

Perejaume, performed.*

Marcia Tucker

There are certain works of art that, once seen, remain indelible in the mind's eye. When I first saw a photograph by Perejaume of several rows of red velvet theater seats set up in a desert, the image stopped me in my tracks. My mind was suddenly filled with questions. Had the seats been thrown away? If so, why? They were in perfectly good condition. Were their occupants about to come back? What was something that clearly belonged inside doing outside? And why in such a desolate place? The piece made me both laugh and think. An audience, after all, would sit there for a purpose, assuming that something was going to be presented to it, and theater seats suggest a setting designed specifically for that purpose. But the desert is, of course, the opposite of a traditional theater hall with proscenium stage, and in this case, the audience hadn't arrived yet—if in fact it ever would. In 1990, the New Museum of Contemporary Art invited Perejaume to do a site-specific piece for its Broadway Window. The resulting work, *Pintura i representació* (Painting and Representation; p. 82), which opened in May of 1991, delighted everyone. The piece consisted of two rows of blue velvet theater seats installed in the window, facing the street. A door was cut to provide access to the long, narrow space, and visitors could enter without having to pass the admissions desk. Those adventurous souls who climbed in and sat down were amused and beguiled by the spectacle of people and activity in the street, and often stayed put for a considerable length of time. Passers-by, in turn, were fascinated by the seated people inside who, while watching them, animatedly talked to each other, pointing and laughing at what they saw, and in general creating a spectacle of their own. In one simple, grand gesture, Perejaume rendered the museum permeable, its inside and its outside engaged in a literal dialogue with each other.

In addition to the work that first beguiled me, and the New Museum installation, there are a series of works by Perejaume, all of them with the same title, *Pintura i representació*. Seats from the Teatro Maria Guerrero were installed in the window of the Galeria Montenegro in Madrid in 1988; five rows from the Palau de la Música Catalana were placed on the steps of the Roman theater of Sagunto, near Valencia, and photographed (p. 82). Variations on these theater motifs have appeared in his work almost from the beginning. In the late 1970s, he painted surreal landscapes which included characters, like Pierrot, drawn from the traditional popular theater. Several paintings from the '80s contain images of empty theater seats or balconies, or of people looking out



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from them onto a vast landscape of abstract, painted canvas. By 1986, the idea of the painting and of nature itself as spectacle, and of the viewer as participant in a complex dialogue between illusion and representation, became central to his work.

As he treats concepts in all his work, Perejaume plays with the idea of theater by crisscrossing a variety of media and themes. In one of the tiny paintings of *Retable* (Retable 1995; p. 84-87), we see the silhouettes of people from the rear, looking obliquely at an empty stage which occupies less than half the painting, while curtains occupy the other half. The image, despite its modest size, raises questions about the relationship between theatrical and painterly illusions. Are these simply two different kinds of representation? Is this a kind of conceptual doubling, wherein those of us who are looking at the painting are mimicking the spectators inside it who are looking at the theater? Where does meaning reside—in the viewer, in the work itself, or in the interstices between the two?

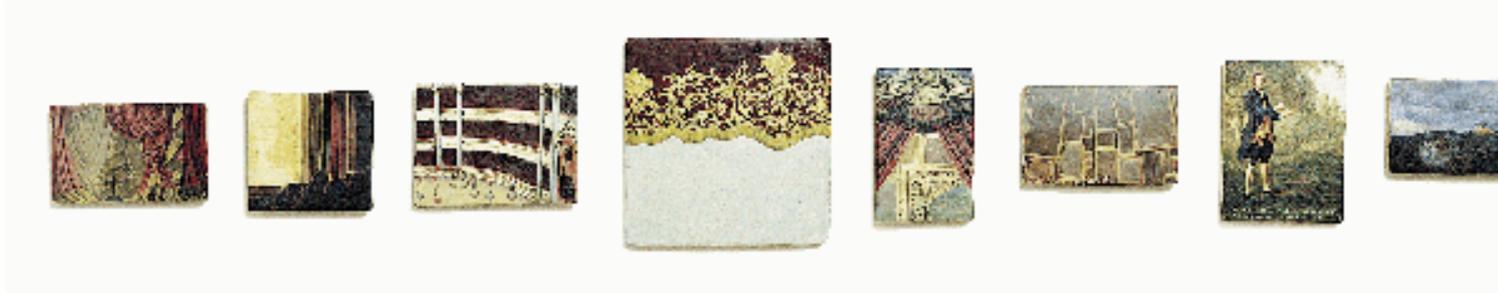
Another small painting of *Retable* shows the top of a curtain, parted under an ornate entablature to reveal fragments of framed paintings behind it. Here, the implied spectacle is that of floor-to-ceiling paintings, and nothing more. Or should I say, “nothing less”? For, in terms of illusion, these “staged” paintings are plays within plays, plays on representation.

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- 1 **Painting and Representation** 1988
Galería Montenegro, Madrid
(Seats from the Teatro María Guerrero)
- 2 **Painting and Representation** 1991
The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
- 3 **Painting and Representation** 1989
Roman theater of Sagunt
(Seats from the Palau de la Música Catalana)
- 4 **Painting and Representation** 1989
Ebro Delta
(Seats from the Palau de la Música Catalana)
Photograph. 135 x 122 cm.

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Retaule 1995
(Retable)
Oil on wood. 15 pieces

In fact, in yet another painting of *Retaule*, the heads of a group of spectators located at the very bottom stare up at the same floor-to-ceiling paintings, this time minus images. Typically, Perejaume also made a sculpture, entitled *Intempèrie I* (Open Air I, 1993; p. 224-228), a free-standing chamber composed of empty frames, gilded side in, providing, in effect, a room of imaginary paintings, whereby the viewer is privy only to his or her own envisioning.

In another work of 1988 a single ornate gilt frame “captures” a mountain top by configuring nature as a representation rather than a reality (p. 104). Perejaume’s photograph shows us the top of a mountain range in which the landscape of its peak is literally framed by a gilded wooden frame which appears to have been melted in order to conform to the mountain’s contours.

The same frame was also shown independent of the mountains, on a gallery floor, startling viewers by its peculiar, contorted shape and enormous size (3 m x 4 m x 50 cm). The audacious scale of a work like this relates to Perejaume’s “pessebrisme”, the use of small-scale fragments of nature as a stand-in for its life-sized counterpart through manipulation of the scale of objects which surround it. The Catalan term “pessebre” refers to the commonplace practice of using pieces of bark to represent mountain landscapes in homemade crèche scenes; Perejaume’s gigantic frame, by taming, reconfiguring, and transforming a mountaintop into a painting, has created a pessebrism in reverse. A related work, *Teló* (Curtain 1992; p. 90), is a painting of an enormous red and gold theater curtain laid on the tops of the mountains, as if by the hand of a giant god. It brings together concepts of staging and transformation of scale as a way of locating and identifying aspects of nature as art. Thus it is linked to yet another series of photographic works in which a part of the ocean is isolated by a gold frame floating on its surface, or identified as an illustration by large iron letters spelling out “fig. 1” and “fig. 2”, placed on the sand and photographed. These pieces exemplify the nonlinear and interconnected nature of Perejaume’s thinking, by which every piece refers to an aspect of another piece, at once clarifying and complicating an individual work and the body of related works.

To my mind, Perejaume’s most magical and extraordinary work is a recent one, part of a four-



part exhibition called *Girona, Sant Pol, Pineda, la Vall d'Oo*, done in the summer of 1997. Upon the empty stage of the ornate, late nineteenth-century municipal theater of Girona, Perejaume constructed a floor-to-ceiling multi-paneled sheet of glass where the curtain would ordinarily hang (p. 98-99). The theater was open to the public, as an art gallery would be, and the empty stage itself, separated from viewers by the glass, was the real spectacle. Across the street in a small space used normally for exhibitions, the word *Pintors!* (Painters!) was spelled out on the floor in large letters composed of alternating blocks of sugar and salt (p. 222). By using the gallery space in which to place the word “*Pintors!*” (interpretable both as an admonition and a rallying cry), Perejaume addresses absent painters, who will never—can never?—appear. For one thing, this is a venue in which individual painters haven’t “*Painted*” anything; for another, the “*real*” painter is a fiction, and the word “*Pintors!*” is nothing more than a linguistic representation posing as a sculpture, which in turn poses as a domestic conceit, consisting as it does of singularly unpainterly materials, i.e., sugar and salt.

In Sant Pol de Mar, Perejaume took paintings from the local museum and laid them out on a mountain site, entitling the resulting work *Retable: fons del Museu de Pintura de Sant Pol de Mar* (Retable: collection of the Sant Pol de Mar Museum of Painting; p. 32). In the small town of Pineda, a local storefront displayed Perejaume’s round photographs, taken looking down into the town’s wells (p. 143); he named each image after the house where each well was. In Vall d’ Oo, high in the mountains, particles of dust collected from the restoration of an altarpiece in Sant Martí de Llanera were burnt and, as a new altarpiece, were “*restored*” back into the air.

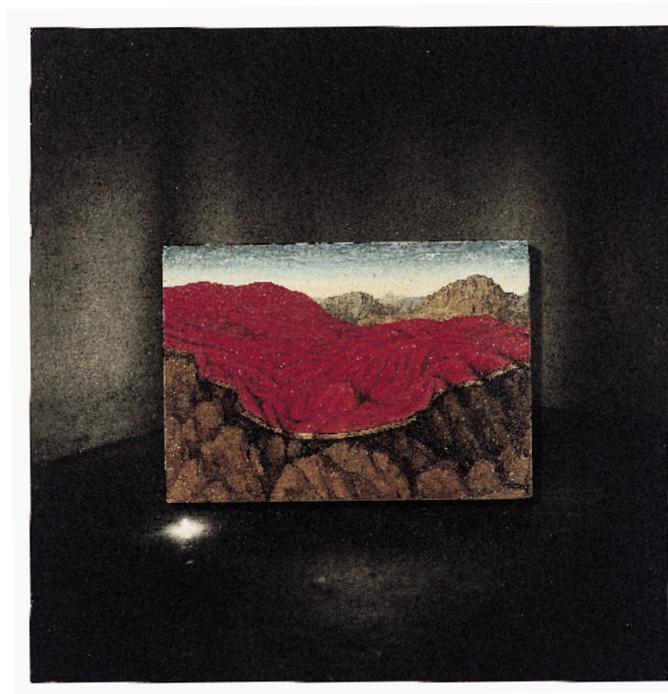
What kind of art work is this? Neither painting, sculpture, installation, nor theater, it defies categorization, suggesting a multi-layered, site-specific group of works closer in feeling to contemporary performance art practice. Unlike traditional theater, this practice isn’t based on pre-existing characters—nor, for that matter, on characters at all—but on making the artist’s process of seeing and thinking performative, and thereby available to others.

In the Girona *Retaule* the use of the theater space as a metaphysical spectacle alters its usual role, which is to present an illusion—a performed representation of “reality”, constructed so as to suspend disbelief on the part of the audience—rather than to re-present the “real,” or the everyday, the ordinary. People usually go to the theater to see a performance and interact with each other only minimally, e.g., laughing and applauding. Nevertheless if the function of theater is, as the critic Margaret Wilkerson recently defined it, to provide “an opportunity for a community to come together and reflect upon itself,”¹ then Perejaume’s piece carries this out by transforming the space of the theater into a social space within which audience members—in this case visitors—become players as well as viewers. The audience for this complex conceptual work, at a site fairly remote from the usual art venues, was mostly townspeople, art-oriented visitors and some occasional tourists. As for the other locations, in Sant Pol, friends and neighbors of Perejaume were the “viewers”; at Pineda de Mar, the audience was made up almost exclusively of townspeople, many of whom were the owners of the wells depicted there. And in la Vall d’Oo, there were few, if any, spectators other than the artist himself.

The title of this exhibition, like several others by the artist, is a series of place names, whereas the titles of related works dealing with the specific imagery of the theater center on issues of painting and representation. But like all of Perejaume’s works they share the characteristic interplay of images and words, in addition to temporal and spatial displacements, which confound the real, the illusory, the representational, and the pictorial.

Perejaume’s “theater” pieces have neither actors nor audience in any traditional sense. With the exception of the New Museum’s window and of the Galería Montenegro, the plush seats of the *Pintura i representació* works are always empty, eternally waiting to be filled or “performed”. In *Sant Pol de Mar* (1990), the “actors” are books, a mound of bark, and the statue from a public fountain, introduced by a single photograph of the empty stage, then shown in paired photographs with the objects first *in situ*, then at center stage. Here the dialogue between public and private is such that interior, domestic objects are made to “perform” for an implied audience, while outdoor objects, accessible to all, are resituated as unwitting and solitary performers in an unnamed drama.²

Such pieces turn the commonplace into art through displacement, making meaning accessible as part of everyday experience and emphasizing the importance of process over product. At the same time, Perejaume’s work is playful, imbued with the imaginative, spontaneous, animated quality that characterizes the artist himself. His playfulness belongs more to the court jester



Teló 1992. (Curtain)
Oil on wood and on photography. 29.5 x 29 cm.

than to the child, informed as it is by intelligence, wit, imagination, and mental agility rather than unselfconscious pleasure. On the other hand, Perejaume deflects any attribution of urbane cosmopolitanism to his character; instead he presents himself as a person deeply tied to local regions, people, and concerns, allied, in his own words, to the “peasant” class. If, as cultural critic Pierre Bourdieu insists, “the primary business of culture is distinction, the stratification of tastes in such a way as to construct and reinforce differentiations of social status which correspond...to achieved or aspired-to class position”,³ then Perejaume has reclaimed culture in order to use it for exactly the opposite ends. His work instead deconstructs these kinds of hierarchies because it is created for a full spectrum of viewers ranging from local working class participants to art world professionals.

Perejaume’s concern with showing work in non-art locales as well as in museums and galleries, his desire to engage audiences who have no experience with modern, conceptual, or any art at all for that matter, is inherently political, addressing questions of elitism, access, and class. His activism literally pertains to the *polis*, the social relations and politics of everyday life. Since he is deeply involved with the customs, history, structures, and habits of wherever he goes, Perejaume’s activities mark him as a citizen and as an “artist”.

At the same time, for Perejaume the entire history of art, theater, literature, poetry, philosophy, and of history itself is his artistic meat and potatoes; his works are filled with references to both Catalan and international artists, writers, political figures, and their texts. Perejaume is at once a visual artist, a poet, a filmmaker, an essayist, philosopher, performer, and historian. And he takes the traditions of *plenairisme*⁴ and *pessebrism* both seriously and literally.

Perejaume crosses the mountains with his students, carrying a drawing by Miró as a visual reference to nature (p. 20). He builds a wheelbarrow-like contraption (p. 93), a chair with a curved wooden screen into which a window is cut, which can be wheeled and placed anywhere so that its operator can frame and contemplate any part of the landscape. He builds actual theater sets consisting of floor-to-ceiling copies of old master paintings in gilt frames (p. 89). Commissioned to paint the ceiling frescoes of the newly restored opera house in Barcelona, he fills the circular panels overhead with images of row upon row of the same red velvet seats and parterres that have been rebuilt within the opera house. This is a *tour de force*, the creation of a meta-language, a play within a play within a play of images.

What Perejaume offers us is not an ordinary, or even art-related performance, but rather a “dialogical” performance, one which brings together “different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another”.⁵ And what his work “performs” is a nonlinear, multidimensional, open-ended network of visual and linguistic narratives which are also social transactions. The result is an ongoing process of interrogation and exchange that resists conclusion and entices everyone to enjoy and fully engage with it.



Monòleg del poeta i el pintor 1988
(Monologue of the Poet and the Painter)
Oil, charcoal and canvas. 33 x 90 cm.

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¹ See Marvin Carlson. *Performance: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1996, p. 196.

² In the United States, the use of objects as performers is perhaps best known through the early work of Scott Burton, a New York-based sculptor who, in the late 1960s, did a series of performances featuring domestic furnishings. Between each “act”, the curtains were closed so that a chair, for instance, could be rearranged in another position and then re-opened, creating a kind of theatrical, real-time flip book of anthropomorphic gestures.

³ Pierre Bordieu, quoted in John Frow. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1995, p. 85.

⁴ The French term for painting directly from nature, also used to refer to its widespread use in late 19th century Europe.

⁵ Carlson, p. 31.