

PEDRO PARICIO, BETWEEN TRADITION AND AVANT-GARDE

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‘Let me hear no more of this absurd maxim: “We need the new, we must follow our century, everything changes, everything is changed.” Sophistry – all of it! Does nature change, do light and air change, have the passions of the human heart changed since the time of Homer? “We must follow our century”: but if my century is wrong? Because my neighbour does evil, am I therefore obliged to do it also? Because you are ignorant of virtue as well as beauty, I must be ignorant in turn, I must imitate you!’¹

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres

‘Tradition’ is a loaded term in art history. It typically embodies everything the twentieth-century avant-garde reacted against, defining by contrast its very identity. Modernity revolted against the normalising functions of tradition; this is the dictum. As Rosalind Krauss has noted, ‘the self as origin is the way an absolute distinction can be made between a present experienced *de novo* and a tradition-laden past. The claims of the avant-garde are precisely these claims to originality.’² In an historical period after post-modernism is still looking for a definition, Pedro Paricio keeps finding the need to confront the history of art, as he thinks through the question of originality at the present time. In line with Ingres’ thoughts on art – an artist unsurprisingly crucial in Paricio’s art-historical pantheon – and Clement Greenberg’s vision of modernist painting, Paricio has argued that: ‘Today there is the idea, which is totally wrong to me, that if you are young, you should be opposed to tradition. That tradition is boring. It’s an idea that was born out of the avant-garde at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The idea of breaking completely with the past. But you need a past, a history that you can break’ – observations which could not be more relevant to his new body of work.³ Rather than violating or endangering the great tradition, Paricio reinvigorates it through his resolute commitment to doing things his way.

Pablo Picasso, another Spaniard who constantly engaged with tradition and whose work Paricio knows deeply, often spoke of being accompanied by other artists whenever he entered his studio: ‘I have a feeling that Delacroix, Giotto, Tintoretto, El Greco, and the rest, as well as all the modern painters, the good and the bad, the abstract and the non-abstract, are all standing behind me watching me at work.’⁴ Picasso discussed his dialogues with those he saw as his great predecessors in terms of ‘collaborations’, a concept that implies not only a sense of comradeship but also that a linear vision of history and chronology are irrelevant. He famously explained to the artist and dealer Marius de Zayas in 1923 that to him ‘there is no past or future in art. If a work of art cannot always live in the present, it must not be considered at all.’⁵ Likewise, Paricio works alone in his studio, seeking a personal connection to the artworks he chooses to reference in his own works. There is a sense of collaboration with his illustrious forerunners, rather than competition, without going in the same direction as Picasso, who viewed style as a set of historically changing codes from which the artist might choose and recombine. Nevertheless, there is imitation, adaptation, impersonation, identification, travesty, elision, caricature in Paricio’s work and never passive acceptance. His references and allusions create variations that

are different from other forms of citation. A variation implies that the formal structure of a specific work of art is used as the basis for a new one, while style, technique and content undergo transformation. Thus, it can only be understood in relation to its generating source, which the viewers must recognise and bridge, thereby demanding their intellectual participation.

As Paricio's oeuvre grows, his *musée imaginaire* becomes increasingly richly stocked. The masters who have inspired his recent artistic output range from an anonymous Russian icon painter of the fifteenth century to KAWS, and include Vermeer, Rembrandt, Fragonard, Sargent, Van Gogh, Klimt, Picasso, Dalí, Warhol, Basquiat. After his previous body of Picasso-inspired works, Paricio's canvases of 2020–21 reveal a new focus of attention: David Hockney. Paricio says he was drawn to Hockney as he sees him as the last great painter in the Romantic tradition, an artist who has managed to continue and develop this lineage, adopting studio practices Paricio holds in high esteem.⁶ That said, both have worked extensively from photographs and reproductions (Paricio is an avid reader and jokingly admits that 'books are with art and family my three passions'). The layers of meaning Paricio adds to Hockney's 1972 *Mount Fuji and Flowers* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) in his *Winter* are exemplary of his artistic practice. Like Hockney, Paricio employs multiple painterly manners: from the delicate, dripping washes of colour-field painting in the treatment of Mount Fuji, while the white jonquils and vase in the foreground are rendered in a hard-edged style. The image itself is also a composite. Hockney himself worked from a postcard of Mount Fuji and a flower-arrangement manual, rather than direct observation. Paricio's *Winter* is therefore the result of a heavily digested image, as well as of a conceptual operation far more complex than it appears.

In his way of looking at his predecessors, Paricio shows a soft spot for portraiture and the human figure, a tendency relating to the strong narrative and biographical aspect he thinks art always had and should have. No wonder he is so drawn to Picasso, whose work he sees as '100% autobiography'. Paricio embraces what Rosalind Krauss famously rejected as 'an art history of the proper name'.⁷ Confronting artists who have intentionally constructed and represented themselves in their art, such as Rembrandt or Van Gogh – uncoincidentally admired by Picasso as well – Paricio has created two key works in the exhibition: *Variable Self-Portrait* and *The New Old School*. Their titles bespeak their allegorical quality in the sense that Craig Owens attributed to this term vis-à-vis tradition, as do other paintings such as *The Classic*, *Life* and *Sempiternal*.⁸ Even when his works verge towards the abstract, Paricio wants there to be a narrative element for the viewer to dwell upon. For the spectator, all this cannibalising of 'high' art can be bewildering if not outrageous, especially when the effect is clichéd or crude, as in *The Model* after Vermeer's iconic *Girl with a Pearl Earring*. The aura of Vermeer, Rembrandt or Ingres and of the whole European tradition serves to raise Paricio's painting above the circumstances of its creation, encouraging the spectator to project onto it the cultural associations of that tradition and to respond to the puns and metaphors that enrich the banal imagery, establishing the lyrically ecstatic mood his flamboyant colours and harlequinesque

figures convey. A form of dramatisation takes place without recourse to a literary subject.

'For me tradition is basic in art, culture, and life', Paricio has revealed in conversation with the author, 'but tradition is not there to be taken as it is ... but to be studied, to be learnt from, to take whatever you can take and bring it back to life in your time and your own way. This is art, something that is always vital, but changing with the times ... it is permanent as the times move forward and the richness of true art makes it alive forever, teaching and pushing us forever.' This sense of vitality of the past and the power to recycle the history of art in terms of one's own ever-questioning self further connect Paricio to Picasso. Discussing with the prominent French intellectual André Malraux the latter's concept of the 'museum without walls', Picasso effectively described the feeling of past artists being alive and living with him: 'I paint against the canvases that are important to me, but I paint in accord with *everything that's still missing* from that Museum of yours ... You've got to make what doesn't exist, what has never been made before. That's painting: for a painter it means wrestling with painting.'⁹ It is precisely this wrestle, this unceasing challenge, that I see perfectly expressed in Paricio's rendition of the icon of Saint George on horseback slaying the dragon, a painting which he has in fact titled simply *The Painter*.

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Jan Vermeer, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, c.1665-66. Oil on canvas, 39 x 44.5 cm. Mauritshuis, The Hague, The Netherlands

Endnotes

- 1 Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, from his Notebooks, in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory, 1815–1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell (1998), p. 184.
- 2 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1985), p. 157.
- 3 For Paricio's thoughts, see Francesca Gavin, 'Future, Present, Past: Pedro Paricio' in *Pedro Paricio: Master Painters*, London: Halcyon Gallery, (2011), p. 9. Cf. Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting' in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (eds), *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, Oxford, UK and Malden, MA: Blackwell (2003), p. 778: 'Modernism has never meant anything like a break with the past. It may mean a devolution, an unravelling of anterior tradition, but it also means its continuation. Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break, and wherever it ends up it will never stop being intelligible in terms of the continuity of art.'
- 4 See Hélène Parmelin, *Picasso Plain; An Intimate Portrait*, New York: St. Martin's Press (ND) p. 77.
- 5 Dore Ashton, (ed.), *Picasso on Art: A Selection of Views*, New York: Viking (1972), p. 4.
- 6 For a better understanding of what the Romantic tradition means, see the classic by Robert Rosenblum, *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, New York: Harper & Row (1975).
- 7 Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press (1985), p. 39.
- 8 See Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism', in Brian Wallis (ed.), *Art After Modernism*, New York and Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art (1984), pp. 203–35. 'Allegory first emerged in response to a similar sense of estrangement from tradition; throughout its history it has functioned in the gap between a present and a past which, without allegorical reinterpretation, might have remained foreclosed. A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present: these are its two most fundamental impulses.'
- 9 André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston (1976), p. 135.