The relationship of the hand with the machine has not only been unstable in the field of industry, of the production of consumer goods throughout the modern era, but also in the field of art, in the production of objects created with an aesthetic purpose and as fundamental containers of ideas. Twentieth-century art inevitably echoed the qualitative turn involved in moving from creation to production. This lexicon clearly reflects an itinerary that, in the case of Joan Rabascall, can be seen in the three decades of work encompassed in this exhibition.

What this characterisation allows is above all the progress of the production techniques of the work deeply rooted in the technical methods for the dissemination of images: photographic reproduction and the proliferation of printed mass distribution media. Since the 1960s we have witnessed the passage from a printed iconographic culture to a television one, which is not accidental: we can see, for instance, the transition from a lasting iconographic culture, where the images are still and expressed within the limits of the sheet of paper, towards the image that does not survive, that is volatile and in permanent motion, that constantly replaces itself. From the printed page to the screen, the landscape of the media is not a distant entity, far from daily life; it constitutes the very atmosphere of all perception. This media operates according to specific and determined laws that the artist must interpret and make explicit in order not to be confused by them. The tradition of the artist who "reads" the media as in the past painters used to "read" nature, the city, the faces represented in the portraits, coincided with the birth of the past century. Thus, we seek antecedents in order to make genealogies known and we see that the ruptures and experiments of the past are our traditions of today. Modernism generates its own traditions beyond the classical materials and principles.

The art of Joan Rabascall is expressed as tableaux; that is, it forms part of a tradition of representation and aesthetic channelling related to the fine arts and the conventions of narrative and perception characteristic of modern bourgeois painting.1 They are therefore domestic tableaux, of sizes and execution going back to a space where life develops in the private sphere. They will only change formats and materials insofar as the manual production of the works gives way to the techniques of photographic reproduction, the photographic emulsion on canvas allowing the conjugation of the characteristics of reproducibility specific to photography with painting materials. Russian constructivists practised and theorised this transition from the hand to the machine in an environment that discovered objectivity as an ethical position of the artist faced with a world that had to be changed, mainly the relations of values associated with the aesthetic experience and its nature. Rodchenko, Tatlin, Lissitzky, among many others, took painting to a conclusion within the paradigm of modernism while introducing technical

---

processes of composition and execution and opened the door to the emergence of the photo collage around 1919.2

Rabascall’s early works are collages made up of images printed on paper that clearly come from magazines and other publications, combined with coloured stains on the surface of the painting. Here we see, therefore, two applications of the hand: that which distributes the colour with an abstract and almost gestural aim and that which selects and arranges the different iconographic components as if someone were making up highly dense miniatures. Both abstract and photographic, these works get close to the combinatory principles of the real and the imaginary and move away from the surrealist imagery that had dominated the panorama of the most recent painting. A collage on wood from 1964 entitled La Fragilité des apparences is, however, structured around a Cartesian and rational spatial organisation. Made up in the form of vignettes on the same level, we already find here some of the main themes that Rabascall would explore in later years; that is, the construction of the stereotype of the image of the woman as a sexual object and the object of desire for male eyes. Nudes, cosmetics, the reduction of identity to specific parts of the body, etc., would gradually be linked to other clichés of mass, consumer and object culture.

Rabascall is one of the fundamental artists to understand the formulation of an art that in Europe reacts against the massification of the production of objects and consumerism in a very different way from the United States. Beyond the classification of North American Pop art, which reproduces the fascination for the serialisation of objects, forms and contents just as they are, Rabascall, like Richard Hamilton, reacts with irony and a spirit of condemnation. The industrialisation and massification of the media fragments the world. The emergence of the masses, a typically modern episode of society, equates the individual with a consumer and the city with a shop. Advertising imposes its seductive and charming efficacy. Rabascall “diverts” the effects of advertising with the means typical of communication, in the way that Situationists “divert” methods of action and systems of meanings.

The emergence of European Pop art has highly different roots from those of North American Pop art: they are roots intimately linked to the political dissidence of the post-war period and to a position contrary to certain canons of modernism that rejects the isolation of art with respect to life and denies the distancing of aesthetics with respect to politics. The formalism that dominated the art of the immediate post-war period clashed with the reading of the new generations of artists that throughout the old continent envisaged artistic practice as a socially significant tool of political

---


Faktura also meant at this point, and not for Rodchenko alone, incorporating the technical means of construction into the work itself and linking them with existing standards of the development of the means of production in society at large. [...] Faktura is therefore the historically logical aesthetic correlative to the introduction of industrialization and social engineering that was imminent in the Soviet Union after the revolution of 1917,” p. 54.
reflection and action. In this way, they connected with the avant-gardes of the first decades of the past century, and with the realisation that art can only be active. Art must not represent the reality surrounding the artist but rather understand it in order to change it. For the European artists of the late 1950s, the constitution of a new culture cannot restore the hierarchies of the old one and cannot be made with the same materials. This is what pushed Constant Nieuwenhuys, among other artists, to imagine a new world through new forms of collectiveness and creativity; this was what also pushed him to abandon painting to start behaving as an architect and propagandist of his new model of communal life, based on the pleasure of the game: the city is the result of the action of the resident. The Independent Group in London, and the International Situationist, addressed this mission of art with diverse instruments and attitudes: *Parallel of Life and Art*, the exhibition of the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London at the end of 1953, resumed the idea of exhibition as a device of experience advocated by Russian constructivists but also by the First Dada Exhibition in 1920. The iconography and the variety of materials and formats proposed the suppression of the hierarchical division between high culture and popular culture in a clearly programmatic way. Rabascall was able to see these contributions in trips made with Miralda to London in 1963 and in the following years, just after having settled in Paris. There he got acquainted with Lawrence Alloway, an essential theoretician of the art of that time who, in the late 1950s, had coined the term “Pop art” (together with Richard Hamilton). However, for Alloway, the term Pop did not come from the fascination with the industrial object destined for consumption but from the media.

---

Nevertheless, we can only align Rabascall’s work in the early 1960s with Pop art with great care. Like Hamilton, Rabascall denounces the excesses and the hypocrisy of consumer ideology. Once the constraints characteristic of the long decade of reconstruction in the 1950s were overcome, the aesthetics of plenty – as Alloway calls it – disguises the transformation of the individual into a consumer and the emancipating will of art in its subrogation as a decorative element for neo-bourgeois interiors. Rabascall knows well the absence of consumer objects, the absence of what we call design and the rigours of the post-post-war, from the Barcelona of the 1940s and 1950s. Paris, in 1962, must have shocked him with its abundance of objects, signs and messages, a shock in realising that there is a history of modernity and that within this history there are diverse and divergent modernities.

Rabascall belongs to the ambit of the French avant-garde of the early 1960s, but his first references are British and similarities with works by Joe Tilson, Eduardo Paolozzi, Nigel Henderson or John McHale cannot be ignored, where cuttings from publications of very diverse kinds which appeared in highly dense accumulations of graphic and textual information are used. They are not ready-mades: they are articulated based on an ordered and serial logic, now organic and often related with occasionally pictorial programmes. Dialogue, a collage on canvas from 1967, makes clear the criticism of consumerism while approaching the world of comics through the use of the bubbles that contain the dialogues. In the biggest bubble, an accumulation of commercial brands and advertising slogans; in the smallest, the image of money. In any case, Mass Media (1967) is perhaps the most emblematic in this series, in the sense that it encapsulates the centre of gravity of the artist’s interests at this moment. The work is a kind of alphabet, an enumeration of the forms and messages of the printed media that at that moment was already beginning to be substituted by the medium of television. In the same year, La Super-Femme inaugurates a set of
works that focus on the image of the woman and the way that the media constructs stereotypes as an object of consumption. Sex and consumption equal pornography.

Rabascall is well acquainted with Jacques de la Villeglé’s decollages and the new iconographic and objectual declinations of the Nouveaux Réalistes. Friend of Pierre Restany, with whom he maintained a long relationship, he closely followed the evolution of the world of art with great discretion and modesty. His is not an art that can be made fashionable in a determined moment: it is like a negation of art and of the society of his time. Although around 1974 we find him associated with the sociological art group, this affiliation is extremely brief and the artist himself breaks it as he does not feel part of aesthetic groups. For a brief period we will find Joan Rabascall contributing to the “rituals” that artists such as Miralda, Dorothée Selz, Jaume Xifra and Benet Rossell organise in Paris.5 The rituals are not performances or actions: the creators do not exhibit themselves as such or take on a determined role. They are not yet theatre plays that depend on a dramaturgy and the stages are mobile and diverse. They are not works of land art although they take place in natural settings outside the urban roar. The critic Alexandre Cirici associates Joan Rabascall with this artistic typology in a determined moment, even though the artist is not present for long as a participant in the organisation of events that often become unpredictable situations. Rabascall returns to the formats and conventions of a very specific form of art, which allows him to be precise in the representation of the relations between idea, material execution and technical procedure.

It is from 1968 that the collages begin to give way to the new techniques such as the photographic emulsion on canvas or the prints on metal. Two later series move away, however, from the thematic of the mass media and herald a very specific concern in relation with history and its transmission. A first series from 1975 combines two kinds of images by simply placing them one upon the other. On the one hand images show the

---

5 In 1970, the art critic Alexandre Cirici wrote about Rabascall: “Very often we find the name of Rabascall among the promoters of research events, in Paris, in London or in Amsterdam. In recent times, we find him linked to the curious phenomenon of the revival of the ceremonial. But in Catalonia he is still not widely known.”
places where the Nazi regime in the Second World War had located concentration camps around the German geography. On the other hand, and with the same size, postcards aimed at tourist consumption situate us before the same places thirty years later. One geography conceals another. The wild landscapes, the stockbreeding, the architecture and the traditional dress do not finally ignore the valorisation of a kind “of spirit of places”, typically Romantic and… picturesque, which contrast with the desolation and generic character of the demolished places that had housed the installations of horror. Rabascall operates with a formula of association of images that transcends the nature of the monument as an instrument of materialisation of memory. They are, therefore, anti-monumental images but aimed at the heart of the constitution or destitution of collective memory as an ideological landscape of the present. They are precise incisions in the mechanisms through which institutional history shakes off the most troublesome burdens.

A second series from 1982, Paisatges Costa Brava, which closes the chronological spectrum of this exhibition, brings us closer to home, allowing us to see places on the coast where the imprint of tourism can be read on the different possible declinations: the parks of boat trailers next to the beach, the modern constructions beside the sea, the open-air garden shops, the rubbish, the forests of advertising posters mixed with the signposts… In each of these images we can read the word “landscape” in the tourists’ own languages: French, English, Catalan, German, Spanish and Italian. At the start of the 1980s, Rabascall suspects what we now know for certain: that tourism, here and everywhere inexorably and irremediably transforms the territory it exploits, physically, visually, linguistically and humanly. Tourism as a temporal migration and as
a superimposition of realities whose coexistence is uncertain and short-lived. We can recall here works created in the 1960s that remind us of the investments of foreign companies in Spain during General Franco’s dictatorship. Investments that, fundamentally based on tourism and infrastructures, drive an autarchic economy towards liberal capitalism still familiar to us, and which possibly prepare the model of intensive and exhaustive exploitation of the territory. Tourism, television, culture, territory, place… have played a major part in key episodes of a corpus of work that tells us more about the world around us than the internal logics of other aesthetic regimes. Rabascall is a selective not an extensive producer. He produces works of modest dimensions and complex themes. Although, on the one hand, he brings clarity and transparency to the sphere of relations of value within European culture, on the other he adds density and reveals dark corners.

It will not be until well into the 1980s that he will try the languages of sculpture and installation, which, otherwise, extend the technique of the constructivist and largely ironic collage. His Monuments à la télévision, as well as the series La Leçon de peinture, attract the viewer’s attention, on the one hand, to the most idiotic versions of the effects of the television set and its role as a contemporary idol and, on the other, to the loss of aesthetic and ethical consistency of a painting devoid of reason, like that which inundates the markets and the media from the start of the 1980s.

---

6 See, for example, the works: Franco hace deporte (1975) and Autopistas Concesionaria Española S.A. (1974), in the series Spain is different.