

## Intimate Topography

We are dealing here with the work of an artist who is completely unknown in Spain. A few separate works seen sporadically cannot give an idea of the systematic work of an artist who superimposes plastic languages and knowledge onto his approaches in the same way in which he superimposes, as visual collages, the layers of reality in a body of photographic work which he has been building up for decades in a delicate but at the same time uncompromising way. However, this ignorance is not due solely to the dearth of exhibited work in this country, but also to the fact that Paiement's visual and conceptual approach clashes with the habits created in contemporary photography in recent decades. This is not a body of work which can be easily bracketed with accepted trends, because Paiement works from highly subjective premises, formed out of his own plastic experience.

Since the 1980's Paiement has worked on the artistic construction of specific places. In his early work the links to physical architecture were more obvious, but the issue of inhabiting space is already present. Architecture and painting as inhabitable spaces but also, or rather above all, as spaces which the artist builds on the basis of direct, broken-down observation.

Alain Paiement's formal background is in painting, like practically all the artists currently working in photography. However, his photographic approach does carry over certain conceptual aspects and also some technical touches from pictorial method. For example, the idea of working on each picture as a world in itself. Or the intention of superimposing layers of meaning through objects or images, as if he were working on a kind of supercollage. The artist did in fact state in his early period that he did not take photographs but built them. This building has passed through several stages in which the artist's practical methods have ranged from topography to archaeology, not forgetting detailed documentation and painstaking observation.

Photography as a method for approximation to and analysis of a physical reality, as a system for observing one's immediate surroundings. Surroundings which may be familiar, as in Paiement's latest work but which, as he has previously shown in other series, may also be historical or urban, as in his work in Brussels and New York, in which the memory of the place and the graphic, visual documentation made up of data and images serve as formal support for the formula of constant superimposition of diverse materials, in the end creating a different, absolutely new work which is not only a new creation, but also a mental – one might say sensory – recomposition of the place.

All Paiement's work speaks of his relationship with a space. And of the size of this space, hence his topographical method; but also of the physical place, of its living past, of the memory of this past

that may still be perceived in the place and of the passage of time which has marked the place, and of course the relationship which each individual – especially the artist – has had or may have with the space. The photographic course which the artist follows as a methodological choice to study real space confirms the statement that he is not precisely a photographer so much as an architect, that he does not take photographs so much as construct them. There are different ways of building an image of a place, and perhaps the most usual are those which involve situating oneself outside the space but opposite it, and taking the photograph. This is the formula we are used to, but is obviously not the one used by Paiement. He places himself within the space, but more than that, he situates himself above the space with a bird's eye view, in order photographically to draw a plan of the place, wherein volumes appear as drawn shapes. One really cannot find a more suitable way to narrate a place, to dimension the space, than to situate oneself within it. Thus, the artist measures the space on which he is treading, the air he is breathing, taking in all things as a measure of themselves. We are talking about a drawing in which volumes disappear, all the objects becoming two-dimensional surfaces. This is the work of an interior cartographer.

A quote from Samuel Taylor Coleridge defines perfectly Alain Paiement's way of seeing: «*He looked at his own Soul with a Telescope*». This way of looking inwards with a magnifying lens which makes everything have a real answer, makes reality into pointillism. When we talk about his pictorial roots it might be more appropriate to focus on his links with other artistic techniques including – crucially – drawing. Drawing in structuring his work, and drawing in the breaking down and of course drawing when we see that he is making a map of the most intimate reality in which everything is flattened – by the viewpoint – and in losing its volume becomes drawn objects. As in a conventional map, where the highest mountains become simply lines and rivers lose their water and their flow to become no more than blue lines spreading across the paper, furrowed with veins which are simply streams or roads along which people travel, along which life runs.

Another of the techniques used by Alain Paiement is to superimpose successive levels of meaning to reinforce the idea of a montage. The juxtaposition, superimposition and interpenetration of images give a variegated result which we will discuss below - a situation of chaos. Because if up to now we have discussed the general idea of a map which his pictures may have, it must be pointed out that these maps are becoming more focused, as when we close the shutter of a camera, coming ever closer and sharper. In fact, his way of conceiving his work, in successive strata which are consolidated over time, becomes an unconscious

method, or perhaps not, upon seeing his work from the 1980's to the present.

We can see how his work evolves over this period of time, how it maintains the same structure and how his universe approaches what is nearest, from the city to the house, and how very occasionally a person appears in his photographs, as just one more feature.

Paiement refers to the surface, where everything we see is actually happening. The surface, as in the tradition of «dirty» art and more informally, deals with the richness of matter, the difference between textures, the importance of thicknesses, hues, the beauty of objects destroyed by rust, of earth not as a pigment but as an object... All this appears in these photographs, in which rust, damp soil, the grid of a sewer, chalk on the asphalt, the accumulation of objects piled anyhow in rooms which have become junk stores, become fragments of a work of art, in aestheticist features, as in the paintings of Burri or Tàpies.

Photography has always kept the aura of being a formal representation of memory, of how this can become a hostage to the passing of time and an imperishable link between life and death. All this is in the end a cultural reading of western man's simple obsession with time, of the fear of the inevitability of death. But in any case, everything man builds is no more than another part of the wall to protect him from the unknown to come. Perhaps this explains the refined taste for the minimal shown by Paiement, his obsessive way of recovering detail; any apparently everyday object plays its part in these photos simply because it was there and he photographed it. Memory and the past, the goals of the archaeologist's searching, but about which Paiement himself says, «*Memory certainly resides in the remains unearthed by archaeological excavations, but it also exists in the very soil itself, in the sediments turned over by the excavator's shovel, and last of all it lies in the archaeologist himself, in his gaze, in his gestures, in his ability to read the objects of the past in the way in which they exist now.*»

In his most recent work, Alain Paiement makes a statement about the landscapes closest to him. «I take pictures of the territory where I walk.» It is as easy as pointing the lens at the detail which most interests us. But before concentrating on Phil's Room the artist takes a wander through disorder: the house, frontier country with the neighbourhood, the street, the city. A chaotic world where disorder leads to the accumulation of objects, of materials, where chaos reigns systematically. Chaos is a way of expressing oneself in a lively way, and makes up a landscape which we inevitably associate with ruin, rubble, the excrescences of a life and a society over-used to excess. This excess is at the root of the accumulation of rubbish, of waste, like a society, like an autonomous territory. This huge number of characters without

homes, without possessions, who accumulate papers, bottles, boxes, cardboard, anything that – as property – can fill them with a feeling of existing in a society in which to be means to have.

Building in chaos, living in chaos. But there are limits and sizes to define chaos. The attraction for artists of this system of accumulation is justified because in chaos is where something is always happening; it is constant movement, and freedom without limits. We all think that in this almost wild territory is where thought and action are to be found, and the cradle of creation.

Paiement's current interest is his own apartment. Free of mental borders – though not of physical ones – with the outside world, this is the place where he lives and within which, as in a mental microcosm, he can reconstruct a symbolic world, a world which represents the other, outside world. Fragments which become references, such as in the child's room where a toy road can become a real road: is this not true for all children, who build a real world in the architecture of their wooden bricks, or explore untrodden landscapes on their cardboard horses?

We see a different world when our viewpoint is displaced. In the images built by Paiement we are seeing a different view of what might seem everyday to us. On the one hand objects to which really, were they not taken out of their everyday context, we would neither pay the attention nor grant the value that we do to these photographs. On the other hand, the perspective from which we see them is not only unusual but also practically unfeasible except in the type of images we see in films, photographs or videos. Transported to another place, we can finally see ourselves, living in our houses, surrounded by an unknown city. A world in which we tidy up the chaos every night before going to bed.