Javier Montes
ROAD TO PERFECTION

The first thing I see is a digital photo on a CD that Pereñíguez sent me. The title is *La casa del poeta* [The Poet's House], and it reproduces a 105x150 cm drawing in chalk, charcoal and Conté crayon on card. At least that is what the photo caption tells me, and I believe it (I will come back to that leap of faith, which to me seems essential in his work). The image belongs to a series created in 2011 called *La escena y el solar* [The Scene and the Plot]. It shows an attic of painted wooden beams filled with martial detritus: helmets, shields and cuirasses from Ancient Greece hang from the walls and are strewn untidily across the floor.

Change of scenery: in Pereñíguez's austere Seville studio I do not see the drawing featured in the photo (at least I don't remember seeing it—more on these memory lapses later as well), but on his laptop computer I do glimpse some preliminary sketches for that drawing: the empty attic, fragments and loose bits picked out and piled into the photo of the drawing I had already seen. But these are not sketches; they are digital photos of a "real" space whose scale and dimensions are difficult to determine without the benefit of context.

Then Pereñíguez opens a box, and I see (and touch—again, more on that tactility in a moment) miniature helmets and shields modelled in resin, curiously finished, that "posed" for the photo from which he made the drawing, which in turn I saw in another photo on the CD I was sent.

Finally, back at home, I read the passages in Polybius and Arrian, those Greek historians of old, which tell how, during the destruction of Thebes, Alexander the Great left only one house standing: the home of Pindar the poet, a tribute and honour to his glorious talent.

Or perhaps not, after all. Then I am reminded (or did I remember it before, in one of the previous scenes, forget it, and only then rescue that memory?) of a splendid article by Mario Praz about Poussin which I read years ago, "Milton and Poussin". In analysing

the pictures of the French painter (another abstract-classicist, one might say, in Pereñíguez's vein), Praz remarks:

"Poussin resorted to a most surprising method. First he made a sketch in pencil and bistre of what he proposed to paint; then he created wax models of all his figures, in their precise poses, first nude and later dressed as he intended them to appear, in garments made of cloth or paper; in the same way, he modelled the buildings and other objects in wax; and finally, around this kind of nativity scene he built a box with openings that let light through just as it would fall in the place where the painted scene was set. This method left nothing to chance. However, it did not merely serve the practical purpose of ensuring the picture's unity and coherence; it also allowed Poussin to indulge his powerful tactile urges by actually modelling his figures and, at the same time, in having them before him, at once so clear and so distant, like the miniature models of a *presepio*-style crèche, they created a visual impression that was transposed into the hallucinatory appearance of the finished painting. The charm of Poussin's paintings is that they are steeped in the memory of a tactile experience, and forever bathed in the eerie, aquarium-like light of a nativity scene. Poussin had actually seen with his own two eyes, rather than in his mind's eye, the Roman, Greek or Biblical scene he was painting; he had taken in every last detail, just as it was at the moment the historical event occurred; in a way, he had even touched the bodies and garments of the figures. This method was something akin to an archaeological reconstruction, but the mind that designed it, while believing that it was merely satisfying an erudite, scientific requirement, was actually yielding to the most bizarre metaphysical nostalgias: it swallowed the pills of method and technique to dream better."

This obviously smacks of contemporary art, not merely because Poussin made a diorama and later reproduced it, but because of that migration (almost a trans-migration) between media and languages: sculpture, painting, toy, model, poetry, memory, ceremony and ritual. The drawn drawing at the end, or the photographed photo of that drawing, at the end of that end, is simply the mental handle, the visible (and perhaps dispensable) track of a mad spinster machine moving about within the artist's field of action. In their exquisite execution, painstaking finish and museum-like timelessness, Poussin's paintings and Pereñíguez's drawings are encoded documents that tell a tale of experience, nostalgia and hallucination.

Above all, they are exercises in themes which I think have always interested Pereñíguez and to which he has returned in this project for the CAAC: memory and its

artistic correlate, the aura. In the age that preceded the mechanical reproduction of images, the two went hand-in-hand and were sisters in the context of the work of art. Works, paintings, sculptures did not travel, either physically or as exact copies in the form of postcards, rotogravures or combinations of pixels and pantones. Handmade engravings or drawings did not truly reproduce them: at the most, they re-produced images that became memories or served to remind us of the original even while their condition of copies threw us off track, and in the end the work and the memory of the work merged to form a new amalgam, perhaps situating the work halfway between both in the spectator's experience who, on returning home, constantly re-created the work in his imagination (just as I am now re-creating the original drawing of *La casa del poeta*, and cannot recall whether I saw it or merely imagined it).

On the other hand, original? We have no way of knowing, and perhaps Pereñíguez would say it is the very concept of original and copy, couched in those terms, that is rendered irrelevant.

In one of his two current projects, *Hadji Murat*, the game of translation and reproducibility becomes even more ambitious and complex. Pereñíguez read (a Spanish version, I presume, translated directly from the Russian rather than from a French translation, unlike so many other Russian classics rendered into Spanish in this manner until quite recently) this novel by Tolstoy and was struck by the abundance of terms borrowed from various languages of the Caucasus: Avar, Tartar, Persian, Turkish, etc. The book describes a distant reality, but these words denote an even greater distance. While searching for iconographic correlates to assist in the *translation* of these words, Pereñíguez stumbled upon the "orientalist" drawings of the 19th-century German painter and traveller Theodor Horschelt. Horschelt's drawings, the mental images sketched by Tolstoy, were subsequently translated into stylized references, stencils, puzzles and moulds. And these artefacts in turn created other artefacts: the stencilled patterns themselves, the reliefs and the graphics.

Pereñíguez has subtitled this project "An Applied Arts Exhibition", and his true interest does indeed seem to lie in the application (translation, in the broadest sense) of concepts and forms rather than in the finished work or concrete form. Perhaps the work *is* the translation—the pure, perfect form achieved at the end of that *road to perfection* (for the artist's own ascetic leanings inevitably lead us to think in such terms) pales in comparison to the successive, perfecting steps of the road itself.

This, of course, brings us back to the concepts of aura and memory. In his wildest dreams, I doubt Benjamin ever imagined the ecstatic (and ultimately static) paroxysm of visual reproducibility in which we residents of the Western world are now immersed. And by Western world I mean a concept which is now more of a technological than a geographic location: today, the dividing line that separates the West from the rest of the world today is more virtual—and class-based, of course—than physical or traceable on a map. However, there are still Wests with access to means of reproduction/colonization and Easts that are reproduced or subject to the colonization of those images.

Naturally, that paroxysm aims to make us believe that the question of aura is becoming irrelevant, when the truth—as Pereñíguez's work seems to remind us—is that it has become immanent. We might call it the elephant in the room: something so purely present, so purely pressing that it becomes invisible. Paradoxically, the aura presumed to be the prerogative of "original" works of art is now more—and perhaps exclusively—apparent in the *applied* arts. Maybe all forms of art are now applied; maybe the aura of that art is dispersed among all the *applications* that our little digital gadgets use every day, with almost no prodding or input from us: applying, translating, migrating from reality to reproduction and back again.
Maybe Pereñíguez is trying to remind us that the entire issue of aura is and has always been impossible to grasp: perhaps the work of art has always (since Poussin, even since Pindar) known how to ensure that no reproduction can ever fully represent it. We might need to think of aura in a broader sense, one that includes the story from which the work emerges and the stories it causes to emerge. From this perspective, the work's concrete reality is constituted by the work itself and by the time that enveloped its conception and execution; that time is the historical and *archaeological* sequence of events which has seemed to fascinate the artist since the earliest days of his career, a sequence in which every point, every milestone, is unique and inimitable, and therefore irreproducible.

Thus, although it pretends to concentrate on the refinement of purely formal aspects and disdain all others, Pereñíguez's work is, at its core, a questioning (seasoned with carefully gauged, ever-so-subtle irony) of the banal dictum which, according to the Formalists, states that a work should be appreciated as completely autonomous and according to the criteria established by its own scheme of representation, disregarding all the knowledge, associations or translations that have brought it before us and envelop it. Not even the most dogmatic Formalist—one of those who hangs a painting

upside-down to focus on the interplay of shapes and colours—can completely extricate himself from one narrative or another. This topic has been discussed in a most illuminating manner by Richard Woilheim and by Alois Riegl, an author whose name came up in conservation with Pereñíguez and whom the artist seems to esteem and disregard in equal measure.

The applied arts exhibition does not end here: today, when the virtual era is in full swing (well, not really in *full swing*: this is probably only its prehistory), when the digital is rendering the analogue obsolete, and the idea, an unexpected and perverse Platonic loop, has become a substitute for matter, Pereñíguez felt it was necessary to recover the basic structure of the great applied arts exhibitions and offer his own small *trade show*. In the early days of the modern era, world's fairs, colonial exhibitions and the like served as instruments of colonizing propaganda. From the heart of the empire, the capitals and mother countries proposed a legible *translation* of the world that would homogenize and accredit their manifestations. Progress, civilization, technology: the tale was transformed into a language that fancied itself some kind of definitive, universal Esperanto. Beneath the iron and glass pavilions, machines (eternal spinsters forever searching for infinite husbands) laboured incessantly to process reality and transmute it into an idea.

In *Tres Maquinas en Estilo Moderno* [Three Modern-Style Machines], Pereñíguez provides the coup de grâce to his ironic questioning and very serious research into the refuges of aura and the contaminations of form in the heart of the age of mechanical reproduction. When I visited his Seville studio, the artist and his assistants were racing against the clock to get them ready for this show. This productive zeal may, in fact, be the most important part of the work. Perhaps it *was* the work, and I was just fortunate enough to *see* it: now that the feverish activity has ceased and the fruits of their labour have materialized, the machines are little more than testimonies or souvenirs of the effort that went into making them.

The fact is that, in a time when the optimization of resources and ultra-efficiency are next to godliness (other spinster machines that continue to whirl and spin in the void, even though the ideals of modernity and the inventors of the exhibitions that gave them life and spread them far and wide are long dead), Pereñíguez pulled out all the stops in order to build these devices, exhibiting an *over-zealousness* which, paradoxically, is the only subversive method we have left to undermine those restrictive ideas.

Because they are machines, they catch up to and zip past the utopian ideas of the fathers of that modern mentality born with programmed obsolescence which

Pereñíguez brings to the fore here: they are the products of terribly hard work which, when compared with their meagre features and abilities, seems laughable. In this case they are *old-maid* machines, with the inevitable comicality and undeniable dignity of all their kind: relegated to the sidelines of procreation, they are able to see and pry into everything from that vantage point (which is privileged, though perhaps not enviable).

The Peter Behrens Machine can only make one stencil. The Loos latrine is able to compact faeces into a final spiral of optimization that would bring us one step closer to the Freudian axiom (shit=gold) than we already are.

Yet their very uselessness is what makes them necessary and useful on a deeper level: in an alternate reality, in a simultaneous translation/application of the world that deliberately diverges from the *official version*.

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