Óscar Alonso Molina

SOUVENIR OF LIFE. THE LEGACY OF GUILLERMO PÉREZ VILLALTA

It is a highly peculiar practice, and in fact I don't know of any other artist who has done anything even remotely similar: since the earliest days of his career, which began over forty years ago, Guillermo Pérez Villalta has made a habit of setting aside for himself some of the most significant pieces from each exhibition. This custom has been faithfully observed without regard for market demand, which in his case was high practically from the outset and became particularly intense in the late 1970s, when public and private collections in Spain began to regularly acquire his work. The artist has always been the first name on his own legendary "wait list", claiming the rare privilege of being the first to choose the most beautiful pieces, the works he liked best, the best portion of his output reserved for his own enjoyment.

And his choices have always been guided by two criteria: firstly, the sentimental value he attached to the works, for it is well known that autobiography has been an inexhaustible source of motifs and references in his artistic endeavours; and secondly, the perceived importance of the works as milestones in his career. In this regard, other important factors for understanding Pérez Villalta's evolution as an artist are his self-image and early awareness of its significance within the artistic context, and that of Spain in particular: in short, his highly intentional historical positioning and the place he aimed to occupy in that context.

However, this is neither the time nor the place to analyse how this distancing, this detached vision of himself as an artist, has or may have conditioned the trajectory of his poetics throughout these decades of creative striving. For now I would simply like to note how the evolution of his tastes or the references to works, authors and movements from art history, constants in his textual strategies, have always been qualified by an analysis of their aesthetic time and by a certain determination to adopt a stance of critical detachment, to occupy a separate, specific place in that time.

Yet regardless of the love-hate relationship with the age he lives in, the artist's intense biography, his public and private passions, and his decision to gradually weave a self-

narrative that is both chronological and vital, exhaustive and exemplary, have forged the incredible legacy which this exhibition merely aspires to reveal to the world by presenting some of the most remarkable, singular and central pieces of his prolific output. For in the end, aside from a studio littered with his accumulated output, typical of most artists who have been working for so long, what characterizes Pérez Villalta is the fact that he has become his own greatest collector, his most critical analyst in hindsight, possessing the most comprehensive, systematic and illuminating collection of his own work currently in existence.

As I have said, *Souvenir of Life* is merely a selection, a fraction of that splendid treasure, a few carefully chosen pieces that will give visitors an idea of the importance of Pérez Villalta's contribution to art over the decades while also opening a window onto aspects of his private life, vital clues that allow us to appreciate the true scope of his particular poetics. The multiple facets of the artist's output—visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture, work on paper), architecture and applied arts (textiles, furniture, jewellery, pottery and decorative tiles, props and set designs, etc.)—are combined with a diverse array of the artist's own archives, documents and personal belongings. Together they strike up a conversation with the historical architecture of the old Carthusian monastery's monumental halls, a dialogue charged with intentionality. The decisive role that these buildings play in the exhibition cannot be adequately conveyed in words, but its power is such that, in all likelihood, this singular encounter between container and contents will be indelibly etched in the memories of all who visit the show. The decision to conjugate this unique framework, with the weight of significance accumulated over centuries of history, with the works of Pérez Villalta, so prone to the superimposition of erudite and trans-historical layers of meaning, was motivated by a desire to show how his artwork, when dissociated from the specific places that witnessed its birth and shaped its destiny (particularly the artist's family home in Tarifa and the Strait of Gibraltar, but also Seville and a certain side of Madrid), is eloquently debilitated and loses much of its original significance, yet at the same time welcomes the warmth and private intimacies that its new "home" has to offer.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Our overview of the exhibition begins in the church, which houses one of the most important collections of Guillermo Pérez Villalta's paintings that can be amassed today. Many of the most iconic examples of his pictorial output are displayed in this solemn

space, in an arrangement that explores what has been one of the artist's greatest preoccupations throughout his career: the complex, ambiguous and even paradoxical relationships that are established between the sacred and the profane, in the art world and in life itself.

Pérez Villalta has occasionally remarked that if we stripped religion of its beliefs, the result would be art. The artist does not claim to be a believer, yet he paradoxically admits to being a religious person, fascinated by the rituals, pageantry and myriad formalities and protocols that faith systems—and in his case the Christian faith in particular—organize around their respective ideas of transcendence.

Presiding over the church nave we find *Vísperas de Pascua* [Easter Eve] (1999-2000); this may well be the artist's most ambitious work in terms of its geometric and mathematical complexity and patently laborious execution, and it must certainly be considered a seminal piece in any serious analysis of his oeuvre. In his typical explanatory style, the artist himself tells us, "I fleshed the idea out philosophically and materially during a time of intense emotional upheaval in my life. I took refuge from those storms in the work itself, which was inevitably affected by them. That may be why it has a strong rational, mathematical and geometric structure of complicated calculations and lines which secure the votive-like symbolic elements that cover it like cast-off remnants. But they are also offerings in the sense of the positive surrender or dedication that art should entail. They are not sorrows; they are the phoenix rising from its ashes. The work aims to be an altar or mandala for meditating on the human quality which, in its desire and passion, aspires to be divine. It is a window or lattice that opens onto the outdoor space of a sky with no visible horizon. In the upper section, like a rose window or monstrance, the void is allowed to fill the centre."

Another particularly striking piece in this group is *El instante preciso* [The Precise Moment] (1991), a painting related to the eponymous three-dimensional work that crowns the remodelled facade of Granada City Hall. In the comments that usually accompany any presentation of his works, the artist explains its meaning: "Sometimes the twists and turns of life lead us to a triumphant moment when all is perfection and we are in harmony with everything around us: with nature and with ourselves. But this harmony is fleeting, and has already passed by the time we become aware of it. Our very blindness may be what gives us the victory we have neither worked for nor anticipated."

Alongside other works of notable importance, visitors to this hall will also be able to enjoy two of Pérez Villalta's least known series: *Lugares* [Places] and *Invenciones* [Inventions], developed in bits and pieces over the decades. Although both have been featured in some of his exhibitions, neither series has attained the visibility and popularity of the rest of his work, which is more obviously figurative and narrative. These types of images, as he has often remarked, represent one of the most productive fields of ongoing experimentation in his studio work. The genesis of these works is indeed quite different from that of his paintings; sometimes they spring from pre-existing ideas, while others take shape as he works, leading him from one piece to the next in a spontaneous segue.

The church nave, with its glorious presentation of our protagonist’s pictorial output, is a prelude to the complexity of his other creative facets, which the rest of the exhibition intermingles in an interdisciplinary manner. In this respect, Pérez Villalta has always been clear about the limitations that other disciplines impose on his creativity:

"I take refuge in painting because it is a medium that doesn't impose the limitations, the obstacles that others throw at you when you try to express a thought. Obviously, an artistic idea can crystallize not only into a painting but also, for example, into a sculpture, an object, an architectural design or a space, and whenever I have had a chance to express my ideas using other media, I have taken it. I actually find it quite enjoyable, even though I'm almost certain that the quality of my painting suffers as a result; what I mean is that, if I concentrated exclusively on painting, I would probably become a better painter. The problem is that sometimes the discipline is so engrossing and so obsessive that it drains you dry, and you need to get away and forget about it for a time. To make matter worse, I'm convinced that I am not a born painter; I'm not one of those painters of whom people say, ‘Oh, he just has such a fantastic hand!’ I don't have one of those hands or anything remotely resembling it. For me, every undertaking requires a tremendous effort and countless hours of work; I certainly don't have a knack for painting, and the truth is I'm not all that keen on the kind of inborn ability that usually excites admiration. When someone sees my paintings and remarks how fresh they are, I'm quite surprised because they are anything but; they are the antithesis of freshness, the product of hours upon hours of backbreaking labour. Painting has already cost me too much, so much that sometimes I wish I could stop painting for a season and lose myself in those other fields where I can continue to express my thoughts."

THE TANGIBLE SIDE OF MATERIAL LIFE: OBJECTS, STILL LIFE, VANITAS...

After leaving the church, the refectory plunges us into the treatment of objects, their formal and symbolic organization, and an allegorical dimension which in our days seems to have been all but forgotten. For Guillermo Pérez Villalta, things, possessions, tools, etcetera, have significance beyond their utilitarian appearance, which modern design, in its almost exclusive focus on the form-function ratio, has made its foremost concern.

The design that Pérez Villalta suggests for them, however, re-establishes their connection with the world of the abstract ideas that their use puts into circulation. Thus, each ordinary object and every human action opens the door to a transcendental ritual space which is of the utmost interest to our artifex at the moment of its conception. Under his conception, furniture, textile patterns, objects for everyday use, decorative items and others become rather like props for a ritualized life whose driving ambition is to give meaning to every gesture (sitting down, looking, pouring a glass of water...) that the day-to-day has divested of all magic and wonder.

In this respect, given the artificial intensity that performance and theatrical scenery acquire, the artist's forays into the world of set design are also incorporated here as a kind of allegory of that double life that characterizes the stage: real life and artificial life, the life lived without full self-awareness, and the life that emerges when every moment and every action is a complete fabrication.

The refectory contains an ample selection of his furniture designs since the 1970s, which generally feature a casual neo-modern aesthetic and an eclectic assortment of materials and formal references. "At the time," the artist notes, "at the tail end of the 1970s and the very early 1980s, I was fixated on finding formulas for using classical language, or elements borrowed from it, but in a totally off-kilter way and in unexpected and unheard-of combinations. I think those were personal intuitions of what people here began calling 'post-modernism' soon afterwards, although in Spain this style took off in a different and perhaps more anecdotal direction. The truth is that, in my case, the apparent madness was usually fuelled by markedly architectural intentions." However, at the close of that decade, his new furniture designs adopted a distinctly severe, distinguished look, marked by formal restraint and echoes of Egyptian and Renaissance art.

Ornament is another of the oblique, inconspicuous axes around which this show revolves—axes which are not underscored thematically in any room, and yet are perceptible in virtually all of them; and here, in the midst of his objects (flatware, luxury objects, cinerary urns) and other applied designs, it seems only fitting that we should pause to meditate on this concept. The intimate bond between object, design and ornament has inspired the artist to pen countless written reflections over the years:

"In this great game, the artistic object dons new attire, becoming ornament. A chair is a chair, and also an ornament of the rite of sitting. The object acquires a dual identity: it is what it is, and it is also a metaphor for the purpose it serves. This obviously has an impact on its appearance, for the atavisms of memory somehow shape it in our recollections.

Returning to the chair, any form is possible as long as it reminds us of a chair; whereas a chair that capriciously departs from its prototype will be perceived by memory as an extravagance—amusing, entertaining, likeable even, but indisputably an extravagance, not a chair.

And this primary form will be endowed with the ornamental form and the rite for which we use it. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the object will be the spark that sets us thinking and the detonator of our inward reflections, re-entering our memory not as what it intrinsically is (a chair) but as the mnemonic image that brings a series of thoughts to mind; in other words, it becomes a commemorative emblem, the carrier of a baggage of thoughts. For this reason, perhaps ornament should have the same qualities as mnemonic characters: uniqueness, oddity and clarity to make them memorable."

ARCHITECTURE AND THE CITY

As a young man, Guillermo Pérez Villalta embarked on an architecture degree course that he never finished. After that point, it seems that certain aspects which might be considered innate in his case, such as the ability to envision and analyse complex geometric patterns, spaces or volumes, were reinforced by the acquisition of a specific technical skill: the mastery of geometric perspective and systems of geometric representation.

In addition, the study of classical architectural languages would prove to be an inexhaustible source of inventions for the future artist who, after abandoning

mainstream academia, would never stop using what he learned there, subjecting it to constant revisions and alterations. Thanks to this attitude, he precociously and almost intuitively aligned himself with the international rising star of the post-modern architectural style, whose salient characteristics would include eclecticism, stylistic heterodoxy and the fragmentary blending of sources and codes.

In addition to the pioneering nature of his exercises in this field, Pérez Villalta is also remarkable for his conscientious conjugation of what, in the hands of other representatives of the post-modern movement, was mere caprice or rhetoric. For him, the decision to mix or graft different orders, or to combine any theoretically distant or even incompatible canons, has always been motivated by a signifying or expressive intentionality: to organize, through a more liberal use of sources, referents, etc., a new, concrete meaning determined by the creator. Articulating new potential meanings is always the ultimate aim.

A pivotal element in this architectural section of the show, housed in Columbus Chapel, is the artist's masterful use of perspective as a symbolic form, which has become one of the strongest, most characteristic traits of his poetics:

"Perspective has always been a theme that interests me. I've worked on it since the beginning of my career, motivated by a genuine fascination. I drew heavily on the ambiguity of the conventional representations of space, such as cavalier or axonometric projections, in my first solo shows. Later I worked with combinations of different systems, and when I focused on the contradiction that arises when perspective lines are altered, which never truly correspond to a pre-existing geometric scheme, I began to come up with corrective systems that would be imperceptible to the eye at first glance. This led me to a continual invention of the representation of space, along the lines of certain pre-Renaissance solutions, the paintings at Pompeii or the oriental tradition of spatial representation. In fact, I developed an almost irrational dislike of Alberti's linear perspective, because it replicates what the eye sees rather than what the mind perceives. I wanted to create a kind of non-retinal perspective. I wanted the viewer to have the presence of the space, without conventional deformations. This made me look at the representation of space in technical drawings: plan and elevation, everything drawn to its true dimension or scale, but not deformed by a rule that says, ‘What is farther must be smaller’."

THE ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGES

The porticoed area preceding the Chapel of St. Bruno is given over to the continuous analysis of languages that has played such a prominent role in the creation of Pérez Villalta's singular and eclectic syntax. In this select handful of works, we see how his referential stylistic worlds have changed roughly every decade. In the 1970s, a fascination with the formal premises of Mannerism led him to recreate truncated spaces, a world of complex, fast-paced perspectives and all variety of ambiguities—spatial, anatomical, volumetric and luminous; in the 1980s his diction shifted to embrace the thick, dramatic quality of the Baroque; and towards the end of that decade, his work gradually became transparent and luminous under the influence of the stylistic signatures of the Renaissance, the Graeco-Latin world and Neo-Classicism. At a later date, he even revived aspects of the Rococo, Surrealism, Gothic Revival, Byzantine art and a long list of etceteras, engaging in an endless revision of what the modern interpretation of each style still has to say in our time.

Aligned with some of the most singular Italian movements of the late 1970s and early 80s, like the *anachronisti*, *hipermanieristi* and Nuova Pittura Colta, but also undoubtedly with the Transavantgarde, this citationism practised by Pérez Villalta is rooted in the precocious and pioneering post-modernist stance which his work has explored from multiple angles. In the artist's own words, the Darwinian concept of art, a product of 19th-century historiography, "would have us believe in some kind of artistic evolution which, in a goodly number of cases, does not obey those rules. The ‘art of the past’ concept, for example, is more like one of rooms that can be visited, always in accordance with our desires. Let us not forget that art is made to endure, to remain; it is not something one creates thinking that it will vanish in time. That ephemeral notion of art is typical of the amnesia of the present, which in turn is a product of the cult of the instantaneous. Not even those visits I mentioned have to do with the concept of revival: the idea is not to resurrect anything, but to take delight in certain places that are to your liking, as you do when visiting a good museum or contemplating books that fill and satisfy you. A mere glance at things like the Gothic Revival or Byzantine Revival styles suffices to prove that they belong to the time in which they were created—as much as they try to pretend otherwise—and not those distant pasts they evoke. Not even the most archaeological revival is more than the art of its time, imbued with all the nervous tics of the era that brought it to life."

JEWELLERY AND THE UNIVERSE OF THE EXQUISITE

The Chapel of Saint Bruno offers us a glimpse of Pérez Villalta at his most exquisite through some of his most refined paintings and examples of his incursions into the world of jewellery and silversmithing. At the heart of this section lies one of the most salient traits of our artist's working method: the careful, meticulous patience, verging on that of the craftsmen of yore, with which he examines and refines every last detail of each piece, whatever their nature. For he cherishes the hope that they will be appreciated for, among other things, the thrill that viewers feel when they realize that they are looking at special, literally precious objects, whose surface and treatment make them an epicentre of fascination and sensory pleasure above all else.

This is patently obvious in his jewellery creations and his more recent experiments in the art of silversmithing; yet even in his paintings, Pérez Villalta's preoccupation with finishing touches has grown increasingly acute with each passing year. At the beginning of his career, his pictorial surfaces were much more untidy; in the 1980s, they revelled in a diction with Expressionistic overtones; but in recent decades he has often achieved a degree of meticulousness that yields truly astonishing results.

Ultimately, these technical preoccupations with the quest for preciosity or the most refined effects can be linked to the artist's keen interest in the world of ornament, a connection whose full meaning becomes clear in his jewellery designs.

The artist's views in this sense are radical and unequivocal: "All superior art is, in the end, purely ornamental," he has averred, going on to explain that ornament "appears in our lives, continually mitigating the bare utility of things that would ultimately turn our daily existence into an arid mechanism which, due to an excess of functionality, ceases to produce the benefits for which it was designed. Like sleep, we need our constant doses of pleasure to avoid the descent into madness. Despite all that was said in the 20th century, to me sleep seems to be a pure game of chance, a mechanism that never submits to reason; and the same goes for art. That is the radical utility of art, and there is nothing beyond it. Deprived of that pleasurable side, now understood in the most metaphysical sense, art no longer exists; it is impossible."

In his case, the desire to create a symbolic space within the sphere of everyday life has led him to categorically assert the value of the ritual (understood as the processual expression of a certain meaning of transcendence conveyed through form) in the day-to-day, in the objects he designs, and particularly in the pieces of jewellery commented here, whose added value as both accessories and objects of quantifiable material worth underscore these aspects. Nevertheless, the underlying idea is the same for

each item, each thing and each ordinary object, for they are all products of this age when "we live in a world dispossessed of significance. Utility has left things stranded and disoriented, in a world where their only value is dictated by the economy. Not only has ornament been stripped of its value; we have also been robbed of our ability to recognize it. Things have to be explained all over again because no one knows what they represent anymore; everything is an instrument and a tool, and things only interest us for what they can produce or their monetary value.

That is why I have dedicated much of my life to developing these ornaments. Few of them have come to life. The majority are still ideas that have not yet materialized; painting is not the proper medium for that, for it only makes sense when it is included in our own lives. Occupy the place it occupies in sterile ‘designs’. Turn back to handiwork, as industry would once again try to devour and digest it in its economic stomach. Find a snaking line that runs along the fringes of other domains; it's important to keep a low profile.

For them—the objects, furniture, jewellery and whatever else may come—I look to my old rites, those that shaped the culture I live in, on the shores of this Mediterranean Sea. Whether the gods be many, one or none. My fascination also travels, for, after all, I do live in a connected world: my own time has also supplied much of the vocabulary."

MODERN ANDALUSIA

From the outset, in both his personal life and his artwork, Guillermo Pérez Villalta has examined the popular underpinnings of his native Andalusia with an enriching gaze, at once comprehensive, critical and passionate; at the same time, he has also conducted an exemplary analysis of the new layers which the progress and establishment of the modern world have superimposed on the traditional image and even the stereotypes of Andalusian culture.

The sacristy and the De Profundis Hall or anterefectory contain several of the artist's iconic pieces on these themes, including *Viaje por Andalucía* [Journey through Andalusia], on show for the first time here. In it the artist depicts many of Andalusia's most unforgettable spots, following in the footsteps of the countless European travellers, from Richard Ford to Gerald Brenan, who have set out to explore this land, armed with a notebook or sketchbook and their peculiar notions of the exotic and the picturesque.

This area also features a salvaged copy of what has now become an impossible-to-find rarity, a short film entitled *Málaga es letal* [Málaga Is Deadly], originally broadcast by Spanish national television (RTVE) on the legendary show "La Edad de Oro" back in 1982, as well as the complete series of late-modern *Arquitecturas Encontradas* [Found Architectures] which the artist patiently catalogued with his camera in the course of his tireless wanderings along the Mediterranean coast in the 1970s and 80s.

The conception and development of the latter series is best described in the artist's own words: "The year was 1974 or thereabouts. My friend Carlos Durán had rented a place above a restaurant at Arenal Beach in Valencia. The establishment was called Monkili. We later learned that the name came from 'Le monk qui rit', and it was situated beside the spa of Las Arenas: a bizarre hybrid of 1930s rationalist architecture and a Doric temple painted white and indigo blue. I found it fascinating. While strolling through the Cabañal and Malvarrosa districts, I stumbled across an intriguing example of popular architecture. Architecture without architects, is what I called it; back then I was very critical of the architecture of the modern orthodoxy I had been taught at school. Charles Jencks had not yet invented the term 'post-modern', but my view, both then and now, was that creative freedom should always trump any guidelines or rules regarding 'what ought to be done'.

I decided to document what I liked, that architecture created, in most cases, by the owners themselves or by building contractors who indulged their personal tastes as they saw fit. As I didn't have a camera, I asked Rafael Pérez-Mínguez to let me borrow his, a Nikon, and so began this extensive collection of slides.

This obsession led me to take my camera everywhere I went, just in case a 'marvel' should turn up. I drove with one eye on the road and the other on the passing scenery, and when I travelled by bus my gaze was always in scan mode. The outskirts became my hunting grounds. First the outlying districts of Valencia, then those of Tarifa and the Spanish towns nearest Gibraltar: La Línea and the Bay of Algeciras. My obsession with the Costa del Sol became something like a sickness: inch by inch, I covered the area along the N-340 road, and every other road I could find. I celebrated the discovery of the neighbourhoods of Bellavista, Pedragalejo and El Palo de Málaga as valuable finds, and the same was true of the entire Mediterranean coast from Valencia to Tarifa. My trips from Madrid to the periphery also bore their fruit, like the savings banks of Jaén and Murcia and their environs. I admit that I have done a poor job of exploring the north. I've always been a southern man, so it was only natural that my quest should

eventually take me across the Strait to Tangiers, which is practically a neighbouring town for me. The 'sickness' dissipated when my photography equipment disappeared in Jimena de la Frontera in 1986.

I showed this work several times at lectures: the first was at the School of Architecture itself, before the surprised gaze of Fernández del Amo, my professor of project design that year. Later, at an art and literature conference held in Algeciras, I remember one lady who thought I was criticizing 'that appalling architecture'. 'Madam,' I replied, 'I love this kind of architecture'."

EROS AND PAN

Pérez Villalta has often spoken of desire, taste, art and eroticism as complex formulations that spring from a common source. Thus, for example, from the primal instinct that leads the simplest organisms to prefer ecosystems where pleasure is increased and discomfort lessened, to the most complex aesthetic options, which cannot be reduced to a predetermined rational-logical process, and even our proclivity for those whom we find sexually attractive as opposed to others who inspire indifference or outright rejection, our artist assumes that all of these situations originate as a matter of taste, of choice, of predilection for one form over another—in short, and ultimately, a question of aesthetics.

On numerous occasions, and often in the most explicit way, the artist has also explored the most rousing iconographic elements in the entire erotic and even pornographic repertoire, which are shown separately in the Priory Hall.

The complex homoerotic symbolism of the Christ-Dionysus duo, over which the figure of the artist-creator is superimposed, gives rise to a highly personal, intimate exploration of private passions and desires. These works betray autobiographical details normally kept hidden from the spectator (his sexuality, his partners, his fetishes, etc.), though this does not mean that the artist forgets for one minute the complex image-building mechanisms that characterize him.

In addition to all this, in the background—perpetually sheltered by the long shadow of the pagan and erotic-pornographic tradition of Graeco-Latin culture, and Christianity's dogged attempts to assimilate it—we catch a glimpse of all the new iconography of contemporary gay culture, with its merchandising, new stereotypes and subcultures, specific clothing and hairstyle practices and trends exemplified by the amusing

collection of "muscle-bear" and "leather" dolls that the artist has amassed over the years, which have also found a niche in this segment of the show.

Again, Pérez Villalta's ideas about eroticism and pornography are anything but conventional. On this subject he has remarked, "For thousands of years, man has been a warrior and a hunter, and traces of this survive in his genetic makeup. There is something about it that he finds attractive. The aseptic society of today has tried to eradicate these tendencies, but they continue to crop up in the most unlikely places. Tattoos and piercings are now part of the modern aesthetic. Less known is the fact that this renaissance of warrior aesthetics began with the leather culture of the early 1970s; in fact, many current looks and styles can be traced back to the 'tough' gay community.

This atmosphere of combat, of conflict and fighting, is part of male sexuality, where adrenaline is as ubiquitous as salt in food. There is a subtle hint of violence that is only possible and comprehensible man-to-man, which shapes this sensibility more deftly than a caress. Thus, the subtle boundary between pain and pleasure is forever shifting.

There is a certain pleasure to be derived from endurance, from being strong in the face of a practice which many would find painful and unpleasant. The bonds of straps or cords make one 'feel' the place where they are tied, but they also represent a sense of power and control over pain. The excitation of aggressiveness is part of man's sexual aesthetic.

Perhaps that is why relationships between men are established in a way that bears little resemblance to the patterns of heterosexuality. Here there is no reflection of the distinctive roles of the conventional couple. Manliness likes manliness; it sees itself reflected, and the bonds are those of camaraderie. This, in an age when sexual definitions seem to be politically incorrect, makes manly homosexuality a refuge and bastion of disparaged masculinity. A place where the word 'macho' is not an insult."

THE WORLD IN A CABINET

In the Hall of St. Mary Magdalene we find a mosaic of small-format pieces that aspire to be a miniature compendium of the vast scope of this exhibition, of the artist's biography and of his particular aesthetic ideas. The layout, modelled on the old cabinets of curiosities or collectors' cabinets, had to be adapted to the intrinsic complexity of this historical space, the oldest in the former monastery (in fact, the rest of the complex grew up around this room over the centuries), leading to the decision to

use particularly significant pieces of a smaller size that could work around the openings and recesses in the walls.

Consequently, this hall contains a wide variety of works, ranging from a legendary self-portrait with hepatitis, executed in the classical manner and with an unusually realistic treatment, that marked a turning point in the artist's life to the highly sophisticated absorption of the tondo *Contemplación* [Contemplation], one of the author's favourite works of recent years. These are accompanied by other iconic works, such as the double portraits of the artist with one of his partners which mark the beginning and the end of that particular stage in his life, or appealing oddities, like one of his earliest versions of St. George and the Dragon, a theme Pérez Villalta has portrayed so frequently in the course of his career that it has become a kind of charm to which the artist turns every so often or in times of transition. The version shown here, exhibited on very few occasions, pertains to the artist's earliest period, with its pop aftertaste, superimposition of cut planes attempting to create a sense of relief, and the *trompes-l'oeil* and marbling which his painting would refine over the years.

THANATOS

Finally, the chapterhouse, with its funerary connotations, offers a restrained vision of the sorrowful aspects of death, emptiness, absence and loss, a fitting conclusion to this journey through an astounding body of work. In the midst of its crowded interior decorations, nestled among lavish tombs, three unique pieces have been arranged where the simplest geometry and the architecture of water (tank, pool, cistern...) broach these aspects, with their death-related symbolism, in an emblematic way.

These three amazingly concise pieces are part of a long series of "Inventions" that the artist has devised over the course of many years, which have hardly received the attention they truly deserve. As the chosen examples clearly show, in these works the figurative aspects have been so drastically reduced that they verge on pure abstraction. Geometry and order are the austere resources the artist uses to conduct what in theory are mere inquiries into perspective and spaces, although these themes inevitably lead to other, darker meanings which in some cases, such as this one, are explosively underscored by the context itself.

There can be no better conclusion than Pérez Villalta's own words on this subject, which sum up the intention of this entire group of works perfectly: "The desert: always

the desert. If the garden is the supposed cradle of our civilization, and the dream of the flowing spring is present in our sensuality, then the origin of the world of thought lies in the solitude and silence of the desert. Though barren, that territory has engendered our religions: Abraham and Moses felt the presence of God, the One, in its arid heat. Jesus Christ withdrew to the rocky wilderness of Sinai before entering public life, and the word was revealed to Muhammad in its swirling sands. We have always felt that powerful attraction to boundless space, an attraction the sea cannot exert, for it has a boundary—the shore—which we cannot cross unassisted. It is a beautiful environment, undoubtedly, but it represents 'something else'."

Ó. A. M.