Esther Regueira:
RAFAEL AGREDANO. *PROLOGUES*

"Painting lacks liveliness and has far too much spirit of the cloister, morality, transcendence and ethics that are badly understood, fake even."[1] This emphatically did Rafael Agredano reveal himself in "Titanlux y moralidad" (1983), the first text he wrote (and also published). It was the early 1980s and the artist uninhibitedly expressed his take on what was happening in the visual domain and in the art criticism prevailing at the time. He displayed his firm belief that it was necessary to "restore to [art]—or to bestow on it, if it has never had—that simple and joyful sensation that is the act of creation."[2] In the same piece of writing—overrated by some and a cult text for others—he was calling for transparency when it came to *recounting* things, basing himself on the free exercise of cultural production: "All the revolutions have taken place. There's no longer anything to invent, but everything's out there waiting for us, happily, to be used as we see fit, to take things from where we like. Art is more alive than ever. Outside of the unique tradition there lies freedom, the personal oeuvre that leads to levels of expression and reading, without a unique tradition to slow them down."[3]

Agredano (Córdoba, 1955) is a firm defender of the fact that the process of creation is an act of reflection and knowledge, but above all of enjoyment: neither sacrifice nor suffering, because "studios are not there for stabbing yourself in the back, but for painting in. There's nothing more immoral than too much morality, all the more so when such morality is based on pain as a defining feature of quality, the good and the bad."[4]

Those who for their political ideas, their sexual condition or, generally, for their ideological differences with the regime were obliged to flee "from the Greys" (the repressive police force created by Francoism after the Spanish Civil War), lived the years immediately after the Franco dictatorship as a time of profound experimentation in terms of freedom. The next decade, the 1980s, turned into a moment of general euphoria, of fiesta, and it was in this context that Rafael Agredano embarked on his visual work.

At a time in which many people did all sorts of things, but only a few did so fittingly—because one thing is "to know how to dance and another, very different, thing is to dance well"—Agredano displayed tremendous artistic versatility. He dissected *Vogue*

Uomo with no less curiosity and passion than *Artforum,* or would volunteer to speak of the current chief designer of Louis Vuitton, Marc Jacobs, with the same familiarity as when analyzing the work of the French surrealistic poet, Max Jacob. His ceaseless need of experimentation caused him to make forays into the world of fashion (working with the Creativo Fridor collective, for whom he designed the logo and handpainted the occasional item of clothing), or graphic design.

As well as such one-off ventures, which have followed one another without interruption from the start of his career until now, the artist developed an important body of work as a writer. He co-edited the magazine *i.m.a.J.e.n.* and also published fanzines such as *En busca del semen perdido*. Especially noteworthy is his work as the cofounder and editor of the magazine *Figura*, a publication that was born at a moment in which the range of art magazines was extremely small and which was prepared in the meetings a group of students held in a bar opposite the Fine Arts Faculty in Seville. *Figura* (1983/1986) was more than a youth magazine: it was a space of production, information, interchange and representation directed and managed by artists. It was, in short, a work of reference linking the visual scene, not only Andalusian, but Spanish, with the international one.

It was during those years that the term “Seville Group” was coined to refer to a group of artists, friends for the most part (some uniting around the ‘Máquina española’ gallery, like Guillermo Paneque, Patricio Cabrera, Ricardo Cadenas, Federico Guzmán and Pepe Espaliu, along with many others who had no links with said space, such as Abraham Lacalle and Victoria Gil, to name but a few), who championed painting—what each person wished to paint—and who assumed a position to do with postmodernity, with their eyes fixed on the Italian Transavantgarde (which proclaimed a return to colour and joy, in response to Arte Povera and the conceptual art of a previous time). Influenced by punk culture and born of a profound rejection of the hippie world, they laid claim to the freedom to experiment and to *saunter* through this or that style: “Allow us to open windows to let artistic contamination in and allow us to be frivolous, eclectic, dialectical: to reconcile internationalism and localism, tradition and innovation.”[5] These artists, who decided to participate in the world and not to remain on the sidelines, contemplating it, had the good fortune to live through a particular moment of change (art and culture were useful tools for political strategy) and they helped make the contemporary Andalusian cultural situation more dynamic.

Fermenting in this cultural brew were the distinctive features of Agredano's world, such as humour and irony. Nods in the direction of combative frivolity, these were not superficial gestures but tools he used to develop new ways of creating a discourse of his own. They were bits of his vocabulary, a vocabulary that was certainly wide, that was complemented by such other constants as, for example, the literary dimension of his titles, the introduction of texts into his visual work, and the wordplay in various languages that invites us not to contemplate but to read his paintings. With a corrosive and poetic paintbrush—and pen—that scandalizes and attracts, the artist resorted to satire and parody as narrative devices for analyzing issues like the desacralization of the great cultural and social myths, the aesthetic dimension of different rites, the contradictions within religious practices, the recourse of folklore, and the risks of progress, while always understanding that, as Didi-Huberman says, "images are a space of struggle."[6]

Prólogos/Prologues, the exhibition currently on at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo—and, surprisingly, Rafael Agredano's first one-man show in a museum—stresses the key aspects to his personal poetics without concealing many other basic elements of his artistic alphabet: the idiosyncratic way he has of manipulating iconography, the religious allusions, his re-visioning of the great cultural icons, the plays on words, different thoughts on the social and political construction of gender, and representations of erotic expression. In this way, we can appreciate how in his work, developed in series that he doesn't always create in a linear way over time, the artist experiments with new formats when changing theme: drawn painting (as he defines the kind he does), photography, sculpture, digital languages, and so forth. Agredano doesn't like to play safe; he prefers to *risk running the risk* of boring the viewer and, above all, of boring himself. These are works that glory in an unbridled lyricism, that deal in one way or another with questions about memory, and which consequently involve silences and gestures, remembering and forgetting. It is a question of works that are seemingly playful—at times strange, on occasions disturbing—that function with various levels of reading because they are full of knowing winks, and which show that in his work—as in his life—Agredano is a master of the fusion and interbreeding that fluently mixes the highbrow and the popular, the underground and the mainstream, in an elegant and agreeable stroll from industrial estate to Fifth Avenue.

Educated at a school for Catholic priests according to the liberal postulates of the Second Vatican Council, the artist turned to the mask to create a series entitled

Portraits of the Artist as Something of a Jesuit (1992-96), in which he made use of the dramatic force of the image of the priest, midway between the amiable and the terrifying, between the devilish (*vampires* Voltaire called them) and the angelic, in order, from the intermediary *non-place* that such ambiguity permits, to evolve an entire discourse that is critical of the political power and social influence of the ecclesiastical institution. These self-portraits, done in a professional studio (the photographer José Ruiz's), display the work of a bashful but brazen artist that utilizes disguise not as something to hide behind but as the most adequate bearer of his analytical message. Agredano uses his own body as the medium that is completely different to the way artists of earlier generations did: not as a battlefield but as an object of desire, with a narcissistic and exhibitionist touch ("Per elegantia ad Deum," we can read in one of these photographs. A way of representing the self that ironically reflects the stardom attained by a few visual artists in the 80s, displaying themselves as if they were rock stars or famous models.

Rafael Agredano dares, without modesty or discourtesy, to decipher his present by having recourse to images that, as Didi-Huberman says, "working with certain aspects of recall, involve a future."[7] This can be seen in *Pastoral Scenes from the Gallant South* (2006), photos of the nocturnal landscapes of Huelva's Polo Químico that contain superimposed quotes from Chapter 77 of *Platero and I,* entitled "El Vergel," in which the author (Juan Ramón Jiménez) speaks of arriving in Huelva to visit the place of the same name where the Polo Químico area is now located. The series gets underway with a photo of one of the petrochemical industry buildings with big lettering on its main façade citing the actual passage from Ramón Jiménez's book. The attraction exerted by our first glance at those beautiful photographs is suddenly interrupted by the surprising information the text offers us: what, before, was a true natural paradise is now one of the most contaminated and contaminating places in Europe. And as if by magic, these photographs are capable of having us *remember* a terrible future. "It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," wrote Lewis Carroll.

Agredano's ideas about issues of identity and gender are in fact visionary, in advance of their time, proceeding, as they do, from the idea that predetermined sexual roles do not exist in human nature, just socially variable ways of playing one or several roles. In the series *The Events in Avignon According to the Sailor's Narrative*, Agredano elects to work on dissident sexualities in a set of pictures based on Picasso's famous painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and on the stylistic androgyny of their bodies. The sailor alluded to in the title is the poet Max Jacob—an intimate friend and studio companion

of Picasso's—who inspired the character with an ambiguous sexuality who, present during the genesis of the painting, disappears from the final work. Leo Steinberg underlines the possibility of linking the masculine variant in the original distribution of the "demoiselles" to the sexual personality of the poet, who had "to induce the artist to reflect upon that mysterious abode of sexuality that is the body of a man, and to meditate on the difference that exists between enjoying one's own sex or being possessed by it."[8] Thus, *The Chamber in Black* (1996), for example, presents the young women of Avignon according to the BDSM aesthetic, a term used to designate a range of sexual practices: bondage and discipline, sadism and masochism.

In *Avignon People* (1996) Agredano crossdressed the "madamoiselles," by turning to the iconography of the members of Village People, a 1970s music group whose members represented the gay stereotypes of the time. *Narcissus in Red* (1994) shows us Pablo Picasso with a Cordoban hat and red evening gloves; a joke about the alpha male, yes, but also a revolutionary gesture, a gag with a motive.

By turns gentle and mordant way, histrionic and intimist, these works connect up with "queer studies," a term that is constantly being redefined but which focuses on sexual orientation and identity or gender as, ultimately, a social construction.

Continuing with his study of the representation of different kinds of sexuality, in 1989 the artist created *La Belle Excentrique*, a complex body of work that explores the aesthetic dimensions of pornography. *La Belle Excentrique* consists of 25 drawings done on the score of the same name by Erik Satie, composed together with Jean Cocteau, in his period of music for cabarets and café-concerts. A series that in *Prologues* is presented in a small room with red walls that warmly receives the visitor with the sound in the background of the aforesaid composition, performed by the Seville group, *Taller Sonoro*.

In a narrative swerve, the placidity of the Satie room gives way in the next gallery to *L'Esprit de l'escalier* (1990-1991), black-and-white photographs of details of cemetery graves, which are shown framed in the typical iron railings of the balconies of southern Spain, so common, moreover, in burials in that same south. Taking off from the photograph by Marcel Mariën, *L'Esprit de l'escalier*, the artist undertakes a tour of the kitsch staging of funeral rituals and of the depiction of death in Andalusia, configuring a popular vision of eternity via details of the tombs of such figures from the collective imagination as bullfighters and flamenco singers.

Capable of cocking a snook at art because he understands that being the inventor of revelation does not make the artist a genius, Rafael Agredano appears, to our constant surprise, only when he has something to say, promoting reflection in the curious and disturbing the comfortable. Sharp, intelligent and perceptive, he, like his much-admired Satie, "has never written a note he didn't want to,"[9] as can readily be seen when going round *Prologues*, an exhibition that, as its title suggests, wishes to be the start of many others that are to come—for, as William Shakespeare said, "What's past is prologue."

Text about exhibition *Rafael Agredano. Prólogos (Prologues)* [Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, 26 January – 13 May 2012]

[1] Agredano, Rafael. "Titanlux y moralidad", *Figura*, no. 0, 1983. (Titanlux is a Spanish brand of household paint; its British equivalent would be Dulux [Trans]).
[2] R. Agredano. Op. cit.
[3] R. Agredano. Op. cit.
[4] R. Agredano. Op. cit.
[5] R. Agredano. Op. cit.
[6] Fernández Savater, Amador. "Las imágenes son espacio de lucha". Interview with Didi-Huberman. *Público*, 18 December 2010. Complete version available at http://blogs.publico.es/fueradelugar/183/las-imagenes-son-un-espacio-de-lucha
[7] In his book *Devant le temps*, art historian Georges Didi-Huberman has made an interesting study of the image as a bearer of memory, and of how the relationship between image and time involves a montage of heterogeneous and discontinuous moments in time that are nevertheless connected. "Before an image, we have, in all humility, to recognize the following: that it will probable survive us; that faced with it, it is we who are the fragile entity, the transient entity; and that faced with us, it is the entity with a future, the lasting entity. The image often has more of a memory and more of a future than the human being who looks at it." *Devant le temps*, Paris, Minuit, 2000.
[8] Agredano, Rafael. In *Arte español para el fin de siglo*, Reales Atarazabas Valencia /Tecla Sala, Barcelona Àmbit Serveis Editorials, S.A., 1997 (presentation text for Art Basel 26'95, 1995), citing Steinberg, Leo. "The Philosophical Brothel", in *October* 44 (Spring 1988); revised version of a text originally published in *Art News*, September-October 1972.
[9] Harding, James. *Erik Satie,* New York, Praeger, 1975.