he is really talking about is religious belief – which to him, a non-believer, is imagination – and as always the general observation proceeds from his encounter with people, places, and things: from a specific occasion that he does not so much narrate as dynamically re-enact in words that render both an inner and outer experience. Well, Guilisasti comes in at a tangent to this simple dictum. She deals with visual occasions that, much in the same way, she does not relate but dramatically reenacts, usually through the repetition of images that consistently demand a perceptual shift: to be seen from a different angle, to be seen in different combinations, to be seen as repetitions of a motif, to be seen as subtle orchestrations of a family of images. I have read a number of essays on Guilisasti's work, some of which are highly perceptive ( I am thinking in particular of Maria Berrios's essay *White on White one hundred and eight times* that sets off from a quote of Victor Stoichita) and the general consensus is to look at it from perspectives that stress the relationships between work and spectator, questions of representation, the intricacies of reality and illusion etc. These readings come, I suspect, through conversations of a true and felt complicity

between critic and artist. In short, they correspond to an intention and provide a useful, and possibly essential, access to Guilisasti's world.

In no way do I wish to question these readings but I would like to approach her work from a very different angle. I recognize, of course, that Josefina works within an overall conceptual plan – the number of works in a series, a general game-plan, optical perspectives, strategies of appropriation, tensions between real objects and represented objects, - but I want to centre on the emotional relationship, to my mind intense, between the artist and the chosen objects: the object as an entrance to the muted intimacies of Guilisasti's universe. And let me say from the outset that it remains an open question if the beauty of these images would be enough to satisfy the sophistications of the contemporary eye without the tightly and convincingly argued support of the conceptual, perceptual strategies that oblige us to engage eye, emotion, and mind with the work. Yet, perhaps, it is also true that the conceptual questions she is asking would remain academic or of relative interest without the striking beauty of the image. And it is precisely here that I'll propose one of the two references that I shall be making to Stoichita's writings. I am thinking of his insistence in *La invencion del cuadro* not only on the significance of the theme but also on the personality of the artist who reflects on the world in the act of painting and especially on her own particular world. In short, I'm suggesting that Guilisasti paints as a mode of reflecting on these two worlds, one of which fits somehow within the other to become an intriguing an incomplete whole.

Guilisasti usually works in series – an option that lends itself to conceptual readings – but at the same time these collective frames present a series of stories, of images, of sequences held together in a temporal and visual flow that suggestively registers the impossibility of reducing all to a common understanding or to a preconceived idea. I have a feeling that she intuits that the overall conceptual scheme comes into its own defeat or interrogation precisely at the point where the work as a whole comes into its own life, driven by an inner necessity that is more the result of personal history than of a successfully elaborated concept. She works with traces of stories, with memories, and with visual documentation capable of transforming personal or social history into inscriptions.

The poetical is our best way of coming to terms with the universe, of bringing us closer to the truth of our being in the world. And it is, I believe, in this sense - and this is what Guilisasti seems to understand in her work - that art is not merely an ornament on the structures of the everyday but an ethical insistence that invites us to think again. She seems to tell us that there are many orders in the world and that she does not respect or recognize their reason. She insists that reality is an individual construct and holds to, against all the senseless drifting of so much of the contemporary, the small lyric valuables: a jar, a fragment of a carpet, a cooking utensil, a piece of furniture. Truth – another strange term in our contemporary slide towards spectacular meaningless – is not about mimesis, not about the realism and transparency of representation, but it is rather the quotidian site of revelation or disclosure. It is about the way in which a trite piece of flowered porcelain or a casserole can become charged with a poetic

immediacy that does not talk so much about what it is as about what it is a vehicle for.

In her work she provides us with the accumulated evidence that it is so; the objects, whatever their material or medium, come charged with conversations. In other words, the academic polish of her work – its strange perfection – should not close our eyes to the intense poetic surge that is taking place within it beyond whatever it appears to represent.

### *I. A still life is a still life is a still life*

From the artist's point of view, the still life has always served as a contemplative form, useful for working out ideas, color schemes, or a "stance to reality". Like the sonnet, it is a notebook in relation to larger works. For some painters it is a kind of recreation, a *jeu d'esprit*: Manet painting a bunch of asparagus; Picasso doodling on a tablecloth. Well maybe, but this does not mean in any way that it is inconsequential or trivial. Bartok and Beethoven worked out in their string quartets what could be done with harmonies rather than in their symphonies. For Chardin, Braque, and Morandi it was their major form of expression, integral to their language. Guilisasti's jar materializes as a meeting between Morandi and Braque. It is a question of optics, of seeing a thing from all angles. It poses the primordial question of representation, of how we choose to see things and, therefore, of how we construct our world. These nine works, life size in scale, show the jar from different viewpoints, as well we might experience it coming into a room through different doors or sitting down and seeing it from another angle in a different chair. It has an almost Morandiesque division of planes but slightly more curved as corresponds to the way we see. The nine paintings are set on a *real* table, as the jar would be in a room. The table is repeated nine times. Things are more or less as we might have expected them to be but the jar has been painted, presented, and represented all at once on a flat two-dimensional surface. It is a strange paradox that we see more in a glance than can be represented in a painting but painting can also show us what is not seen in that same glance.

In a catalogue she relates it to *Fiori*, a work by Morandi from 1953. Indeed, there is the same nakedness of presentation, the same mute hope and confidence in the clarity of the subject. The still life is an art that is symbiotic with civilization and its subjects are the bread and wine of a basic humanity: fish, fruit, a jar of flowers, or the pitcher of water. The still life provides us with images of well-being; it creates well-being, a sense of comfort and of being at home. Home, we know, is not a location but a narration. In Morandi's world, the still life also creates relations. The objects are not usually alone; they enter into relationships with others and thus give rise to emotive meetings. The separation of one of the objects from the group stresses our essential loneliness. Josefina's jug, however, stands alone and declares its independence from all existential *angoisse*, perhaps because it wants to say something simple and specific. It is homely, overlooked, menial, but necessary; its absence from its table would be a cause of perturbation. It seems to beg a bowl and is made strange because its representstion, the painted canvas, plays at or with reality by being set on a literal table.

A still life can guide the table as a civilizing occasion: flowers in a vase, fruit in a bowl. Josefina's jug, however, is functional, easily overlooked, and modest. It is there so that we can wash our hands or pour a glass of water. Looking at this simple sequence, the muted colours, the play of late afternoon light, all is calm, low key, no stridencies. It is a world that asserts its own orders and will not be upset. In other words, it talks, as does not so much of Josefina's works of values that are beyond the art of painting, beyond *The invention of the painting*, and that have to do with our need for a consoling beauty: a certain sense of awe before the simple wonders and mysteries of our world. These images can be read as a musical structure, a series of deep chords and their reverberations.

Josefina is drawn to modest objects. The tables return in the inventory of her father's possessions, in the guise of objects that were painted white and then put in the attic, or placed in the kitchen, or in the maid's room. She turns to these resonant things to find her own pretexts for painting: to set herself a pictoric problem that haunts the rules and problematics of painting.

### *Digression I. Ponge and a bar of soap*

We all recall what Francis Ponge made of a bar of soap, a lyrical meditation that extends in my Cape Goliard edition for ninety-six pages! Ponge opens a world as detailed in its naming and numbering as that of Guilisasti, a similar act of transformation of what poet and artist take hold of, look at, and emotionally and intellectually digest. It results in a clinically detailed, yet profoundly lyrical realism. In Josefina's work it is probable that this quality comes through more specifically in the paintings, - conveyed by the energies and touch variations of a brushstroke - but it is also present in the one hundred and eight photos. We feel it as the pure white sheet is being pulled over us. Ponge's work - and I am suggesting that the same sensation can be felt in Giulisasti - is not simply a putting into practice of an idea but the troubled or untroubled grounding of emotions in a valued reality. Ponge started out on *Le Savon* in 1943 during the German Occupation, at a time when soap was a valuable commodity, and continued working on it at intervals until 1965. In these prose poems the piece of soap is studied and restudied; the study itself is developed and a seemingly infinite set of variations is finally played out. For Ponge it is a matter of a bar of soap and its marvellous powers of dissolution and rebirth; in the case of Josefina, it is an inventory of her father's possessions after his death or a collection of porcelain. In both instances, a structuring music that forms and reforms sensations.

### *II. El Duelo (2009): Porcelain and flowers*

Fragments, shards, memories, traces, found items, social documentation, and even a hint of that horrendous contemporary cliché of the archive: they all constitute a functional vocabulary for these works that are stunning on account of their painterly qualities and intriguing on account of their conceptual strategies. I'm not sure what her priorities are but I suspect she first feels the seduction of the subject matter and, after that, the question of representation and its relation to reality: the question of how things are seen. The elaboration of a subtle conceptual frame adds another level of interpretation to the work, eliminating the risk of it being reduced merely to the genre of still-life (Could this

explain why Guilisasti opts mostly for single objects that deny the normal composition practices of the genre?). If we think back to where our mothers and grandmothers kept the porcelain, many of us might well recall sometimes looking up and sometimes down, rarely eye to eye with these decorative pieces as if their social function was never to occupy centre stage - flat on is a gaze that belongs more to photography than to life. These objects are full of stories and, although she does not narrate them, we sense how much they weigh upon her. They have been used and abused; some of them they have accompanied people across their lives as objects of taste and social status, others have simply fulfilled a momentary function, been picked up in a store and used as everyday objects, and then thrown away as expendable. Josefina has gone in search of them and lord knows where she found some of these fragments - on a rubbish dump, in the garden, through friends! She became a passionate collector, always on the look out for these decorative flower arrangements, subjugated for most of their lives to the happiness of a home: roses, pansies, climbing plants, you name it, scrambling all over bone china, porcelain, and pottery; vases, pitchers, cups, saucers, tureens, jugs, mugs, soup bowls, plates, teapots, even a spoon, all besieged by flowers; all belonging, once or still, to someone. This is a lexicon of bourgeois living, a tongue in cheek telling of their taste or even an act of complicity with it. These objects that were kept in cupboards, placed on shelves, or set out on tables are now isolated, framed in a kind of Mondrian grid, so that we can register the spectator's gaze and see also who we are through the perversely telling mirror of taste.

Looking at this array Ungaretti's beautiful lines seem appropriate:

*Between one flower picked and the other given*

*The inexpressible nothing*

Some flowers bow their head in longing but most remain open; they curl fragrant arabesques, decorous, and impeccably charming. The larger complete pieces are stacked up on the top row; the fragments on the bottom. It reminds us with its six modules of the kind of display found in 17<sup>th</sup> century cabinets, such as Willem Van Haecht's *The Van der Geest Cabinet* (1628).

What I am saying sound perhaps an excessively rational explanation of intent, central perhaps to Josefina's own concerns, nevertheless what I suspect is that none of us can resist the qualities of the painting. I am trying to see it as a still life, knowing all the time that it says more and resists being appropriated as a representative of a genre. The pulchral quality of the work denies such a reading, whilst the overriding geometry that houses the objects emphasizes a conceptual clarity. Yet, taken as a whole, the *frisson* of the still life returns: the sheer overwhelming presence of a family of objects related only by material and design: a conversation, if you like, between vaguely related strangers.

Confronting this display we are asked to experience individual pieces, groups, and a whole, and amidst the impressions we sense the presence of human life. Each object is treated with respect and each is prey to a narrative potential. Who owned that? What was he/she like? Who dropped it? Why was it thrown away? They are presented in small groups, but only on a couple of occasions do we find

two objects sharing the same space. We are made aware of the simple beauty of the ordinary, of passing time, and of the history of *les arts decoratifs* and how they collapsed into commercialised popular taste. We also feel the truth of the fragment. Each piece is a discrete homage that gathers in intimate connotations. The mind travels across them, wandering at its will.

They can be understood as a sequence of energies that might well run out if the story was ever fully told but it can't. Seen as details or as a complete but endlessly nuanced and fragmentary whole, it stands as a partial telling: a siteing or sighting of the truth. It is a continuous song constantly bringing in the sliding unanchored emotions we all know.

The unequivocal splendour of this display helps us appreciate why many critics are now turning back to the idea of beauty and affirming once again the Kantian idea of a *sensus communis*, not a common sense but a common sensibility. And both Kant and Gertrude Stein chose the rose. Kant uses the example of a rose that we all recognize as asserting a beautiful presence, capable of travelling across cultures, although not always with the same cultural meanings attached to it. Guilisasti's work has this quality, engrained within itself, not only as a result of a painterly dexterity but also as integral to her vision of things: what Charles Olson called a stance to reality: a position from which to read the world. Josefina works in extended series because she intuits that what has to be said needs a fuller telling and that by nature it resists what is being told and comes impregnated with the knowledge that it can never be fully told, and that it is precisely this sensation of what cannot be said that needs to be extended.

These images of chips of porcelain – later to become fragments of oriental rugs - are about the power of transformation. We are jackdaws drawn by the glitter of a shard. We hear the song, just as on a spring day when we hear the sounds of Chopin through an open window, we recognize that they gather both what is in the air and momentarily form what goes into it, giving both an audible shape.

I can't help thinking of Frances Yates much quoted phrase in *The Art of Memory* where she sets out for us a Memory Theater, a box with tiers that we look out at from center stage and her remark that "the monads, when they are human souls having memory, have as their chief function the representation of reflections of the universe of which they are living mirrors."<sup>1</sup> And one wonders if Guilisasti has not set out her own memory box in this work, so haunted by presence and absence.

#### *Digression II: Morandi, bottles, bowls, paint, and words.*

Morandi's still lifes have a distinctive almost subterranean beauty; they tend to germinate in the lower band, often sprouting through to the upper band. They have the beauty of roots and seeds. When we look at them they grant permissions for our thoughts to wander. They talk of things lost, and then

---

<sup>1</sup> Yates F., *The Art of Memory*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1966, p. 388.

recovered, only to be lost again. They murmur, whisper, touch, and exchange sensations and they have been fashioned by self-restraint. They are the exquisite articulations of the flowers of associational thinking, of letting the mind roam freely from a focus of suggestion. They evoke desire, fear, loneliness, vulnerability, warmth, longing, and uncertainty, not so much through what they say as through what they don't say. These plain components bottles, jars, boxes, bowls stand assured and audacious, doggedly honest, endlessly qualified, and carefully nuanced. They have to do with the kitchen, with a table, with a windowsill, with the intimate spaces within which so much of our lives take place. They are meditations on time, art, isolation, and those ordinary mysteries so active within us. Morandi looked at Cezanne, Chardin, Caravaggio, Corot, and so does Guilisasti. Morandi checked out with the futurists and produced some still lifes in the style of de Chirico's *Pittura Metafisica*. I doubt, however, if Guilisasti is very interested in metaphysics, she is more interested in the strange illusions of reality and what to do about representing them and it.

That the kinship of still life with still life down through history is greater than that of landscape with landscape, or portrait with portrait, lies at the centre of its mystery. A roman mosaic of a basket of apples and pears is wonderful, like baskets of apples and pears of all ages. There is the same nakedness of presentation, the same mute hope of and confidence in the clarity of the subject, a complicity that we may never get to the bottom of it.

When Kenneth White, the poet, tells us that no alliance can be made between self and things we find ourselves encountering once again these same enigmas, these same mysteries, without what he calls "the poison pit of conscience". The imagination in our time has tended to be reductive, even simple, even primitivist, out of a reaction against the complexities and pluralism of a culture which it cannot assimilate

The still life is like a *carmen perpetuum*, a continuous song where each piece is like an extended metaphor (for want of a better term, something that could come closer to their sense of self) and through these groupings, through the power of a music that overtakes the body, enter all kinds of things: thoughts and feelings, faces and places. It is as if only the heat of ones own discarded elements can produce the proper fire.

### III. *La Vigilia (2001): the pleasures of cooking*

Morandi had a repertory of objects salvaged from his kitchen or bought second hand: bottles and pots with sticking out handles, painted in nougat beiges, chocolate browns, and the colours of bread and earth. Guilisasti's objects tend to be more neutral. *La Vigilia (2001)* consists of twelve everyday aluminium cooking utensils seen as they were perceived from the spectator's viewpoint. The painterly task is to render a precise likeness of a moment of focus. The selection process of these pots, pans and kettles was, in all probability, similar to that she would use in *El Duelo*: the intriguing and seductive consequences of an idea. They don't seem to come so much from the kitchens of friends or family as from

the ironmonger, but I'm sure there are some strange cats with seven lives and several stories amidst the shining barrage!

As in *La Jarra* and in Wallace Stevens's poem *Seventeen ways of Looking at a Blackbird*, she opts for a solitary presentation, each speaks for itself, there is no leaning upon each other, no listening to each other. Why, one wonders? Maybe because she does not like forced relationships or aleatory juxtapositions. Maybe because she wants no emotional whisperings or murmurs or maybe because she has an overriding idea and wants no interferences. Nevertheless, as they say, one thing is what you want and another is what you get! And what you get is literally an orchestrated frontal display. Some of the objects seem period pieces from the forties or the fifties: each closed in on itself but engaged in acts of teasing complicity with the eye, forming a family although somewhat indifferent to the fact. Josefina sets herself an exercise: six different perspectives of these twelve everyday objects whose past is clearly indebted to *Gris Maquina* (2000) - a work in which each object was positioned on a metal structure with a rotating handle that allowed it to spin round and to be seen from every possible visual path. In this instance the perspective of the object corresponds to the height of the shelf on which it sits - a strategy that becomes even more complex in *El Duelo*.

In short, she represents what she saw and how she saw what she saw from different perspectives; she asks the viewer to do the same or, more precisely, to think of doing the same. Her question comes through the simulacrum of a painted image. However, our relation to the work is different, we see it initially through a single glance, and then in groups, or one by one, so that what we see is more than what she saw and also, of course, not what she saw in reality but what she also came to see through the painting experience: twelve objects seen together from the six perspectives. It is a musical change in rhythms and this subtle brushing impacts our critical understanding. We don't know how to start, or even from where we start; yet we do know, as spectators, that we are dealing with how things are seen and not simply seeing them!

It is an extraordinary work. Guilisasti, like Morandi, exploits the bands of separation that define earth and air, ground and background and, like Walker Evans, centres what she presents; no intrusions, no humans, just the thing and you. There is a slight metallic chill in the air; so different from Morandi whose work seems to bathe in the warmth of summer heat on a stone wall. Josefina paints tactile values, pottery, ceramic, porcelain, aluminium, and textile. The painterly quality of the work sucks us in. We feel the tensions of the familiar and the unfamiliar; we feel time and the way things were used; we feel human presence, rituals and routines; and we feel the social organization of a home. The objects tease our memories, trouble the retina, and play on the jagged edges of our nerves. They satisfy because they are fundamental. We don't escape the kitchen: dense living space of our homes!

Morandi's still lifes can be psychologically fraught, apprehensive, nervous, chattering with each other; whereas this battery of Josefina makes visual links, cool, sophisticated, laid-back, Berg like rhythms, insisting on a commanding confidence, as if saying just one too many times "this is what I am", or as if saying "who I am depends on where you are looking from". These are large metaphors!

Both artists engage in forms of thinking that free thought, animating us to err and creating a sense of how life should be.

In a still life down through history, we find an ongoing meditation on where matter ends and spirit begins, and on the nature of their interdependence. These aluminium utensils call attention to their design. They are not chic contemporary but they have been subtly imagined. I guess the high handles of the kettles are meant to keep the hands away from the heat. They sing function and use.

#### IV. *Carpets and fragments*

These are extraordinary- I repeat that much abused adjective – works: luscious and lived. Josefina, as with the flowers with their circles and arabesques, felt the power of their presence: the pull and autonomy of the colour, the force of abstract design, and paragon of abstract colour. Possibly she lived with them or discovered them in Art History texts, in both instances she may well have felt the falling light and the play of sunlight on an oriental rug. These are the small experiences – intense and glistening - that fashion and cultivate sensibility, gathering in an intricate play of emotion: a cobweb caught in the last days of summer hanging from a beam in the barn, the primrose peeking through the grass in cold days of early spring, or the sheen and smell of bee wax polish on an oak floor. We can all make our own list of such memories and sensations but we don't always recognize is their ramifications, what they leave behind as sediment in our lives. It is a matter of care, care as a definition of love, and that is a quality we are losing; care for detail, care for quality, care for intricate relationships. These variants are all recuperated and reaffirmed in her work, taking it towards Pater's sense of art as aspiring towards the condition of music. Guilisasti's series are on occasion surging and symphonic but usually they opt for the intense, drawn out *sotto voce* tone of a Schubert string quartet. And I should add, as always, a twist, she is not painting rugs as a simulated reality; she is painting rugs as painting. She makes this clear by leaving sections of unprimed canvas, bare linen, another wondrous material.

This going out into the world - through landscape, still life, ornamental rugs, and an inventory - are for Giulisasti ways of experiencing self, awakened and tuned to all possible connections; self intensely experienced in the individual's unique identity as part of the universe at large. And, indeed, we all know that as the self responds to a mass of details it becomes conscious of - as fully and deeply as possible - its own unique network of associations: a self, as Robert Duncan puts it, derived from the associations possible "within the ground of man's imagination of what he is ... creating a world within the boundless ensemble of created and creating forms."<sup>2</sup> These felt forms serve as vehicles to take her where she wants to go: into a larger evolving world.

---

<sup>2</sup> Duncan, R., *The Truth and Life of Myth*, Sumac, Michigan, 1968, p. 8.

### *Digression III. Holbein and the Holbein variants*

Josefina tells me Holbein was one of the impulses behind this series of rugs found as fragments, perhaps even as memory traces, in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London: a treasure trove for all that can be and has been imagined. Holbein, born in Augsburg in 1497, remains inseparable from any account of English painting. He arrived in London at the age of twenty-nine with a recommendation from Erasmus to Sir Thomas More and the hope of finding more profitable employment than was available in Basle, beset by religious dissension. Holbein had a vast range of abilities that included portraiture, religious composition, mural painting, and - and this is what appealed to Josefina - the arts of design. He became the official court painter to Henry VIII and died in London in 1543. His power to bring a living person authentically before us never failed and, where necessary, he does so with all the pomp and circumstance of his regalia. His portrait of the King sets the key for Tudor portraiture through its precise delineation of feature and elaborate treatment of accessories: the detailing of the embroidery, the buttons, the rings, and the fur of the hat.

I don't know if Giulisasti took these things into account in her choice of rugs. In all events, coincidence has it that Holbeins and Lottos were produced in the 16th Century and so named as a type name to facilitate their identification. The Holbeins consisted of a major motif and small, detached octagons filled with star rosettes to produce a balanced and decorative design; the Lottos have an open design of continuously alternating rows of octagonal and cross-shaped forms. Both are invariably woven on a red ground; the Holbein variants were produced not far from Smyrna and then later in many different parts of Turkey. They were manufactured in Izmir for the foreign market in the 18th Century. At this same time commercial looms sprang up in the Turkish hinterland and their production was exported into the Western market through the port of Smyrna. In texture the rugs of these looms are quite thick and heavy; in design, however, they follow the classical models. The typical series of large openwork palmettes were obviously based upon similar designs which appear in the sumptuous Turkish carpets of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, familiarly known as "Turkish Court Manufactory". These are the truly indigenous rugs of the Turks each representing a highly developed individual interpretation of an age-old tradition as established in village and family life. They follow the formal garden design and there are others that continue the 15th century tradition of the dual medallion or repeat octagonal patterns. Both options are often represented in 15th Century European paintings; whilst others follow a variety of traditions creating individual patterns. They end up distinguishing one place from another; the same thing happened with porcelain, with wine glasses, with lace.

### *Digression IV: Eastern carpets in Western paintings*

The presence of Eastern carpets in pictures by Giotto, Simone Martini, Fra Angelico, Van Eyck, Memling, Piero della Francesca, Mantegna, Crivelli, Carpaccio, Bellini, Lotto, Holbein, Pontormo, Tintoretto, Veronese, Rubens, Van Dyck, Zurbarán, Velázquez, Terborch, Vermeer, De Hooch, Reynolds and Copley, and then later Matisse, and now even later Josefina. In short, she is latching onto what can only be seen as a tremendous tradition, just as she has done with the

genre of the still life. Delacroix, surprisingly, did not paint Oriental rugs but he did say that the most beautiful pictures he had ever seen were Persian carpets. Quite a statement at the time! The carpets in paintings reflect two things: firstly their usefulness to paintings – geometry, design, colour – and, secondly, their ubiquity for centuries in European houses, palaces and churches where they decorated floors, steps, tables, and walls. Americans were importing them by the 18th Century. There is a portrait of George Washington posed on an Ushak rug, as there is of Henry VIII.

In the mid 19th century the West started corrupting the industry on the technological side (for the star of progress), by introducing synthetic dyes; absurdly but characteristically, at this same point, the West started applying its scholarly facilities and skills to the recovery and study of the Golden age of the same culture it was working to destroy. The great collection that Josefina saw in South Kensington started in the last quarter of the 19th century with the purchase of seven 19th century carpets, three Persian and four Turkman, but it was not until 1883 that the museum acquired a work made before 1700!

And just one more small scrap of anecdotal history - Wilhelm von Bode and Lessing started to collect for the museum in Berlin, acting with a very low profile and immense discretion so that they could buy cheaply and nobody would know what the museum was up to. They weren't alone since by the end of the century many other museums were also collecting. The first colour-picture book of carpets was that of Vincent Robinson; it consisted of twelve large colour plates reproducing the author's sister's water colour drawings – eight of them details – of a dozen assorted rugs, half early, half not. Robinson would later exhibit in his showroom what would become one of the most famous carpets in the world, a Northwest Persian Medallion carpet, possibly from the Mosque at Ardabil and dated 1539-40. The price was two thousand five hundred pounds, a colossal sum in those days. The South Kensington Museum wanted it but they had never paid more than 380 pounds for a rug. William Morris wrote a letter supporting the purchase. It was later discovered that its borders had been filched from a twin carpet that Robinson also had in stock. Such are the dealings of the art trade!

It was Alois Riegel who tried to fit carpets into the framework of his concept of the history of ornament. His analyses are often coloured by the theory that ornament originates in the observation of nature, and that geometric stylisation is characteristic of late stages in the history of a culture, and not of archaic ones: this helps him get some things right and some things wrong!

To look at carpets is to acquire a training in detail; we need to learn again to look with care. I recall James Lee Byars telling me that he had not learnt to see until he went to Japan (and that led him to ask such an unfashionable question as: Is the perfect still possible? for the rest of his life). Josefina has learnt this discipline and reaps the results, not simply in the eye, but in the mind and emotions. Persian red envelops the beholder; Ushak red confronts him. The Persian carpet is eternal movement; the Ushak a solid stillness. The tension in a Persian medallion carpet derives from the superimposition or intertwining of several layers of pattern within a simple centralised composition; the tension in an

Ushak medallion carpet derives from an interplay in the same plane between an ostensibly centralised composition and an implicit repeat pattern.

#### *V. Learning from detail*

I'd suggest that in a real way these objects and fragments (and in the carpets she also centres on the worn, frayed edges where life has left its traces) constitute the household of all she feels. I realise that these are not favoured terms in the language of contemporary criticism but Guilisasti's push within the contemporary involves a return to fundamentals. We need these reminders. Charles Olson, the American poet, tells us that he learnt the first things last, that he came late into himself and his time. Perhaps it is our nature to always arrive late but we have acquired a certain awareness.

I think that when George Oppen said he wanted to recover the value of small forgotten words - small nouns and basic prepositions - we can catch a glimpse of why Josefina is so attached to simple objects, seeing them as declarations of our attentions and how we choose to live: the inventory of her father's possessions sadly reduced to a list of prices, the porcelain objects from the homes of family and friends; the jug. These are all ancestral echoes, if you like, that she needs to translate into her own world where they move into a new matrix of meanings, of evolving thoughts and emotions. They pass through a chill-out of analysis and intellectual teasing and they probe incisively into the issues of the relationship between art and reality, incorporating on occasion real objects that in the context and language of art become formal supports. Her work is characterized by its openness to numerous readings.

#### *VI. Shuffle landscape*

Monet presented his late work in what might be seen as an acre of French countryside; the pond, the river Epte across from his house at Giverny, and the haystacks in the neighbouring field. Josefina seems to have locked herself into a similar familiarity. I don't know where it is but seems like the landscape between Santiago and Valparaiso, a known but in many terms ordinary landscape, one that doesn't matter but is as comfortable as an old shirt. No wonder she asks us to shuffle it. It responds once again to how we choose to see. Landscape, or more correctly the horizon of the same, is what we take in with a glance. Yet, at the same time, as we all know, landscape not only forms but informs those who live within it.

#### *Digression V: Thinking land*

Let me also make another point that seems to me significant. Few painters from the eighties onwards have touched the theme of landscape. You can count them on your hand; Richter in Germany, Hockney in the States and England, as two emblematic examples and also outstanding in a different context and generation Mondongo in Argentine, and Guilisasti in Chile. She asks us to respect four rules as we make our own landscape compositions out of twenty four elements: a respect for the four referential points have to be preserved at the vertical edge of the painting: "the point that marks the hill, the horizon, the beginning of the

foreground and the background of the painting.”<sup>3</sup> She’d picked up the idea from a cardgame. The rules allow for what she terms a fictitious continuity of the landscape. And so it does, but the fact remains that Josefina does not choose icebergs in the Arctic or the Russian steppes; she goes to what seems familiar to her, to what she has always known and grown to be comfortable with. Thus her use of the landscape genre relates once again, on one hand, to the organizational bands in the still lifes and, on the other, to the familiar made strange.

Let me briefly refer back to the above-mentioned artists. For Richter landscape appears as one more genre that he chooses to deconstruct, along with abstract painting and portraiture, despite the fact that he himself argues that his concerns are not theoretical but aesthetic, he is not interested in illustrating theory but in capturing the beauty of an image. For Hockney it is both a nostalgia and a passion, he returns to West Yorkshire to look after his mother and rediscovers the landscape of his childhood. He paints it directly, like a Sunday painter, feeling it in his bones. He also presents a composite of what he remembers as he drove across it to see a friend; for Mondongo it is symbolic of the abandon and decline of their recent history and also of a hoped for regeneration.

One way of recognizing verities is to look at them as if you had never seen them before, to make an enigma of the familiar. This estrangement of reality, that I certainly feel before these works - not at a rational level or as a priority but as a seed of her curiosity - provides a partial explanation of why she constantly turns to the domestic, the humdrum, and the minims of intimacy. This phenomenon has been with us throughout Modernism. It is there in De Chirico, and in the contemporaries of Joyce, Osip Mandelstam and Viktor Shklovski. Mandelstam’s terse novels and rightly rendered poems manipulate the inventory - as when Mandelstam lists his father’s bookshelf, or when Joyce catalogues Bloom’s books - and the exhaustive list: bizarre, aleatory contingencies. And I mention Mandelstam since it is an operation close to Guilisasti’s own manipulation of the inventory made of her father’s possessions - one that she takes as an initial pretext before moving elsewhere and deliberately complicating the referential field. And isn’t this one of the few ways by which a contemporary work can survive in an image saturated field, thus maintaining the spectator’s attention for a greater period of time?

#### *VII. Beds, chairs, and tables*

*Dos camas, un velador, una silla, y un Cristo* (1999) consists of 108 photos of cupboards, chairs, shelves and tables. I’ll also borrow the quote that Maria Berríos uses to begin her essay on this series because it is so suggestively appropriate: “It is not “pure nothing” *purum nihil*, but the nothing of something ... the *nihil negativum* of life is the representation of death ... And we might add: The negative nothing of the image is the image of the absence of image. To discourse about (or paint) “Nothing” - that is an art.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> e-mail conversation with Josefina Guilisasti, April, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Stoichita, V., *The Self-Aware Image: An insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting* Cambridge Univ Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 279.

The inventory is a list of her father's possessions and the values assigned to them by the assayer. Things are people. When the owner dies they often die along with him, or pass into other hands as memory or as valued object, or are sold to strangers. Whatever happens their story changes. In this work they talk of absence and look terribly alone as they wait to find a new home or have simply come together for an occasion. Josefina takes this sad inventory as a starting point. It is charged with dimensions she does not wish to use: the crucifixes, the chandeliers, and the carpets (although she'll get to them later). She in no way chooses to illustrate the list but takes the inventory as an idea, opting for cheap household furniture, the kind that gets relegated to the kitchen or to the maid's room, or to the garage: modest, anonymous, functional, everyman's. It is mostly cheap pine painted white, clean, and insistent on not calling attention to itself, simply there to be useful. Just a few pieces show the brown of the wood, or even the back of the piece of furniture that nobody bothered to paint. As always, they come infused with attitudes. Josefina has made her own inventory out of her own emotions, extending and sharpening the sensation of loss.

The choice of photography as a medium for this blown up still life is like another twist in the questioning of what is conventionally a painterly genre. Although it could also recall the work of Irvin Penn<sup>5</sup> who self consciously recalls in a similar way the domain of high art by calling on the diverse elements of *the vanitas* or the *memento mori* – skulls, desiccated fruit, broken objects that function as reminders of the swift flight of time: the terrible shortness of it all that seems to permeate the works of Guilisasti in much the same way. Seen as a block it is like a Victorian novel of life under the stairs, or the slow soaring movement of a fugue, like small grains trickling through your hands or a sand clock. There is a constant picking up of a theme, soft pedal, and repeated notes. We scan it, stopping, moving on again, returning. It is not so much the static of “white noise” as the whiteness of the silence to which we all go: elegant and seductive.

She documents her own slow collecting - what Balzac would have called a slice of Chilean life - presented to us cleanly and coldly. She seeks not so much to show their best sides but more to undress them, to show us how they were - discrete, servile, and unassuming - and how they are suspended metaphors waiting to be relocated. We feel that cutting edge: a heavy webbing that underlies simple narration. And through all the work I feel the presence of what John Keats called negative capability one of the few gained conditions of contemporary life, despite its romantic heritage: “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason”.<sup>6</sup>

#### *Digression VI: the wondrous absurdity of it all.*

---

<sup>5</sup> Penn also produced a series of still lifes for commercial contexts whose format, disposition of objects, and frontality of composition is identical to these *momento mori*.

<sup>6</sup> Keats, J., quoted by Charles Olson in *Special View of History*, Oyez, Berkeley, 1970 p14

I hear echoes of Beckett with his sense of the overwhelming absurdity and meaningless of life. Objects strung out, accumulating without reason: “No trace of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine”, says Beckett in *Imagination Dead Imagine*

In this white landscape the senses end by refusing to distinguish between illusion and reality, they appear to be more than we can take, so real and meaningless that they become metaphor. Consciousness, far from directing action or controlling matter, ends by displaying its infinite mutations. There is no logical relation between particulars (objects) and universals (concepts). And when definitions are made they are usually made in the negative, by a process of elimination, as if to define the world were to empty it. Molloy tells us: “There could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names ... The world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning a middle, and an end as in a well built phrase and the long sonata of the dead”<sup>7</sup> Well, Josefina certainly gathers *a handsome little sum*, 108 photos that taken together look like a sonata to the dead. At one level it rings as clinical as the morgue, but at another it is intensely human charged with ordinary stories, nostalgic and actual, completed and ongoing.

### *VIII. An ending*

These are important works, be in no doubt about it. She sets the pace of our looking; we follow her rhythms, her angles of vision, and her song of what is always absent. I hear Heraclitus reaffirming that man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar. And we see the pleasures of thought coming back into art, not the frantic dance of contemporary mass production but something simpler and truer, aiming where it should at rehabilitating our lives, working towards some kind of transcendent conceived as a quality within reality and its illusions, visible at the moment it loses contact with meaning.

The imagination is as intimate as speech and custom, and to trace its ways we need to re-educate our eyes. Is this one of Josefina’s desires? Does she recognize that forms and structures tend to reconcile or integrate, that they are conservative by nature, and have to be broken by the intrusion of some other reality: a Mondrian grid that is also a piece of furniture, a table that serves as a support, etc?

Interpretation is always struggling after something and I am trying to avoid the temptations of a dense web of poetry. Agamben says of poetry “language ... returns to that which never was and to that which it never left, and thus it takes the simple form of a habit”<sup>8</sup> - *the simple form of a habit* that holds the shine of our

---

<sup>7</sup> Beckett, S, *Molloy*, Grove Press, N.Y, 1955, p41

<sup>8</sup> Agamben, G., *Language and Death*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1991, p. 97.

“being thus”. That is to say, the heart of it! I think Josefina has achieved both what she *planned* to do, but also what she knew she was doing at non-conceptual levels and saw no need to push forward as a priority. If I have managed to stir anything so far it would be the humus that lies beneath these works: the desire to take us - deliberately, subtly and poetically - back into the world of painting.

Josefina has a system of discourse, a language system within which she lives; her work is contemporary because she seeks what Rimbaud called a *dereglement* achieved through a continuous interrogation. She survives amidst the contemporary condition – loosened meaning, distrust of tradition, dark times. In painting there have been many answers to this condition: a reconstituted relation to tradition often ironic of the present, an aesthetic purity, a deconstructive turn, and so forth. Many threads of wisdom and despair! Her work has to be looked at within the enormity of present experience. I have throughout this essay tried to place it within the beauty of a lyric tradition and I sense in the artist this yearning for what has been lost. But it is also true that the explanation for the importance of her work lies in the fact that she is profoundly questioning the danger of any slippage into a facile poetry. Yet her way of working in the world of painting is through poetic thinking and the search for an imaginative order that has become a lifetime task.

We can never know whether the real of imagination is our necessary fiction or a wondrous quality of mind in the nature of things. Can beauty be confined to the formal relations of the isolated work of art, or must it somehow reenter the world? And what I am suggesting is that Guilisasti takes it back into the world.

The real question of a still life is how to say what stays put. All that is external to us is a metaphor of reality: jars, furniture, oriental rugs, kitchen utensils, porcelain, etc.

Kevin Power