

PLASTIC PEOPLE. THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE FUNCTIONAL

Alberto Martín, 2008

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The interest that Belén Cerezo has shown in what may be called “second order images“ is a recurrent theme within her work; images lacking autonomy or that are linked to a context or to a message that limits both their meaning and movement. This relation of dependence, limitations and contextualization is what conforms the basis upon which she has developed her latest works and some of her current projects. She clearly states her interest in this idea when she presents her work: “series in which many images taken from advertising, magazines and wrapping paper. I’m interested in the combination of what has been produced to be photographed or sold and reality. I want to play with these advertising pictures”. Series such as *Far Close* and *No Home* or the project in which she is currently working *Heterotopías fotográficas. Intersecciones entre la casa ideal y el espacio público* show an artistic continuity in relation to photography. Photomontage, collage or the reflection made when taking a picture of a glossy surface are some of the techniques Belén Cerezo uses to re-contextualize or to corrupt the spaces for illusion and desire that are offered by advertising and shop windows. Regarding this idea, she has achieved great success in the series that deals with the crossroad between the ideal house and the public space. This series is composed of a set of pictures that shows the inside of some specialised shops (mainly furniture and kitchen equipment shops). By taking the pictures of the shop window from the inside, she is able to include the outside and the street in the ideal and aseptic sceneries that aim at moulding standardized dreams. The result of this series, which is still in process, is the confusion between dreams and reality, the public and the private. Another point that appears to be the most interesting and revealing one is the clash between chance, represented by what is going on in the street, and what is planned, represented by the static order that governs shop windows, also the relation between life, unforeseeable and fleeting and commerce, structured and regulated. This dialectic takes us to the tension that exists in the world of photography among different schools of images: instantaneous as opposed to staged photography, artistically-aimed photography versus the pictures without such qualities that are often shown in furniture advertisements. Although the artist’s standpoint is that of anyone who may be walking around and having a look at the shop window, neither the camera nor the artist’s eye are persuaded by consumerism. In this way and through her eyes a complex reality that shows both sides of the question is presented; on the one hand, the desired object, and on the other, the reality on the streets. The image turns to be the metaphor of our circumstances and a criticism against consumerism.

The reason for including such an extensive reference to her previous project (which is still being developed) within the analysis of her current series is due to the interesting and even logical connections that exist between them. These connections show the thematic and strategic coherence that govern Belén Cerezo’s work. Her new series is entitled *Plastic People* and it has been developed in Central Asia, more precisely in the former Soviet Republics of Kyrgyzstan and the south of Kazakhstan. These territories border China and at the same time are influenced by Turkey. It is needless to emphasise the situation that this territory is going through, mainly due to its geostrategic situation in relation to the complex and accelerated economic growth that China is undergoing and also regarding the influence that this country exerts on the basis of its powerful consumer goods production. These aspects are easily perceived as the background of this project. The leitmotiv of these images is an object that may be deemed simple and conventional: the plain plastic bags that are used every day to carry small goods and products. Although some paper bags appear in the project the artist is mainly interested in plastic bags, an idea that may appear to be naïve but is not, as will be

clarified later on. These images present people with bags in the street, the people being photographed from the waist down, each picture is focused on these plastic containers. This project is composed of another set of pictures that show different stalls in which plastic bags are sold. What first catches our attention, as western viewer-consumers is the change that bags undergo from free objects to consumer goods. This difference appears to be the first indicator of the Asian local identity that is essential to understand the essence of Plastic People. Also striking is the homogeneous imagery that appears on the bags that tends to be associated with advertising, and more precisely with brands. A variety of women's faces; cloned, attractive, smiling faces that transmit a feeling of vague mystery and transcendence. The bags are presented in street stands, hanging out on ropes, with pegs or metallic hangers showing the icons, which are commonly shown in advertisements, on a variety of objects. As expected, the foreseeable references to the Western dream can also be found; from the well-known image of London's Big Ben, to the motto "See the world", to the typical image of the joyful Western family, a couple with their smiling and healthy son and daughter, while they are savouring their holidays on the beach. Although Belen's photographs respond to a documentary style; direct, instantaneous, on the street, they also cross the boundaries to the world of conceptual references. On the one hand, she approaches bags by isolating them from any reference and presenting pictures that are similar to close-ups. On the other hand, she focuses on an element that becomes, in the end, an image inside the image. This conscious loss of autonomy on the part of the images turns out to be beneficial for the project. Not being influenced by the anecdote or the context, she concentrates on the bags, which are transformed into banal goods, lacking characteristics. The images' redundancy makes us think about cycle, repetition and echo as the dominating elements in the war for dreams, as Marc Augé has indicated.

As for the project entitled *Hereopatías fotográficas*, which has been analysed at the beginning of this text, clear elements of continuity are found; such as the interest in studying the field of advertising, the existing tension between the imaginary world and the real world or the distance between desire and satisfaction. However, in Plastic People the proposal gets more complex in terms of quality. This step forward is materialised through an approach to the staging of everyday life and to the forms that are adopted in the process of life stylization. A variety of interesting and tangential subjects are also dealt with over this work; the massive presence of the face-object that could be deemed as a pathology of our society or the assent to consumerism. Yet the two aspects that have been pinpointed above dealing with the stylization of life and the staging of ordinary life offer more nuances in order to analyse this project in depth. The relation between the two main groups of images that articulate this series (the bags that are presented and their display on the streets) offers us a wide range of subjects. First of all, the evident contrast between homogenization-globalization and idiosyncratic features can be perceived. This idea leads to the presence of local elements, an idea that is the essence of this series. Many of the stories or testimonies about everyday life in these former soviet republics (that can be found in many blogs) refer to the effect produced when seeing people wandering around with these bags. Bags that are not single-use objects but that are re-used everyday for various activities. In this sense, we may be talking about a slight distortion or deformation of the objects as its function is partially modified or is, at least, placed in a different position within discourse or signs' repertoire. There is a resounding contrast between the ordinary and functional use of bags and the set of images that refers to the world of game-like use and satisfactions. Thus, the object is replaced in a different field of discourse that deals with the ability of the citizen-consumer to develop his/her own ways of using the goods that are imposed by an overcrowded and globalized world. This replacement takes us to the central theme of the interesting dialogue between the beautiful and the

functional, the crossroads between freedom and necessity. Having a range of bag models (for example, Aygen Collection and Rave Girl are two of the most common ones) we are talking about the possibility people have to choose their own style, with regard to the stylization of ordinary life. Yet, we can also talk about the creation of new models and signs that stem from human adaptation to necessity. The meeting point and often the clash between beauty and functionality, between stylization and necessity turns out to be the image of the “sub-consumerism situation” in which some sectors of society are obliged to live. So, we are immersed in the complex discourse somewhere in between the globalization of society’s desires, the omnipresence of certain images and the understandable evolution of these desires that originates from necessity.

There is another relevant theme that shows up throughout these images. One of the pictures presents the striking face of a woman below which the words WEIQUAN PLASTIC CO., LTD are written. Searching for information about this name we find out that it is an important Chinese firm that produces bags and, besides, that an antidumping policy on bags imported from China and Thailand has been adopted both in the European Union and in the United States. This policy aims to guarantee competition of trade in relation to this product. One of the firms that has been affected by this policy is the aforementioned. All these images make us aware that every single product, however insignificant it may seem, is part of a war that has nothing to do with the war for dreams.