

MANUEL LEÓN

*Story of a silence:*

*Something similar happens in art*

"Painting is perhaps the art of silence, definitely of speaking without the throat." This comment by Manuel León (b. Seville, 1977) lies behind the title of his second solo exhibition at the gallery. *Story of a silence* presents the world of León's imagination as expressed over the last two years. His painting addresses topics that are for him intimately interwoven with the most cutting-edge manifestations of reality, though they are also universal themes, established ideas which cannot be excluded from our current debate, such as environmentalism, feminism, and other issues affecting our society.

León's starting point is whatever others take for granted. A painter, who knows that he lives "out of time", needs his hand to speak, like the figure in *Ventriloquist of Herself* (*La Ventrílocua de sí misma*), where a well-known children's puppet may be delivering a speech, a story about something still to be revealed. Count von Count, the godfather of basic mathematics for a generation, keeps doing his sums, but looking at the composition for a while in silence, we realize that she is the one pulling the strings, with her mouth closed, in silence, possibly telling us a tale.

This story takes us to another of the works in the exhibition: *Theseus and Procrustes* (*Teseo y Procusto*). The mythical Greek hero, here reimagined as a leaf of *Monstera deliciosa* — a recurrent motif in his work since the exhibition of *Santa Clara's Rib* — explodes the concept of the still life (dead or alive?), signalling the painter's intimate relationship with the whole tradition of Spanish art, with which he engages from his own vantage point in time with humility but without complexes. In the painting, cropping the leaf's edges alludes to the legend of Procrustes, turning it into a very contemporary symbol of conformity and uniformity, a fascist egalitarianism. A Procrustean bed is an arbitrary standard to which exact conformity is forced, and the term is also applied to the pseudo-scientific fallacy of making real data fit a pre-existing hypothesis.

In silence again, the artist talks about having a child, the lineage of father and son, being fruit of an earth. Against a background that recalls the glorious breaking of light in the Sevillian baroque, León deals with the theme of fatherhood, and the title of the work is very clear—*A Rib off the Old Block* (*De tal Palo tal Costilla*)\*—through which he winks at the masterpieces of one of the painters who are his guiding lights, the Goya of *Fight with Cudgels* (*Duelo a garrotazos*) and *Saturn Devouring his Children* (*Saturno devorando a sus hijos*).

It could be said that Manuel León carries on fighting with what he loves most: the tradition of painting. As the lyrics of a segurirya say: *It's rained tonight, there's mud tomorrow.*

As dessert, León leaves us with a canvas measuring almost seven square metres, a huge Venus, a Grand Tour that starts with Titian, goes by way of Velasquez, revisits Goya's modernity, and finishes its journey with Manet's *Olympia*, revealing a nude who intimidates us through her sheer dimensions but invites us with her gaze to contemplate, again in silence. In this work, entitled *Vegetable Hypostasis (Hipóstasis vegetal)*, who or what is the main subject?—the leaves of Monstera, the woman, or the painting itself as gesture and expression? The artist invites us to look not with our eyes alone and thus, as a voyeur, to search out one of the possible meanings to a story that remains always open-ended.

In the words of Miguel Gómez Losada, Manuel León is pursuing “something that is difficult in Spain, refreshing the vernacular, showing that it is possible to visit Andalusian Costumbrismot as an Andalusian and use it to create contemporary and universal art”.

\* *De tal palo tal costilla* is a double pun on *de tal palo tal astilla* (“a chip off the old block”), where the *astilla* (chip) is substituted with *costilla* (rib), which further alludes to a popular Spanish name for the *Monstera* (Swiss cheese) plant, “*costilla de Adán*”, or “Adam’s rib”. See also the exhibition *La Costilla de Santa Clara (Santa Clara’s Rib)*, centred on a huge *Monstera* that grew in an old convent of Santa Clara, whose leaves were the subjects of León’s paintings.

† Costumbrismo is the depiction of local everyday life, customs, and manners, usually realistic, but often with a satiric or romanticised vision of traditional life, and a style particularly associated with Spain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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