

## **A CONVERSATION WITH PEPE CARRETERO**

**Óscar Alonso Molina:** To begin with, I would like you to tell me about how and why you are dedicated to painting: when you started, what your motivations were, in which context...

**Pepe Carretero:** I can't remember not painting; I've always painted, at the beginning with no motivation other than that of representing what I saw and, later, with the intention of exploring and learning more about art and about myself.

I never broke the inclination all children have towards drawing and painting. There must have been some sort of problem with my understanding of my surroundings since my true paradise was the roof of my house from where a splendid view could be seen. I used to spend hours and hours up there, doing handicrafts, and when I went downstairs to the house I used to recline in the armchair and watch TV, thus exasperating my parents since I didn't do any exercise at all nor behave like most children of my age. There was a lane that ran parallel to my home where children used to meet to play and ride bikes... back then children also used to go into the fields to play football, but I never liked doing any of those things.

I must not have had a good time then. I don't like to recall those years. Luckily, my father showed me the way to the public library; I spent many hours of my childhood there, reading. As a child, I even dared to read a teenage-level version of Don Quixote! How foolish... And in those rooms I saw my first exhibitions: Francisco Valbuena's was the one I liked the most... I am going back to when I was ten, twelve years old...

I always had the vocation of becoming a painter. The world I have always been most interested in is the artistic one, all art forms included. I know I am predestined to it. My aunts used to find it amusing that I had the capacity of remembering every detail of all the weddings I attended.

I remember my first drawings -made on rough wrapping paper- where I depicted the Eurovision Contest, scenes of the town fair... (One of my father's cousins used to keep them, but she had a tragic ending and who knows where they might be now.) I used to participate in children's competitions organised during the town fairs, and I always used to win prizes. How I would like to see them now!

We must also remember that Antonio López Torres, Antonio López García's uncle, was living in Tomelloso. Already an old man, he used to walk in his grey painting smock and organise classes that local painters took - people from Tomelloso have always been very fond of painting.

I went twice to his studio with my father's cousin, and she signed me up for a class where I painted a still life. I was the youngest and I did it so badly that Don Antonio himself had to retouch it and exclaimed that "I would never become a great painter!" Of course, all of that demoralized me and drifted me apart from painting; neither my head nor hand seemed ready to transmit what I wanted on canvas. Maybe this is the reason why I always encourage instilling in young people the fun of painting, leaving them free, giving them a few guidelines without their having to

depict subjects that don't match their age. Remember what Picasso used to say about the trying to paint like a child...

About my motivations ... Nobody knows for sure why one becomes dedicated to the creative world. One has and needs a gift and constancy to dedicate oneself to painting. Artists have the capacity of communicating ordinary or exceptional things, of representing others. I was impressed when I heard the poet Carlos Bousoño once say that among the motivations that lead one to pursue a career in the arts, one must share the common ground of "experiencing an extreme situation." I have asked my colleagues about this, and they say they may have had some kind of unsettling experience, but nothing too defined. I suppose everyone has their own motivations. I think I know what mine are, but would rather not confess them....

As for context and Tomelloso, this is where my family continues living up to now. I am the eldest of four children (three brothers and one sister). None of them has ever worked in the visual arts.

**Ó.A.M.:** And what were the next steps that led you to dedicate yourself to painting?

**P.C.:** I always knew I would dedicate myself to painting. No surprise. I studied at the Carmelite School in Tomelloso. Some of my professors have been life-long friends. This summer, unfortunately, one of them passed away. His name was Father Manuel Anguiano and I always had affection for him. He used to teach us theater and how to draw wonderfully... he used to play violin while we sat for exams. He used to teach us what "was good

for nothing": theater, poetry, drawing ... this helped me channel my sensibility over the course of time.

Another priest, Father Juan M. Pérez, chose me to draw for the weekly journal that covered all sort of news. This is how I became very close and protected by priests. I used to even spend my weekends and holidays drawing for the journal and loving it because I didn't have many friends at that time. I got to like that environment so much, the priests seemed to be so happy that when I was thirteen I told my family I wanted to become one. You have no idea what a fuss I kicked up!

After I turned fifteen, teachers at my high school realized that I was especially interested in my art class (in which I almost always got an A) and that I had an aversion towards linear drawing that I always used to make a mess of. I managed drawing the lines but never dared to use color. I was quite confused, misinformed. I didn't know where to go from there, how to make growing use of my artistic inclination ...

During one summer I painted watercolors about poems by Miguel Hernández and followed a strict timetable. I would have spent more time but my parents wanted me to learn accountancy in order to work for a bank or hold some other kind of office job. They didn't see a future for me in painting and said that "painting was for rich people". This made me sink into further loneliness...

During the first year of high school I sold my first painting, a Christmas card. I learned that, face to face with a work of art, people "observe differently" according to their intellectual

background, sensibility and perception. I always remember this anecdote: with the money in hand, my literature teacher told me why she had bought it. It turned out that she'd seen in it just the opposite of what I'd tried to transmit...

In 1979, a competition organized by [the] Caja Madrid [Savings Bank] took place in Tomelloso. I submitted my first "serious" painting: a very surrealist image based on reality. It attracted great attention because the other painters submitted work in the style that prevailed in town: traditional realism (*realismo costumbrista*) taught by our admired Don Antonio L. Torres. All of them had very similar subject matter: the bass drum, the vineyard, the country house ... and there, in the middle of some other 30 works, was my painting that had nothing to do with the rest.

I didn't win first prize but was recognized with a secondary one. One of the judges was Don Antonio's nephew, Antonio López García, and for me and my family the prize confirmed that the efforts of my dedication had yielded results. There is no doubt that such recognition was a hallmark in my life, and I will never be able to thank Antonio enough for the support he has shown since my beginnings.

My town friends were essential to me during my adolescence. They were people older than I, advanced for the times and well rounded. They backed my dedication to painting and introduced me to the work of Antonio L. García. I remember one day, when I was in the main square, I received a small book with color and

black and white photographs of his work. You have no idea how they impressed me!

In 1981, I received a grant from the Cultural Foundation of La Mancha to attend their first painting course in Almagro; this helped me enormously because I was a self-taught artist. In one month I was able to meet a whole series of professors: Manuel Villaseñor, Antonio Guijarro, Agustín Ubeda (all Fine Arts professors from Madrid), Antonio López (who wanted to see my work as soon as he arrived), María Moreno, Jaime Burguillos, Eduardo Sanz and Carmen Laffont. I also met the other students in the class with whom I still I'm still in contact.

Back then I also studied drawing for Advertising in Málaga, to work in a related field just in case I couldn't make a living as a painter. Had I chosen to study Fine Arts, I would have put my family in a predicament as they would have had serious problems financing me. Besides, I did not have a clear idea what they could have taught me [at the university] although I guess it would have been a lot...

**Ó.A.M.:** In this sense, your painting transmits, if not a certain pleasure and complacency, a lack of drama, a lack of passion and torturous struggle often suffered by other painters. Perhaps it is that your expansive personality allows you to work with ease and agility... a rare quality that permits you to talk about very intimate things -perhaps even about distressing things in their origin- without tragedy. Or one could also define you a "happy painter", a term that Juan Antonio Aguirre liked to use in reference to painters

capable of connecting to their work through their optimism and inner peace...

**P.C.:** I don't consider myself a happy person, but if those around me see me like that, there must be something in me... perhaps a factor in my favor is that I like people, and one of the few things I am sure about is the importance of friendships... I also live for the things I love and that give meaning to my life, and that's quite a lot.

On the personal front, I may look "frivolous", but this is just a way to protect myself and not expose all my feelings. Usually I don't like "stilted" people, always complaining. After all, painting is a vocation, a choice one is free to make; personal limitations can cause feelings of impotence, of fragility, of not being able to fully reach one's goals. We artists struggle to overcome ourselves, trying to work in better and better ways. But we must also consider the rewards at the human level... above all the gratification of making a living with our vocation.

Some people may suffer due to psychological issues but most "set a stage", a lie, a common cliché, like when we say that we love our paintings "like our children." No way! You cannot imagine how happy we feel when we sell them! I wouldn't exchange anything for those evenings when I layout a painting. It is a passionate and very seductive game; you are like a small god, able to do and undo as you please. Then you have to finish it... but that is another matter.

Many assert that true art arises from pain and feeds off of it, thus sentencing the artist to loneliness, to the deepest ostracism. Life isn't easy for anybody and least of all for those who are fully dedicated to developing a vocation. We all work "like dogs", some feel "on the edge of an abyss," and these are not simply expressions. Now that there are no longer any rules ensuring the validity of a work of art, we must learn to live with a greater sense of isolation, doubts and uncertainties.

I must confess, however, that starting from zero has helped me feel stronger, more resistant; whatever I achieve, even the smallest thing, makes me feel thoroughly happy with myself. Up to now I have been able to live off of my painting; if I had been told this at the beginning I wouldn't have believed it, and I think that this is a good enough reason not to complain...

I remember the painter, Felicidad Moreno, who, after one of her openings, when she started to calm down at dawn, cried inconsolably saying: "Nothing happens, nothing ever happens..." We all have that sensation... We are completely alone; we spend years of hard work preparing for an exhibition which often goes unnoticed... you lay quite a lot out on the line. Everything becomes an obstacle course. You need to mix a mental, psychological, environmental and economic "cocktail" for good results ... but this rarely happens. Too many influencing factors! Often you want to "throw in the towel", to give in. But the same thing happens to bullfighters: the choice is yours; nobody forced you to make it.



Besides, don't forget that when art history is written, we may not be chosen because we don't all represent or contribute the same. Many painters have been forgotten and then rediscovered with time; even Velázquez reappeared after three centuries of oblivion. Then we have the later case of Van Gogh, and that of Frida Kahlo who was overshadowed by her husband, in contrast to other painters who were very famous in their time and are now forgotten. It's unfair but it's the way it is...

**Ó.A.M.:** Then, in your opinion, what would be the best way of contemplating your work to enjoy it to the fullest?

**P.C.:** First of all, and as obvious as it may seem with any work of art: with respect. I approach my work with great seriousness and it has become very important to me. It is the center of my life; I am completely immersed in it. It is based on a "relative truth" and centuries of individual artists who have struggled throughout the history of art, approaching the truth but not entirely reaching it.

One can say that I am my first spectator, my first critic, the one who decides what is to be seen and how it will be showed. But, of course, I am also the one who knows the degree of falsehood or self-satisfaction that resides in the work. It is based on emotions, feelings and aesthetics. As all creative individuals, I want it to be alive and to connect with the spectator who needs space. I don't provide this space deliberately but rather allow the spectator to find it in his or her psychic zone.

Honestly, once you know my approach to work, it should be easy to understand it. The process would be something like this: first

viewers enter into contact with the purely formal, which ranges from the way I extend the paint to how the work results from a structured drawing. Some of my colleagues praise the fact that I unintentionally create a very recognizable language which allows my work stand out and be easily identified. Afterwards, and according to viewers' visual appreciation and cultural background, they will interpret the paintings and explore their meaning to give them their subjective sense.

My work is full of light. I think this facilitates a first contact, although later everything depends on the feeling and story I try to tell. Above all, I believe that paintings should be both entertaining and surprising – just look at how paintings by Antonio López García are made and how surprising a good Bacon or Freud can be!

I hope that in the course of time my subject matter will continue triggering complicity and happiness. I hate dogmatic or malicious opinions. I don't like it when my subject matter scandalizes, embarrasses or offends viewers who read my work superficially. Honestly, I am very careful about this. As a painter, I hate to play with those weapons –the scandalous, ignominious, and despicable– but some viewers can only see these aspects due to centuries of repressive influences on their moral sense.

**Ó.A.M.:** Whatever one may interpret beyond the personal collection of stories found in your work, one would have to say you're an "odd" artist, not easily classifiable. You have never followed any of the new "fashions", nor have you been supported by institutions, official art collections and the like which have

encouraged so many members of your generation, and in some cases continue to do so.

Why have you chosen to walk alone and run the risk of almost becoming a "rare bird" among the figurative painters of our country? Is it due to your own personality as a painter, so peculiar and resistant to "integrating" into currently-day trends, or is it due to some other factor?

**P.C.:** Is it "odd" to choose the option of communicating from a more intimate self? The Archpriest of Hita once said that all that is created in first person has more interest... And look, what you said before about not being easily classified is actually a kind of flattery for a creative person, isn't it? At least that's the way I see it. It's the product of a pondered option which I hope will keep giving me good results.

I see that there's a prevailing taste for non-meaning, nothingness and the absurd. What sort of dialogue can you have with those ingredients? It is easy to encounter delirations resulting from the fragility and disorientation with which man lives today after such an awful XXth century. Art, spurred by the speed with which we live, produces ephemeral artists that burn out in the market at the same speed with which they are raised. Too many empty works are being produced; they don't disturb, they don't contribute anything... although some may be suitable for decorative purposes.

It's only natural that my work, with its largely emotional and sentimental load, does not easily enter into those mechanisms of

promotion. Instead, it has purity, and I am so consistent with it that I have not lost the ability of being myself, knowing full well in what works I am best represented and what level of hoax and boldness I have put into them.

Regarding institutions and official art collecting, well, having a language so detached from "fashion", dealing with personal issues... works executed the way they are... perhaps they don't attract sufficient attention or maybe I don't know how to get it... There are some museums, however, that have been interested in my work, the Bank of Spain and the Reina Sofía Museum, when Pepe Guirao was the head of the latter. Later, Salomon Lerner donated two works to this museum, a large painting and a sculpture from my second exhibition.

Perhaps it is more of a problem of the galleries with which I have worked; we all know there is a poorly concealed power play at hand. It is not easy to get into the most important and powerful galleries – those that have economic potential behind them, already filled with artists selling at high prices. In the end, this is the prevailing interest.

Finally, I must confess that I have never chosen my friends for what they are or the position they have, nor in the interest of taking advantage of them. Actually, none of my friends are art critics or journalists. I suppose this has had something to do with promotion matters.

**Ó.A.M.:** In any case and beyond these contextual difficulties, certainly your work has evolved, grown, matured... What has this development been like?

**P.C.:** I have achieved not a style but a way of working that is quite personal and recognizable. I do regret, however, not having benefited from a formal arts education. Even though I believe that art schools are useless, I know that daily contact with other artists is something very positive and that I could have benefited from learning more about materials.

I missed out on the fraternity I could have enjoyed at the university but I was able to meet many painters of my generation when the Spanish Institute for Youth (*Instituto de la Juventud*) selected me to participate in the II Young Artists Fair (*II Muestra de Arte Joven*). Remember the importance granted to young people then. Thanks to the Ministry [of Culture] we travelled together all across Europe searching for Joseph Beuys' work along the way. Incidentally, I'm not sure I can understand him yet ...

If I am asked about when my artistic career began, I usually date it in 1986, with my exhibition at the Gamarra-Garrigues Gallery which turned out to be a success in regard to reviews and sales. Coincidentally, my work was somehow linked to the thriving German Neo-Expressionism of the time, and was also influenced by "Pop Art", inherited by my generation and always present in my work. In my second exhibition, I followed the same path but in a more poetic way, and added sculpture (an art form I will return to some day). This time not as much sold, probably because the gallery was of lesser importance.

Then wonderful Roman times arrived, where I learned and worked so much, and also had lots of fun. We all were under the "Barceló syndrome", wanting to be young, rich and famous; perhaps I aspired to too much without giving up anything...

Other decisive hallmarks? One year in Berlin when the wall fell, Madrid, and four months in India, period during which I produced a body of work that very few people have seen.

Upon my return, and as I already mentioned in the Levy catalogue, I realised that I had a really personal, authentic and non-transferable "gold mine" filled with characteristic stories that unfolded themselves in my home in Tomelloso. That was where my family, my town and everything that could most intimately affect my biography could be found. All of that had been there from the very beginning, but it was only upon return from my travels that they acquired greater relevance. It would be a challenge to my sense of poetry and a way to mature. So, initially against my will, I returned to paint in my hometown. It was there that I began my first steps in painting traditional and biographical work that was exhibited at the Levy Gallery.

Later, back again in Madrid, I kept on rescuing images from the past. I also began a large series of still lives that I continue working with today. More recently, however, I resort to more realistic images to express myself.

I always used to say that I needed to draw on reality when starting a painting - this still occurs today - but then ended up

without models and making use of my own language. The difference is that now, when I start a painting, I need to lean on something very specific, like sketches based on photography. In the past I would have also done the same, but by simplifying forms or inventing them directly. That's the difference.

Only the passing of time gives one greater perspective. One is able to see more clearly the evolution that good work provides. We are so obsessed and immersed in time, and the past is so short that it would be hard to me to differentiate and list the phases I may have undergone during these years. I feel like M. Delibes who says "he is tired of thinking about himself". You can now see how little theoretical I am, and how little one knows about the content and value of one's work.

**Ó.A.M.:** Now I would like you to explain to me in detail how you work: where your ideas comes from, how they are transferred to drawing and then to painting; the role of those photographs you just mentioned; whether or not you prepare many sketches; how you transfer them to the canvas; the way you start laying it out; how you provide tonality to the whole, and whether you establish the range of colors while you sketch, in your mind, or during the creative process.

**P.C.:** The process is very simple, well, at least to me [laughs]. Ideas burst into my mind obsessively. If it's a dream -and I remember it well after awakening because it has impressed me- I retain it in all detail. If it is an image I like, because I've seen its "magic", I also retain it or help myself by means of a photograph. If it's a still life, either I set it up or nature does; I place myself in

front of it and paint it as best I can. When I want to paint a landscape under a certain light, I set myself there at the right time and decide which part of it I'm going to paint. It's as easy as that.

My paintings are based on my drawings: I start preparing them on the table, with many sketches. I use scrap paper as I used to as a child when I couldn't afford to waste sheets of notebook paper. Then, in front of a blank canvas, I transfer the drawings without any grid, because I don't know how to, and watch the forms arise: the composition, the balance, depth and proportion. That's why I laugh at all those books by art scholars who see imaginary lines everywhere: converging lines, perspectives and complicated compositional studies, hidden geometry inventively sustaining formal perfection.

One of the "problems" I had early on was that I wanted to paint "everything". Hence that constant juxtaposition of elements, planes, crisscrossed lines..., well, a chaos I loved and which I can reproduce at any given moment. I'll never forget that Antonio López used to say: "but don't you see that Picasso only painted one image and that the background is neutral?" I guess not. I painted the street, the shop window, what was behind it, what was reflected on its surface, the person walking in front of it, selling inside and, as if that wasn't enough, the lady leaning out of the balcony above... Later I started relaxing a bit, but I am a born-Baroque, I know and I acknowledge it.

As mentioned earlier, laying out a canvas is one of the happiest moments in the process of painting. I love it; it gives me real pleasure. You realise that it's a kind of game: you start by



applying one color and then another; you are the first spectator, the first to be surprised and the first to be often disappointed. As you paint, there are moments when you want to stop, but you carry on and start perceiving the image you want. Little by little, it becomes more complete, more of a whole, carrying more strength... And so on until the moment when it is completely yours and, even though you could continue with the painting -and never stop painting some of them- one fine day you sign it and that's it. On the other hand, some ideas fade along the way... they vanish and lose strength...

I have already mentioned that my painting is very straightforward; I don't go into laborious preparatory work. I know many observers detain there without knowing how to look further. But my work often is praised by colleagues, I think they know best how to observe and value it (Antonio, Cuasante, Pacheco and others have even bought some of my paintings.) That's what encourages me the most to carry on and the main reason why I'm still here.

Now, going back to the process, I never work on just one painting but on several at a time. To tell you the truth, I start one but if by afternoon I get "stuck" -as often happens- I go to another one. In fact, I can even get stuck on all of the paintings I have in the studio. I suppose that this chaotic method would appear to be madness to any systematic person [laughs].

I always paint with oils. I have been concerned for a while now with exploring other techniques because I paint in a small studio and have been inhaling turpentine, varnish and thinner for a long time. I think I would feel more comfortable with a water-based

technique which takes less time to dry and has a lighter density. That's where I'm at, searching, but I always return to oil painting, I don't know why.

**Ó.A.M.:** Incidentally, how do you foresee your work will evolve?

**P.C.:** When does one know one is alive? When one has still a lot to learn. I paint to continue learning and to become better all 'round.

Many elements have to come together for cultural freedom to emerge: foremost in importance are health (psychological health) and social and economic welfare. Luckily, I have overcome bad times. Cross my fingers! [laughs] Well, the worst at least. Despite, enormous efforts, I would do anything for things to remain just as they are now to the end of my days. I realise that I am in my prime and now begin to decline. You can be sure that even though I will always struggle for my work to be praised, my greatest concern (laugh if you want) is that my basic welfare falter in that decline.

With respect to my work, what can I say? I would like it to keep enriching with life and strength. I hope that will happen and that it represents the world in which we are living, a modern world. I also hope that, in the future, the public will return to my work for enrichment and amusement, experiencing for themselves the moments I rescue as "magical" for me...

Supposing that my work will keep dealing with my life, I hope to have a long life of happiness, of enriching events, and not an empty one. That's what we all want, painters or not, right? [laughs]

**Ó.A.M.:** What part of Art History and which artists are closest to you?

**P.C.:** I'm afraid my answer will be obvious and typical of someone who is familiar with History of Art, enjoys it and devotes his sensibility to it... I reassert it is a "history of continuity", where nothing emerges by itself. No doubt the Western world, and Europe in particular, has educated us. Who would not be moved when entering the Villa of Mysteries or by sunset at the Acropolis?

On the other hand, I don't quite like the word "artist", so broadly used. Peter Brook, the theater director, said that "anyone who calls himself an artist stops being one." Being a "hedonist", I thoroughly enjoy the work of many names and movements, I'm very eclectic. I feel the same about music and poetry. One becomes quickly aware that there are few examples of true art.

Having mentioned Pompeii, I would like to comment how impressed I was by the Villa of Mysteries which I visited with María Moreno and Antonio López while I was on a grant in Rome. Its beauty is insurmountable, as are Greek sculpture and jewellery. Back then, humans didn't burn out, they were youthful and pure in ways they have not been again.

I was also impressed by Egypt. If there is any truth in the saying that if you thoroughly empathize with a place it's because one of your previous lives took place there, then "I was there." You spend a while contemplating Nefertiti's bust and... it breathes, I mean it, no exaggeration! That's what I call ART, with capital letters: time goes by and yet the work endures generating the same impressions and feelings as when it was first created.

From the Renaissance I already have mentioned Da Vinci and the superhuman Buonarrotti. I never tire of paintings by Vermeer, whose calmness and purity I admire. I seem to recall he used to work at

home, always painting his people with the exception of two landscapes. Velázquez is a painter I like tremendously but who also frightens me. The most interesting piece of writing I have read about his work was by L. Gordillo. He more or less said that when faced with a Velazquez and depending on one's feelings, one would feel welcomed to enter or not, and this is so true. He completely dominates the viewer; he can even be a tyrant. At times you see him as transparent, other times he grows distant, separates himself from you forever, spits at you and even offends you. Nonetheless, he is one of the greatest, perhaps due to all these notions he triggers. And [one can't forget] the magic and the enigma in Bosch's paintings.

My liking for Ingres is due to his intuitively gifted draughtsmanship and his voluptuous shapes, so unexpected within the rigor of Neo-Classicism. I also like Goya, especially his small paintings, his penultimate work, painted out of vital need without caring if it would be liked or not, such as *The Disasters*, paintings about prisons and some of his female portraits.

We are tired of seeing and hearing so much about the Impressionists and their surroundings, but I must mention Van Gogh's well known work and life, so marked by his complex psychology. That's why earlier I mentioned the importance of psychological health and the importance of finding the right place and time to paint.

Now it's time to talk about "Papa Picasso". There's no choice but to accept that he was a real monster. My list of favorite twentieth century artists is so long that I'm bound to leave out many important ones who produced uneven bodies of work, so typical of the times.

Focussing now on contemporary art, the most outstanding names for me are Bacon, Balthus, Christian Schad, Frida Kahlo, Stanley

Spencer, Bhupen Khakhar... for being so "immersed" in their work, their subject matter and, of course, their respective keen-sighted and autobiographical pictorial styles,

Hockney used to be one of my favorite "travel mates", but no longer. No exaggerating to say that I could fill an entire book regarding my town mate, Antonio Lopez García, but I do want to make special mention of him, perhaps due to my proximity to his world, to my admiration, friendship and respect towards him. I feel close and familiar to his subject matter and admire his undeniable authenticity, his utmost talent for painterly expression (I humbly confess how much I would like to paint like him...) and life dedicated to painting, all the characteristics I refer to when asked about the painters I like or admire. No doubt he is the painter who moves me the most.

Thanks to my close relationship with Antonio, I have gotten to know and have ended up identifying with all his colleagues, most of them followers of realism. I am speaking about the subtle and elegant work of María Moreno (the most kind-hearted person I've ever met), and the work of Paco and Julio López; Isabel Quintanilla and Lucio Muñoz; Enrique Gran; José M. Mezquita; Aquerreta... I can't really fully express how much I like their work in such a brief conversation.

And, of course, I like my friends, that's why they're friends, even though we all have different ways of working: Feli Moreno, Alfredo García Revuelta, Eduardo Barco, Jorge Galindo, Fran López Bru, Lita Mora, Pedro Morales Elipe, María Gómez, Sergio Sanz, Miguel Oliver (they say we should form I team, I would choose the subjects and he would paint them)... [laughs]. I am also very interested in an American painter, Vincent Desiderio, and recently became more familiar with work exhibited by Paula Rego who displays such a personal world.

**Ó.A.M.:** Considering your personality and anecdotes, where do laughter, humor and irony reside in your work?

**P.C.:** While painting, it has never occurred to me that my work could make somebody smile. I've already mentioned I work without a preliminary program. Therefore I am not ironic or conceptual at all. The subjects appear in a natural way, but I am aware that, since I talk about universal feelings, I contact with an audience who understands and ends up liking me. I do not invent anything, there are existential and generational experiences we share that are linked to the way of life we now, luckily, live. This is why people who know me see themselves mirrored in my paintings; I love that because at least I can connect with part of my audience. A smile is the closest thing to happiness.

In any case, if one looks "globally" at one of my paintings, one doesn't find anecdotes, not even explanations so often looked for obsessively in the world of figurative art. My paintings work well color-wise, and also they do relatively well in competitions, before judges who must see two hundred or eight hundred works in one day. When I visit museums or big art fairs, where so many paintings have a concealed conceptual secrecy or a prevailing nothingness, I am happy to find fresher, direct, less pretentious and therefore more "human" work by artists such as Botero, Pérez Villalta...

I find it funny and feel proud when, after a certain period of time, my friends still remember some of the "bubbles" that I place in my paintings, like in phylacteries or comic strips, to help understand the work.

**Ó.A.M.:** What is the role of story-telling in your work? Beyond the mere mirror of reality, which is enough for many figurative painters, in your work one can see a desire to narrate, to share an anecdote or develop a biographical issue from a story to be told...

**P.C.:** Of all the sources I have turned to in my work, indeed two of them (the autobiographical and the dream world) share a narrative dimension. With respect to still lifes and portraits (I have never exhibited them, but they do interest me very much), what I try to do is to get closer and closer to the model's reality, looking for resemblance -although adding my way of painting- by means of colors and shapes.

When I paint something oneiric or I recreate something anecdotal of my life, rescuing it from oblivion, I deliberately tell those stories as faithfully as possible, drawing on my own memories, on the "truth" once lived. Regarding the paintings where dreams are the main subject, I can't give exact explanations for my choice of images, but if you know yourself a bit then you always have guidelines at hand; explanations are best provided by experts or, even better, by psychiatrists [laughs].

In my autobiographical work, I try to transmit experiences, a regression of feelings, as I've already explained, a retrieval from oblivion of my magical moments. Could I be displaying a parade of images one supposedly sees in a state of trance? They are there because of their beauty or how much they impressed me and became a part of my life.

O.A.M.: If you had to describe your paintings, what would you single out, what values do you think you've attained, where do those values

and interests lie, and what territory have you conquered that others haven't?

**P.C.:** I've been happy with myself for a while now, and comfortable in other areas as well, like in my work. I believe I've made the right choice, and know that if I continue along this line of work I will feel completely fulfilled. In general, I live the world of art with passion and devotion. I think of my work as kind of "nude", very much in the Spanish style: it's a highly spiritual, heartbreaking and physical work that emerges directly from my relationship with life. It has a beauty without formula and a very personal subject matter which makes me look -as you say- like a "rare bird". As a creator, I gather collective feelings that go beyond individual limits.

It's a bit of a gamble, perhaps I'm mistaken about this, but I have to explore beyond the learning process. I'm unfamiliar with work similar to mine, work immersed with traditional scenes where I portray my family, my home or memories rescued from the past, dreams that remain frozen, as Pilar Bayona used to say, "in an unresolved hieroglyphic."

You ask if I would like to paint like Antonio López? Well, of course! I'll always try but will have to comfort myself with the realization that not everything is attainable... My style is recognized wherever I go, I stand out amongst others, I know, I've been told. I have the blessing of famous artists whose work I highly admire, who follow me from exhibition to exhibition.

That's why I am here, in what psychologists call excelling oneself with the "Pigmalion effect"; to have the trust of others can be an impulse to reach one's goals. One begins acting in view of other people's expectations, because prophecies often become realities when



impelled by strong wishes. And this is what my work is for; [to display a] strength of images, [to present] what I have constructed and worked on in my paintings. Again, I know that I give a frivolous image of myself, but deep inside I'm very *Manchego* [characteristically of the La Mancha region of Spain] and very, very serious about everything. People close to me say I'm even a negative, defeatist kind of person.

Painting has not failed yet me - I studied drawing for Advertising to turn to in case I failed as a painter-; it has given me plenty of satisfaction. How could I possibly have dreamt, back at the beginning, that I would be able to survive with my first choice profession, get to know other cultures, travel, meet fascinating people who, besides - why deny it - end up liking you for what you do and how you do it?. [The answer is] by trying to reach the largest possible audience, those who have artistic backgrounds and those who don't; both groups interest me. My work is not difficult to understand yet those who are best prepared will discover more in it. This happens with everything.

My work has a "saving grace". I try to get close to the truth, to my truths. After reaching catharsis and together with the push of my first choice, I am faithful to color and shapes. This leads one, however, to always confront real limitations on the professional and personal level...

And when you are playing on "your own home ground", you're already ahead. I hope that my meandering -as you say- along a pretty lonely road will eventually pay off, even without any institutional backing or the popularity of other artists. It is crucial to know clearly the role you want to play and what are you're ready to give in exchange; what piece to move on the world's complex board

game. When you accept imposed limitations, you gain a peace of mind; as Antonio López said many times: "this is a very long road." We'll see who wins the final prize. Culture is a complex, choral framework and everyone's opinion and energy counts toward building "the whole." In my short career, I have already seen many "dethronings". According to another wise saying: "the important thing is not to get there, but to be able to stay"; or even better, according to Cela: "he who resists, wins".

And this is what I'm up to. I know I'm not in pursuit of fame. For me, success is to be able to paint for a living, have certain comforts and pay my bills like a good citizen. This is all I need to be happy. Of course I would like my paintings to be exhibited at museums worldwide, absolutely, no doubt about it!

Due to my own work dynamic, I would never be able to exhibit new paintings every year; that's why photography has occupied such an important place [in the art world.] We live immersed in an age of communication, speed and non-stop travelling; and yes, it's true, we painters belong to another age and because of our shortage, we've become more valuable. We preserve tradition and cherish it as if it were an endangered species.

It's no doubt a relief for many to still find people setting up easels in front of landscapes and transforming them into cultural experiences. Humanizing them, let's say. It's also relieving to find still life painters experimenting with color matches. Human psychology has not changed. I don't know what the future will bring, but I do know that, up to now, people have always been shaken up by similar things - basically by feelings- even though we live surrounded by mediocrity, falsehood and lies.

By going back to painting one goes back to intuition, to sensations, to an existence full of life, to an aesthetic sense and, in general, to man's sensitivity. That's why I am confident in my work: I believe I've developed a sensitive approach to universal issues, reaching the value of a style that is not odd, mind you, but personal ... Does my existence have oddities? No... it would be odder if I were to paint guns, which I haven't seen in my life (although I know they exist and know exactly what they look like.) I was even a "historic" conscientious objector! [laughs]

As far as territories conquered, this should be commented by audiences who have been kind enough to visit my exhibitions, or by collectors who have felt impelled to buy one my paintings. I am always at the beginning, full of doubts; although, right now with my last show about to close, I'm a bit exhausted and I feel as if I'm not going to find motivation back in the studio. Lucio Muñoz once warned me about this, and I know from my own experience that this feeling is only transitory.

**Ó.A.M.:** Since you've already brought it up, what place does sexuality, more specifically homoeroticism, occupy in your pursuits?

**P.C.:** We know that sexuality is important to human beings, a source of pleasure and knowledge to be experienced with intensity. Those who search for sensations and take a non-passive approach to life strive to break molds and conventionalism, trying to be as free as possible despite having been hindered by society and education, especially by religious education.

Precisely because of their importance, my paintings have depicted sex, eroticism, libido, but never wanting to be morbid nor produce outrage. "What's happened has happened and that's what I try to

reflect ..." It's unbelievable how our society is still largely homophobic. I could tell thousands of negative stories about gallery window passers-by feeling outraged by the content of a painting on view, gallery owners refusing to display paintings with naked men in them...

That's why we must be on guard and not lose any freedom we have struggled to win (thanks to leftwing parties, I must admit), because the current "state of well-being" turns us into accommodating and conservative people even though life doesn't "conserve" anything....

I have no choice other than to enjoy painting what's in my mind; I don't want to leave many paintings inside there. On the other hand, how we simplify everything, how we fear to live intensely...! That's why we must dub everything (damned taxonomy, parcel, delimit and label everything very well). It is amazing that, even today, erotic subjects cannot be freely represented; many people are uncomfortable with them even though sexuality is a vital need, a law of nature. In art, since it gathers human experiences, eroticism has somehow always had a way of appearing, either in secretive form or for small audiences. These audiences have become all-inclusive because everyone is interested even though they don't show it. In this sense I am interested in the work of Balthus, that of this brother, Pierre Klossovski, and drawings by Tom, an artist from Finland.

Anyone familiar with erotic work in the History of Art -including that by many current-day artists- and who stops to compare it with mine will feel disappointed by their innocence of imagery and form. In any case, these subjects don't compose the entirety of my subject matter although they must be attracting attention if talked about so much.

**Ó.A.M.:** Your current work leans towards both very private topics, such as dreams, personal childhood experiences, etc. and also towards more public topics, dealing with local customs of your native *La Mancha*, concentrating on genre scenes, still lifes and floral paintings, indoor scenes, city views ... Is there a reason for such an accentuated duality? Could it be that part of your work derives from innermost impulses, and another part from almost objective aspects that emerge when faced with realities you want to depict?

**P.C.:** I agree with your analysis. A person is the summary of many happenings, experiences, feelings and more: an amalgam, a complexity full of details and subtleties.

I try to rubberstamp the minutes of an existence marked by first-hand living experiences. It's simple, although memory is not the objective register of past experiences; it's neither rational nor intellectual but essentially unfaithful and subjective. Klee once said that "art is a return to the past, to dark and immemorial moments with long lasting fragments hidden in the artist's soul."

To revive certain, not so pleasant, memories helps me to overcome them somehow. I try to present myself as openly as possible in order to connect well with the audience. But, as I have already mentioned, the audience may only perceive the anecdotal, or view the entire painting, or perhaps even look for a message... what do I know!

I would like the audience to appreciate my sincerity, how I try not to lie, and the sacrifice required by this profession which, like most, has a hidden side: the ego. Artists may despair and be driven to madness if their work is not appreciated. That's why one needs to be committed to this profession and live it with devotion even though it never offers enough. Can you imagine how many hopes are behind

every exhibition, every work of art? That's why I respect all my colleagues: professional and amateurs, including those whose work is decorative or more conceptual and arid.

But let's not forget that luck can be too important a factor. From within you can see the internal workings, the power struggles, the tendencies, useful "friends..." A bunch of people that help each other within a mediocre framework in order to reach positions of power and be able to benefit in ways beyond the economic. But I probably should not talk about this...

**Ó.A.M.:** What is the role of poetry in your life and in your facet as a creative person?

**P.C.:** Poetry is a condensation of emotions, the closest thing to a painting. The images are more direct. Although less intellectual background is necessary to enjoy them directly, both have different readings and produce endless sensations.

I have always been interested in poetry as a manifestation where verbal expression is sublimated around emotions. During my second year of high school, I studied with girls who used to write poems, so I began too. But unfortunately, like with my painting, without method or direction. I remember the day I bought my first book at a fair: the complete works by Bécquer, which I began reading with enthusiasm.

This book filled me with so much enthusiasm that soon afterwards I selected three poems I had once written and won my first high school poetry prize. Later on, at fairs organized by my town, I received several other prizes for my stories and poetry (some of these works are included in this book.) I competed time after time to win money

that, together with other jobs, would allow me paint the rest of the year.

Apart from the well-known poets, García Pavón and Félix Grande, there is another relatively unknown poet, Eladio Cabañero, who is also from Tomelloso. You cannot understand *La Mancha* without reading his work. I reread him every summer; he's the poet-version of Antonio López Torres, but much more dramatic, more severe...

There's another poet from Tomelloso, Dionisio Cañas (also known in the art world for having created Estrujenbank). He used to live in New York together with the best critic of Latin American poetry, José Olivio Jiménez, now deceased. Thanks to Cañas, I was able to meet and develop friendships with some of the best Spanish poets. I admire all their work, and have become very close to Claudio Rodríguez, Carlos Bousoño and Paco Brines (I visit exhibits with the latter every time he comes to Madrid.)

I also love the work of Luis Antonio de Villena and Luis García Montero, the latter was with me at my first exhibition in Ciudad Real, back in 1984, after publishing his first book which won him the Adonais Prize. I have high esteem for all of them, for their courage and dedication, and I thank them for their friendship even though we don't see each other often.

In 1995, I published *Before the Journey*, a collection of poems written during my adolescence and others inspired by sensations experienced in different countries. In 2004, *Ask for a Wish* was presented at the Fine Arts Society in Madrid, together with some 30 paintings based on the poems... Now I have two unpublished books and a desire to continue reading poetry. I spend so much time painting that I don't have much left; I also get lost in a thick novel full of names. [laughs]

It's probably better not to get hooked, as happened to me when reading my beloved Paco Nieva's memoirs that I couldn't put down.

By the way, both José Olivio and Paco Nieva spoke well of my books and they gifted me with encouragement to keep writing. Without deluding myself, I'm aware I can offer more with my paintings, and that the world of poetry is a luxurious pursuit that requires inspiration. As a painter I feel the obligation, the need to forfeit everything in order to work as much as possible. With poetry, however, if the poem doesn't take shape... to insist would be foolish. You are like a "lightning rod"; energy passes through your body. In any case, what a pleasure, what an enormous pleasure to reread Aleixandre, Cernuda, Lorca, Whitman, Rilke... and all my poet friends!

**Ó.A.M.:** Before you mentioned the places that have influenced you. Tomelloso is a constant reference in your work; you are living in Madrid... To what extent do places where you have lived appear or influence your painting?

**P.C.:** Psychologists agree that childhood experiences are fundamental and determinant to predict an adult personality. So, Tomelloso, where I lived to the age of 18, is important in my life and will always be a reference when I think of experiences that range from childhood to adolescence. This time frame contains images that are not always easy for me to recall.

Lately, I've been spending three months a year there, always in summertime. Being there triggers old memories, with a mixture of love-hate emotions. My *La Mancha* origins don't generally lead me to happy memories, but they have taught me to be pragmatic. Now I am looking for a place by the sea which I so much enjoyed when I



had a grant to work in the town of *L'Escala*. I know, however, that my creative catharsis occurs when walking around the streets of Tomelloso, in fear and feeling observed... with all my family there.

**Ó.A.M.:** With paint brush in hand, even the most local customs or anodyne scenes -a simple still life, some flowerpots, herring drying in the sun- end up taking on a certain surrealist mood. What is the cause for this unrealistic phenomenon? Is it provoked or does it emerge spontaneously?

**P.C.:** What I fight for, premeditate and deliberate over most is to transpose my living experiences onto canvas as sincerely possible. The end result is a transformation of an "original" reality by way of all I have learnt, with my preferred colors but with my limitations and deficiencies too. I start off with reality but finish a painting by turning my back to it. This is because, at a certain point, I cannot extract any more from the original idea. Although I feel a certain impotency, this is the way I finish my work, my own personal touch. However, in my last individual exhibition, some people noticed that I have an increasing need to extract from reality, as I have done for some self-portraits.

**Ó.A.M.:** Another very surprising feature in your work is how the essence of tradition and vernacular culture of *La Mancha*, which so strongly lurks in your paintings, often acquire an unexpected air of Buñuel-style brutality...

**P.C.:** I don't understand what you mean by brutality. I don't think that *La Mancha* traditions are so visible in my work. A procession, a musical band, etc., can be found in any Spanish town. Are you referring to paintings like *The Baptism*, where a child's nails are being cut for the first time in front of everybody, with a song being sung

from behind a door? This kind of scene may seem surrealistic to those who are unfamiliar with it and have never lived such traditions, but I have been seeing this since childhood and my family keeps practicing this tradition at home... Do you really want to call that brutality?

Let me give you some other examples to think about. *La Mancha* was present in Antonio López' first paintings. He moved here [Madrid] when he was thirteen to study Fine Arts. Afterwards, he kept returning there [*La Mancha*] but he doesn't strike me as very *Manchego* in his relationships. I know he does care about the region, however, and always has it on his mind.

Pedro Almodóvar provides us with the opposite extreme. He doesn't care about *La Mancha*, he doesn't even like it and he's never really been happy there. When he's had to refer to the region in his movies, he's chosen Almagro of all places, the only town that doesn't even look *Manchego* in any way, a town founded by the Fúcars, German bankers who followed Charles V, filled with palaces, thoroughly whitewashed, a completely polished town...

In the prologue of Eladio Cabañero's complete works, Francisco Gómez Porro said that "being poor and being from *La Mancha* means to be poor twice." *La Mancha* is hard on its people (yet sometimes miracles do occur, like this book.) The region seems to be focussing on issues other than cultural. I may be one of the few who return and I do so because my family, home and memories are there... I don't know for how long this will last... I hope to enjoy it in good health...