

THE TRUCE

Tabacalera offers up its space to a project by Ángel Haro, (Valencia, Spain 1958) whose proposal is an intervention that incorporates his interior architecture, accentuating the traces and textures time has left on the building. A plastic artist boasting a wealth of experience as an art director and scenographer, Haro acts upon the Tabacalera space as if he were working on a grand opera. He draws us into an aesthetic action, structured by different languages in continuous dialogue and autonomy, making the space a narrative flux, underpinned by a great discursive and vital charge.

Haro does not keep secrets. He confronts us from the outset with a type of prologue, an evocative proposal titled *Obertura (Overture)*. This forceful piece receives us in fragmented form. Yet it forms a unity of concept that foreshadows the artist's intentionally heterogenous world.

The expressionism of this multidisciplinary intervention leads us along light and shadowy paths, acting to transform how the works and even the space manifest themselves. LA TREGUA, that tense lull, explores a circular conflict that places us simultaneously at points of departure and arrival. It is a multiple gaze that allows an emotional "stroll" through different spaces, where independent proposals come to materialise.

Ángel Haro is a multi-faceted artist who set out from painting to broaden his horizons and become a constructor of images, objects, volumes and light and sound architecture. He is now a creator of open landscapes of great intensity.

1. Looking over your career, it seems that you always return to painting with the same force with which you left it, as if this were something inevitable.

That's right, painting is my nuclear activity. For me, it's the most complex of all and it's where my commitment is at its greatest. I can't avoid a degree of suffering. I try to avoid this and feel comfortable but it's tough to do. Yet that same feeling is accompanied with an excitation that I don't feel in any other field. I'd say that there is something basic, perhaps telluric, in the act of painting that exerts an irresistible attraction on me. The encounter with the subject, its temperature, its density, its shifting, never ceases to amaze me. The chance to create a field of nature that is parallel to reality exercises in me a power that has remained intact ever since I was a boy. I still have pretty clear memories of when I discovered a specific colour. Now that I think about it, I really enjoy it, not just painting but seeing paint, visiting friends' studios etc. Considering that it's an out-of-time activity, meaning that it doesn't need "news" in order to happen, it can be activated by something very distant, very insignificant or that lends itself to little conceptualisation but it is born from an unbroken truth.

2. (Ángel Haro was very young when he began drawing, painting and building all type of objects and mechanical apparatuses) It seems to me that since your first exhibition at the age of 17 you have remained unshakeable despite the difficulties of surviving as an artist in Spain. Has it been or is it still a challenge, a conviction?

I had that conviction when I was very young but we all know about convictions; they can easily get watered down if you're open to the world. I think that my determination to keep going as an artist comes from my own relationship with the subject and the space. I can't find anything that has the power to absorb me as much as creative activity. I consider myself a social animal; I like being with people, talking, getting involved etc. But when I'm in the studio immersed in a piece, I don't need anyone, time passes very fast and it pisses me off when the phone rings. I suppose it's the same for most artists. There's also a therapeutic aspect, that's obvious. Honestly, if I didn't do this job my mental health wouldn't be the same or at least I wouldn't be able to face up to reality in the same way. A friend asked me recently if I'd ever gone to a psychiatrist and I replied that it was what I do every morning when I go into the studio. Then there's living off art, the financial aspect, "the rat race" as Gerard Lauzier called it. I've always seen this as a job that requires effort, the capacity to suffer and knowing how to enjoy the bits of recognition you receive. I think patience and the practice of the most radical freedom are key if you want to compensate for the difficulties. On balance, it's been worth it. Although you're right that it's especially difficult to work in this country. Paradoxically, when you go abroad they introduce you as a "Spanish artist" using the demonym as a kind of adjective, the implication being that you're the heir to a caste of creators.

3. You spent your childhood and adolescence in an artistic environment in Paris. Did this influence your decision to become an artist? Is there any trace of this in your work?

I am the son of a generation that had no choice but to leave Spain. My father, as well as being a great professional in the aeronautical industry, had a passion for art. He took me to museums and also painted with other amateurs. I remember visiting the Louvre, seeing the great 19th century paintings, the Egyptian rooms etc. I have a clear memory of the first time I saw *The Raft of the Medusa* by Géricault and those powerful historical paintings. It was as if they'd been painted by great giants and then I went home and tried to do something similar. At my house, creativity was really appreciated. My father had friends who were artists or actors and they came by. Jean-Paul Belmondo was one. They met in the May '68 strikes and from time to time he called round for my father; he was really keen to make my father an actor. One day, my father went with a

delegation to see Picasso and get him to support the strikers at the factory where he worked and Picasso gave them a bottle of Anís del Mono. The bottle was lying around at home for years; we called it “Picasso’s bottle”. Years later, when I saw his Cubist paintings I liked to think that the painted bottle was the one we had. That sort of thing was just amazing for a child. The Paris of the 1960s was fascinating, even for an emigrant, and my parents didn’t want to miss it or for us to miss it either. It was a key time for me.

4. (You have worked in a variety of Spanish cities like Madrid, Murcia, Valencia, Zaragoza, San Sebastian etc. In Madrid, you’ve exhibited your work at the Begoña Malone Gallery and the Marlborough Gallery, among other spaces. Last year, we had the opportunity to see a series of your audiovisual works that evoked Goya’s Black Paintings, the scenographies for Buero Vallejo’s work “El Sueño de la Razón” (*The Dream of Reason*), at the Círculo de Bellas Artes). It had been a while since you had been seen in Madrid. Tell us what you had been doing.

As I said, Spain is tough for artists and you need to leave and seek out new channels. During that time, I strengthened my relationship with foreign galleries, in New York, Paris and Johannesburg, and alternated this with scenographic work. The artistic direction in various film projects helped me experience the production system in industrial terms. I feel now that this type of experience is important for a plastic artist because it makes you understand what the team means and how to relate with the other jobs so you can achieve a product with an artistic purpose. This applies to cinema, opera or an artistic production. I worked with Wim Wenders on a project where the team were of three different nationalities and, therefore, three different production systems. In the end, you realise that you’re not on your own and that any of your decisions affects the rest of the project and that this is the same for everybody who participates. I then did opera and theatre and although there’s a greater creative freedom, the structure is essentially the same. These days, I have a close relationship with several contemporary theatre companies. When I work as a scenographer, I apply aesthetic systems and solutions that come from plastic art and when I create a personal art project, I almost instinctively introduce production systems that come from my theatre experience. At first, this worried me but now I do it deliberately. I’ve always been attracted by creative boundaries.

5. From your experience in different cities, which was the most stimulating to work in?

My most intense relationship at the moment is with Africa. I had spells working in the Sahara and on projects in Mozambique or South Africa with a variety of artists. Whenever I can, I visit the DAKART biennial in Senegal or the JOBURG ART FAIR in South Africa where I work with a gallery. What is

happening now in Africa has an amazing vitality and the artists pick up on it. Contemporary African art has the heartbeat of our first avant-gardes but it still hasn't got lost in the ceremonial liturgy of our artistic system. People have a direct relationship with their artists and the latter have yet to create the status of detachment that prevails on this side of culture. This experience has given me a more physical relationship with the pieces, not only in formal terms but also in terms of allowing the escape of the emotional side that produces such caution in us. I'm passionate about the avant-gardes of the interwar years and I started to travel to Africa in search of the start of that 20th century story, and needless to say I found a continent that was really different from the end of the colonial period. However, I'm not trying to play the primitive artist, I'm aware that I'm a Western artist and in debt to its "cultural pantheon", as Peter Brook says.

6. Your work keeps a balance but also a tension between the space, the line that crosses the light, and the subject matter that constructs spaces that play host to a world of shadows. Are you aware of that relationship?

That's where the baroque part that connects me with expressionism may lie. I'm interested in chiaroscuro, the suggestion of shadows and their evocative power that rules out any need for what is literal or explicit. The other day at the Prado, when I saw the breathtaking exhibition, LAS FURIAS, I realised how Ribera or Titian introduce a pictorial sub-text with figures in the penumbra that justify the excess of dark space. These pieces acquire their tension from the light on the bodies and its geometric arrangement that responds to the proportion of space. This theatricality is stunning. There's a lot of emotional truth in that "staging".

7. Lines are very important in your work. I see firm brushstrokes with blacks that leave no room for doubt. Is this something you strive for?

This isn't something that is merely expressive. I am technically trained. I quit my engineering studies but I love geometry and the problems of perception. Space, both three-dimensional and flat, is a territory that I'm interested in marking, walking, measuring, dividing. The brushstroke is a line on which a decisiveness, a will, is imposed. Accordingly, I like it to be precise, for it to come from a place and to go to another in particular. It is vital to know how to manage space in order to propose a certainty, an emotion. Otherwise, the viewer gets lost and you do too. The chair in Velazquez's *Portrait of Pope Innocent X* is separated from the background by a series of black, interwoven strokes that outline the figure. Such radical decisiveness works visually and gives the subject a character. You might say that abstract expressionism germinates in that space. I'm interested in "warming up" geometry with the inflections of gesture. You see this really well in Africa as they have a sophisticated system of structures and triangulation in their iconography and even in their primitive engineering,

but in an organic manner. That encounter between geometry and body language gives off a very special feeling.

8. “*Colours are light’s suffering and joy*”, Goethe said. In your case, suffering and joy are red, a colour that is ever-present in your work.

Yes, it’s a colour that I resort to very often. It’s easy for me to perceive how it sounds in combination with other reds, like a chorus of voices. I associate it with the night. Some of my pieces are nocturnal reds. It also produces an interesting elevation of the characters; I have sometimes used it in stage design. In the production of “*El Sueño de la Razón*” (*The Sleep of Reason*) by the Compañía Ferroviaria, Goya’s space is a red square that functions as a territory of auditory difference between Goya and the other characters.

9. In psychology, red is associated with danger, desire, violence, power, ambition, anger etc. What symbolic weight do you attach to it?

I wouldn’t like to say that I’m removed from these connotations but I never think about them. I prefer to reconnect with colour from the viewpoint of sound. I’m interested in how it vibrates.

10. You often talk about sonority, rhythm etc. How important are these factors in your work?

Sound is important for me; I work with rhythm and from rhythm. I think a good work should “sound” for it to be able to speak to the viewer and this involves composition, silence, counterpoint etc. A space cannot be conceived if you ignore its echo and the type of sonority produced whenever an element intervenes in it. It’s also true that I love music and its power of transmission is unsurpassable. It’s the only activity that enables us to speak to the gods face to face.

11. As a vital artist, you have passed through various stages and experimented in different languages like video, photography, drawing, sculpture, and engraving.

This might be down to my curiosity about processes; I am interested in any process that is capable of producing images, spaces, symbols etc. They are starting points, tools with which you can work according to the project. That doesn’t mean that I have an in-depth knowledge of each one but I take from each what I need at the time. At the same time, I learn from those languages and this leads me to create other pieces. I don’t subscribe to any specific tool; in my opinion, a pencil is as relevant as Photoshop, although they have different and complementary applications. I’ve always tried to work in a creative context; this led me to graphic design in the 1980s and to cinematic art direction in the early

1990s, although I'd already participated in 1987 in the Ministry of Culture's first "Video-Creación" Festival and in the photographers' workshops at the Círculo de Bellas Artes.

12. You are an artist who values space. So it seems that from the outset you were expected to move away from the traditional painting format. I remember in the "Talleres de Arte Actual" exhibition in 1991 organised by the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid, you presented some pieces that were clearly positioned between sculpture and installation. Is this when you started to expand your painting?

There's a lot of talk about the limits of painting through the concept of "expanded painting" as an extension of Rosalind Kraus's "sculpture in the expanded field". I think the aim is to link painting to an idea of permanent evolution/transformation that always returns it to the same place. What are cave paintings, the Sixtine Chapel, or a zebra crossings if not "expanded painting"? In my opinion, painting is now born expanded; it's just that at a certain historical moment it was placed inside a framework, but that's a temporary thing. There's a questionnaire that the sculptor David Smith conducts for his students where he considers the issue of limits in the following way:

Do you assert yourself and work in sizes comparable to your physical size or your aesthetic challenge or imagination? Is that size easel-size or table-size or room-size or a challenge to nature?

In primitive cultures, paintings were used for polychroming figures, the fronts of houses or bodies. So if painting returns to its natural space outside the framework we close the circle. I prefer to use a photographic prism like John Szarkowski's in "*Windows and Mirrors*", as I see my paintings as a fragment selected from a greater space or as what enters through a window. William Kentridge also talks of "what is seen through a window" when referring to his pieces. Sometimes, the glass of this window has a mirror effect and turns your gaze back on you.

13. In 2012 you created "ECO DE CICLOPES" (*Cyclops's Echo*), another intervention project, this time inside a huge mine, at the festival of Cante de las Minas de La Unión (*Mining Song from La Unión*). How did you go about it?

The project came from the experience of entering the Agrupa Vicenta mine after it was opened to the general public. The La Unión mining area is a brutal landscape, the victim of centuries of erosion as the result of mining, which has turned it into a telluric space of huge dimensions. I regularly go walking in this landscape, which possesses all the beauty of the catastrophe. Thinking about the

lives of these men and boys, their working conditions and all the literature and musical and oral culture that emanates from those mountains, inspired me to create an intervention in that space, 80 metres under the ground. I took the proposal to the organisers of the Cante de las Minas festival, they liked it and I got down to work. The idea was to get the pieces to mark a path on the descent to an oxidised lake that is located at the lowest level. I wanted to talk about the echo in the mine, a terrible echo with a strange beauty. There was something operatic about those dimensions. The conditions in the mine made it a difficult job; there's an internal humidity of 70%, with minerals in suspension. During the assembly, we would go up to the surface with our mouths full of minerals. I knew that the work was going to deteriorate quite a lot; over the month of the exhibition, many of the pieces were attacked by the humidity and fungi began to wear away the stands. I shuddered to think of the lungs of the people there.

14. Do you agree that sadness is created by an intervention in an empty space with a history, a use and the involvement of many lives?

Yes, empty spaces have that about them. I'm not someone who believes in the paranormal but it's clear that there's something heavy in these places that gets to you. The passage of time is also the weight of time and when you work in a space like that, you can't avoid this. In these cases, the work must be understood from this echo if you don't want it to become an interference. On the other hand, it's tempting to break that silence...or perhaps the right thing is to leave it be, I don't know.

15. LA TREGUA (*The Truce*) is of a multidisciplinary nature and is more spatial than "ECO DE CICLÓPES". How did you go about this project and what does it mean to you to work with all the elements in combination with a specific space?

First of all, it's always a challenge to face a space like the Tabacalera. The power of architecture is great, and also the traces and textures in themselves make for an evocative proposal. When I start a project like this, I try to note down instinctive things that arise from the initial contacts. Then I look for information, I do some research and create an intervention plan. I try to work freely by following an outline that acts as a link between the pieces and the space. I create a summary that I don't follow to the letter, however, as it can vary during the process. It's vital that a piece can be replaced with another or that its position in the space can change with regard to the initial idea. One thing is the project on paper and another is the physical relationship of the pieces that demand to be located in a certain way. I don't like fixed projects where I have to work without feeling. I have tried to create a journey where the viewer becomes involved with the pieces and the space. To do so, I have resorted to solutions that are more stagey, if you like. There's a degree of theatricality that I believe

to be necessary to evoke this and this is supported by the illumination and the sound space that are vital to the proposal, without the discourse ever being invaded. This is a way of competing with the space, I can't deny it. It's a type of challenge that energises me.

16. The title of your intervention: LA TREGUA (*The Truce*) conjures up a concept that suggests a conflict. Would it be fair to say that in this case there's a political aspect to your work?

We know that all art is political but, as I said before, my work isn't activated by news although I can't deny that, as a citizen, I'm interested in politics. However, I like proposals to be polysemous; I have no wish to compete with news programmes nor do I try to be messianic. It's extraordinary how easy it is for us sometimes to take the pulpit and lay down the law even though we find it hard to manage our own lives. LA TREGUA could be a geopolitical concept but it is also an intimate state, like a humming in the ears that warns us that something is about to happen. I define it as a multiple tale on the latent conflict that concerns us every day and this conflict can occur at multiple levels. There are personal experiences, however small, that sometimes mark us more than collective ones and we can't do anything about it. We are hyper-informed and often what we retain from all that information is the issue that most affects us. Often what is vibrating in us for days is not the thing that fuels our ideological programme the most. Some people have no problems with this type of thing but I'm always surprised by what I retain. Nor am I naïve, if I install a shipwreck in a gallery I know perfectly well the types of associations that will be made. What's interesting is to set it up so that as well as these, other less obvious associations are activated and they are present too.

17. Nearing our conclusion, I'd like you to tell me about one of the pieces and its role within the installation as a whole.

Perhaps the one that gives rise to the name of the intervention: LA TREGUA because it functions as the skin-map-landscape of this tale. It is the piece responsible for leading the viewer along the journey like a dorsal fin and the one that most engages itself with the space. It's a piece in which the viewer has to move to fully read it and so it works with two superposed times, the one that implicitly marks its execution and the time taken by the spectator to walk around it. It breaks the relationship of the instantaneousness of the plastic experience by bringing it closer to a musical score or a tale where time becomes an inescapable element. It might be where you'll find the "expanded painting" you referred to before.

18. I feel that despite its scenographic nature, this project provides an accurate summary of your artistic background.

It's true that at the end you always stamp your obsessions onto each work more or less consciously. This time, due to the type of space and the production possibilities, I have been able to create proposals that on other occasions have been more limited. Also, the risk has been greater in the sense of creating a central strand through them while avoiding literality. I wanted to work each space autonomously like in a book of short stories. When I began the project, I was greatly inspired by an Italo Calvino book that I'd read years ago, "*If On A Winter's Night A Traveller*". The protagonist is the actual reader because he or she is the only link that passes through all of them, although they themselves are connected in an unorthodox fashion. It's fascinating how an author can talk in different tones but still be the same person. In life, we don't repeat the same discourse constantly, our tone changes according to whom we are talking but we remain ourselves. I defend the right to plurality in language and heterodoxy. Going back to the intervention, the aim was to establish a link between the pieces – sojourns that go beyond the formal sphere, and, despite everything, for there to be unity. That was the challenge.

Julieta de Haro
Exhibition curator