

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

## THE DAMNED

"Through me the way to the city of woe, through me the way to everlasting pain, through me the way among the lost. Justice moved my maker on high. Divine power made me, wisdom supreme, and primal love. Before me nothing was but things eternal, and eternal i endure. Abandon all hope, you who enter here."

Dante, The Divine Comedy, "Inferno; Canto III"

Without any hope left, the damned go through the river Styx on the boat guided by Charon, amid weeping and curse, amid blasphemy and pain. Destined to Hell. Damned in the Final Judgment, there they will eternally suffer their punishment. Their sorrow and their hardship will have no end; who knows if their remorse may ease. In the Sistine Chapel Michelangelo visibly lays out the damned and those who have been saved in this Judgment. As in all judgments, mistakes and injustices will no doubt be made and done. In the lower part of the Sistine Chapel we can see, on one side, the noble souls of those who have been saved coming out of the earth, escaping from the demon's clutches trying to grab them. We can see them freed of the weight of earth, of gravity, flying -floating-, going up toward God, toward salvation, toward Heaven. On the other side the fight is on a different slant. Foreshortened bodies savagely interwoven, in unthinkable positions, grabbing one another. Demons pulling them down, toward earth, toward Hell, while Charon hits them with the oar. The die is cast, their fate is decided. They are the damned. Desperate faces: disappointment, bewilderment, anguish, pain...Not only in their faces, but also in those writhing bodies trying to grab one another to avoid the fall or maybe to drag others to their ruin in an inevitable but not necessarily lonely fall. The pain is our guide, the fear wipes out any ounce of mercy on others. No one wants to be on Charon's boat, no one wants to suffer forever. No sin can seem so terrible so as to deserve such a devastating punishment, such a cruel and irreversible fate.

Michelangelo paints his masterpiece where he displays his virtuosity. He undoubtedly reflects the great comedy of life, illustrates the fear, the reward and the punishment to virtuous existence, and to those different lives marked with evilness, with envy, with disobedience to the church doctrine. There is an inevitable didactic tone, an almost childish display of fear, punishment and reward, with the simplest work structure, the whole picture divided into areas of pain, of peace, of doubt, of calm, in order to locate in each of them the various possibilities and levels of proximity and remoteness from reward and punishment. In order to do so, Michelangelo, in his paintings, represented himself and those who had helped him - and also those who had troubled him- during his life. Those who loved him and those who hated him. Women who had acted as friends and benefactors, depicted as virgins and protective souls. His lovers and his enemies. The popes who had given him the means. The nobles who had replaced him with other painters, his rivals... And those he had fallen in love with, but whose favours he never enjoyed. So he made a frieze where it would be possible to investigate about both the myths of catholic religion and the artist's private life. But he will not be the only one choosing the Final Judgment as subject, or more specifically the damned. Let us remember, for instance, Rodin's "Gates of Hell", where in a more concise and less narrative way, he also offers the image of the damned going through the Gates to never return.

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

So many centuries later, during his stay in Rome another artist takes up again the Sistine Chapel to re-create some of the portraits of that time with people from today. To re-create with men of our time some of those bodies touched by the fate of sin. He replaces the divine curse with a more human one. Germán Gómez employed the same usual Renaissance method: he turned his friends, people close to him, into the main characters of his portraits. On this occasion, he has just remade nine portraits and nine groups of bodies absorbed in a fight for survival. Photography replaces painting and the presentation is different. Today they are lonely bodies and individuals, without a background making them part of a divine or human comedy whatsoever. They belong to a global and ordinary landscape, but they are presented alone. Germán Gómez has chosen nine damned as a symbol of the pain and the fear of our time. But they are by no means nine pictures of people imitating the pose of Michelangelo's damned. They are rather the creation of nine nonexistent identities from the pieces belonging to existing men. They do exist but none of them alone is a single damned. Each of these nine damned are made of fragments of those men. Arms, hands, legs, mouths, eyes, hair, ears are combined. And all and each of those men hide behind an expression of despair, of fear, of pain, of anguish. But at the same time it is none of them. So the foreshortening becomes even more extreme, the feelings expressed by the faces are joined to shape an unrecognizable, nonexistent but nevertheless familiar face down to the feeling it recalls in us.

Again, Germán Gómez shows his personal style: his way of using photographic images as the material with which to make artworks that are both painting and photography. Pieces of art emerging from collage and hard, individual work. Work that turns each of his pieces into something unrepeatable and unique. He has demonstrated that his work offers far more possibilities than people may have originally thought at the beginning. And again, with this series, the artist comes back to aspects of the history of religion, a religion full of blame and the shadow of eternal sin. A religion that has undoubtedly turned us all into damned souls.

Rosa Olivares

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

FICHADOS-TATUADOS Germán Gómez

"He told me that he wanted to write the story of his life on my skin, beginning with his birth in my lips and his infatuations in my chest. He would dedicate the rest of my body to our lives together "(From "Nagiko's journal ", in Peter Greenaway's "The Pillow Book ")

In this project (of sociological and conceptual kind), speaking about "fichados" means speaking about feelings from the point of view of privacy. It is a sort of "invented historical self-portrait", a biography in images using the skin of fifty characters, who have accepted to be the "support" to narrate my life.

The final result is fifty actual police records, consisting of fifty people who have a police record ("fichados") and that have tattooed in their body a symbol, a date or simply a name...

The records are carried out by three pictures: one frontal and two laterals, and they are completed with a list of data related to their physical appearance, daily routine and details such as: race, accent, cultural level, clothing, heftiness, riskiness, drug addictions...

A photographic portrait with a "conceptual portrait", that the character himself has had to make by means of a questionnaire filled up before the photo session. Facing the apparent harshness of the pictures and the squalor of the questions formulated in the questionnaire, a section arises giving sense to the work, from the counterpoint. A section loaded with feeling, passion, and some times even with colour. That is the section that mentions the external marks, the tattoos. These tattoos are the private diary of each one of them. My private diary.

Completing the work there is a series of photographs next to the card. These are the portraits of those men who have narrated that private diary, turning its bodies into metaphors. Metaphors that have to do with the subliminal, encoded messages that let glimpse the cracks of each one, their desires, wounds... That is the reason why we find characters who show with shyness and insolence, with resignation or with pride those symbols that communicate in a subtle way something about their lives; they show us a part of their souls. Therefore the name of the series: "Tattooed" ("Tatuados").

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

ALEJANDRO CASTELLOTE - GERMÁN GÓMEZ

Madrid. November 2006

You introduce yourself as an artist by a series of portraits of disabled children. Why did you choose to confront such a delicate subject?

There are two main reasons for carrying out this project: first of all, a family background which makes me sensitive to this matter, and secondly the fact of having Cristina García Rodero as a photography teacher at University. She pronounced a sentence that I have constantly repeated to myself: "Take photographs of what you know, what is really important for you". This made me consider why I had decided to study Disabled Children Teaching and which the role of those children in my life was. During nine years I portrayed the face of mental disability. Nine years during which I worked as a teacher in a school for disabled children, that concluded after the closure of the circle which started by a family matter and finished by taking photographs of the families of these children.

Usually photography adopts a leading role between the photographer and the photographed. How do you manage this imbalance?

Face to mental disability there's no leading role, no ifs and buts about it... Face to this situation one restructures his values; these kids put everyone in his place. You trivialise many things and you question many others. It was a stage in my life during which I feel to have matured and that has been the beginning for the new paths I have taken in my life.

The collaboration with these children in the construction of images referring to Caravaggio, a painter who was especially belligerent with the canons of the Renaissance and with institutions in general, does not seem at first sight a simple occupational therapy. Why did you choose precisely such a controversial painter?

The fact that Caravaggio is one of my favourite painters is not chance... One day, while studying History of Art, I felt especially shaken by a painting; when I arrived home I described it to my mother and she made me remember "that" Calling of Saint Matthew by Caravaggio that she discovered at the time she was living in Rome. She was so impressed by the painting that, when she came back to Spain, she hung up a reproduction of it in her room, so that I lived a part of my childhood together with this mysterious image. Besides, as I learnt new things about the painter, I felt more and more attracted by his work. Urchins, beggars and even prostitutes acted as models for the characters of his paintings; paintings with a biblical subject! He used to incorporate so much his life into his work that it is said that the model for his Saint John the Baptist (Youth with ram) was one of his lovers.

By avoiding any trace of idealisation and using only the realism, he tried above all not to leave any of us indifferent. All this, added to his "crimes", made that when I wanted to put together two of my passions, the children and painting, I chose this -as you call him- controversial artist.

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

After knowing the rest of your series, the images of the children seem to fit in a polyhedral process of search of your own identity. Have you thought about it as that from the beginning or do you create your works in a more intuitive way?

I guess that the first work was more intuitive, but after closing the first project about disability I became conscious of the approach of identity as a project in my artistic discourse.

Chronologically speaking, your series go through documentation, mise en scène, typologies, three-dimensional experimentation and eventually you turn back to a point of view closer to anthropology. Above all of them glides the portrait as a shared element. Where does this fascination about people come from?

I love to let myself get fascinated by people... I know many people from many different countries. I try to know them intensely and soak in their experiences, I get enriched with them. Thanks to all these people I know myself better, I find answers, I analyse their experiences, their faces... and by getting involved in their lives I start to recognise myself. I see in the others a mirror that, when you look at your reflection in it, gives back your naked image, it doesn't matter their economic, social or intellectual level. As you say, the human being never stops fascinating me.

In some series of portraits you seem to use the characters as actors at whom you send out your own personality. Why don't you use the self-portrait?

All my work is a self-portrait, from the disabled children series to "Compuestos" ("Composed") and of course this project, which was conceived from the beginning as a self-portrait. A self-portrait in which I don't reflect my face but those of fifty men that lend not only their faces but also their bodies in order to become the support of my life. I believe that the fact that it is not my face amplifies the work. In my portraits I try to talk about passions, fears, wounds... Universal subjects treated from my personal look, my personal experiences. I think it is easier to reach the others by using anonymous faces, multiple faces, different faces that contribute to the work with the force of their looks. Honestly, I believe that the works gets enriched with all those faces.

In the series "Del susurro al grito" ("From whisper to shout") you superimpose simultaneously metaphorical and physical layers. You perform "literally" on the construction of the work generating very theatrical portraits. Compared to your past works, it is formally a very different work. In an early interpretation it could be read as an attempt to escape from the rationality surrounding your past portraits. What is this break due to?

This series is motivated by the suffering and illness of some of my best friends. I was so shocked that I felt I had to create something that could reflect my state of mind. It is true that they are very theatrical, but I also believe that they are very dramatic. The works take a sculptural dimension, inside them there are "buried" letters of pain and love addressed to each of my friends suffering. They are photographic sculptures that become trunks of secret pains, so they can't do less than scream.

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

This series includes expressive and pictorial elements, as well as theatrical dramatisations that point to a need of overcoming the two-dimensionality of photographs. However in "Fichados-Tatuados" you retrieve the style of your past works. Could you speak about that process?

It is a more serene and reflexive work, but not for that less emotionally intense. In this project, two-dimensionality is conceptual. There are two different levels, on the one hand the artistic portrait and on the other, the social portrait of the police record. There is a very evocative image supporting a much colder one, loaded with theoretical details that speak not only about me, but also about each one of them. It is at the same time a private and a public portrait, as well as a multiple portrait, the portrait of individuality and the portrait of a society... This project is also composed by evocative and pictorial elements, since I have made the tattoos myself and it is also theatrical, as it is a *mise en scène* in which my friends have pretended to be convicts. Deep down it is not very far away from the rest of my works...

From my point of view, the use of different layers like those of the faces in "Del susurro al grito" ("From whisper to shout") is the same as in "Fichados-Tatuados", but you adopt a different formal solution. You seem to insist on the difficulty of transferring to an only image the complexity of human personalities. Do you think that video could make up for this shortage?

That is a field I regard with respect. I have just made a video: "Año 32" ("Year 32"), which was made by 365 photographs... There is still much to explore in the field of photography for me; I am mad about mixing drawing and photography, and I have just started to do it...

The fact of sending out your presence at other people's portraits may seem a wish of belonging, of associating your "I" to other people... of recreating more a shared identity than your own...

In philosophy, the traditional view of the different views of the "I", the human being, the identity, or however you want to call it, has been to raise a close, systematic, and identical to itself individual. However, ideas such as Hume's began to distrust this kind of "I", he said that it doesn't really exist something we could call "I" but that we are a plurality of changing moments, and we decide to make up a character that we call "I", stringing these moments together by the memory; this way, we feel comforted because we are a "something". Besides, linking with romantic literature, Shelley's "Frankenstein" or Stevenson's "Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde" introduce subjects such as the modern Prometheus (Frankenstein as the creation of life by mankind, turned into a new God; the fight of this creature against his own creator...) and the duality (on the one hand the good and on the other the evil...). I want to represent in my work this plurality of the "I", of the person. I like the view of this Frankenstein as an identity made of remnants, maybe my dreamt identity... (And I feel a wish not only of belonging or associating myself to the others, but also of possession). In modern philosophy too, above all in Nietzsche, I find questions that make me keep on raking up this matter. I am especially interested in the idea that there is not a traditional "I", but a plurality of masks with nothing behind them, which is something like the death of the subject. Or that the only thing that we have got on the table is a lot of fragments and there is no puzzle to be made. I

# BRIDGETTE MAYER GALLERY

question everything and keep on looking for myself, in me and in the others, by my own means or by means of the others.

The use of police records as a support or container of this portrait catalogue entails a sort of criminalisation of the portrayed. You induce the audience to a fixed interpretation that seems to place the characters a priori in a frame of guiltiness. Where is the origin of this decision?

A police record has a great level of harshness, coldness, dehumanisation, monstrosity..., that's true. And as they are fifty, there is also a component of routine, serialisation, like a catalogue, it's excessive... I wanted to tell my experience from these two points of view: from hardness and from the counterpoint, since those "criminals" have tattooed on their bodies moments of anguish, love, fear or happiness... People who have a police record, mentally disabled... in a few words people like us, who don't have a police record, or maybe we do.

The police documentation, especially the portrait of detainees, avoids any subjective representation; by its own nature it aspires to the objective description. As for you, you adopt this strategy but you voluntarily pervert it by dramatizing -and somehow distorting- the personality of the photographed by showing their tattoos, which describe you, more than they describe them...

We could say that all the work is a great metaphor to tell my life... I hope that the trivialisation of something as serious as the police documentation and the use of such harsh ways of description help to give sense to this project, in which I would like to be reflected me and everyone who wants to look on the inside.

Instead of choosing either typologies or *mise en scène*, you seem to have decided to superimpose both practices. Do you feel comfortable with this blending or will you keep on experiencing?

It has been written about the project "Fichados-Tatuados" that it could be compared to a collection of stuffed insects, pin-nailed to a board... Also analysing the series "Docena" ("Dozen"), this analogy could be found...

And actually they have a lot of classification and serialisation, and although this anthropologic approach exists, my intention was to create a chain that expressed an internal shock; that is why I add the *mise en scène*: I don't want it to be an exhaustive classification or something scientific, but a physical translation of my feelings. Whether I will keep on experiencing or not, that is something I cannot decide right now. I will keep on looking, listening, learning, living and coexisting as intensely as I can to go on analysing my feelings in order to capture them in the most honest way possible.