

## THE POLYHEDRAL VISION OF CIRIA

**Ignacio Calderón**

When I was invited to write the text presenting Ciria's catalog for his new exhibition in Belgium, I was besieged by doubts that grew as I reread the essays in the most recent publications dedicated to his work. The majority of these texts formulate a series of subjective interpretations that, in part, barely suggest the true underlying spirit beneath the shell of his works, despite the luxury, the magnificent staging, and the perspicacity of the comments by many of his essayists. The visions that Ciria invokes in his paintings tend to escape, or rather, always escape, from the reduced space dedicated to the approximation or habitual explication found in this now traditional task. Art catalogs have reached a point of supine boredom, in which we are usually subjected to the insipid repetition of the same formula, to the reiteration, on countless occasions, of undecipherable messages; in some cases it would even be possible to interchange the contents of many of these publications, which have almost acquired the status of a literary genre.

Perhaps the most successful attempt to approach this painter's work is the voluminous book written by Antonio García-Berrio and Mercedes Replinger, entitled A.D.A, a discussion of contemporary abstraction in which, independent of the quality of the writing in the different chapters as composed by two authors with opposing styles, we do manage to get a contextualized vision of the place that abstraction occupies at the present time, and in turn of the space protagonized by Ciria. Nonetheless, that attempt fell short of its potential by spending too much time on the way to fit the plastic arts into a rhetorical pattern, without limiting itself to what the painter's work itself offered on its own.

Providing a more accurate vision of the character of Ciria's work is a very difficult task, given the reduced space, the time to spend on it, and the number of possible interpretations, or as he himself notes, the multiplicity of strata, which must be taken into account in order to achieve the least success. Polyhedral is the first adjective that comes to my mind to refer to his work. An enormous number of planes unfold when one tries to encompass the formal and conceptual characteristics of his work as a whole, while this author also constantly underscores the deep relationship and differences between the various series of works and of approaches that make up his development as an artist. Series of works which do not come to a conclusion and which are sometimes simultaneous in time. Slippery is the next adjective that perfectly fits Ciria's mind and work, given that the multiple

planes invoked purposely lack a stable structure, when not directly interlinked, overlapped, and juxtaposed. The wealth of perspectives and the rigor suggested by his works and by the texts written by the artist himself go far beyond the boring painting that we are seeing on the international scene, and even more so on the limited art scene in our country, where Ciria occupies a unique and privileged place, since he endows his figures and artistic solutions with a complete theoretical and conceptual framework lacking in the painting of his whole generation, if not in all the painting from Spain's most recent generations, except for a very few cases, (sincerely, hardly any names come to my mind). And complex would be the final adjective I would use to approach this work, which in various ways provokes infinite reflections and poses questions about the deep meaning of painting and of art in general, at the conclusion of the 20th Century and on the threshold of the 21st.

Clearly, here we could begin to ramble through the territories or arguments that make up the current critical and historiographical spirit: dematerialization, cross-breeding, globalization; or to let ourselves be drawn into what we observe as the expansion of the limits of what we understand to be art, in its very diverse manifestations, which try to broaden our vision and perspective within, of course, the most recent lines of investigation; and that all this rambling would turn out to be, one supposes, entertaining and fascinating. Without a doubt, Ciria broadens what we understand to be painting. I believe I understand, and I believe (as a sort of faith) the man who creates this work, when I state that his painting has little to do with what we habitually recognize as abstraction, although on first glance it is difficult for us to discover the differences in form. Ciria appeals to a deeper look. Ciria is painting.

I have already referred to the impossibility of offering on these pages a summarized or complete vision of the multiplicity of interpretive possibilities or territories that join the work and thought of this painter. The themes: time and memory. The tools: pictorial levels, iconographic registers, textural techniques, compartmentalizations and the combinations of these parcels; together with the different subgroups investigated, experimented in, and named. The proposal to generate a mental plane supported by painting, but totally independent from it (preconceptual space). The search for meaningful units and their application to the various series of works. The conceptual sublimation outside the pictorial plane... Pardon me, but I decline this responsibility, not because of a lack of interest, far from it, but because of mere powerlessness, laziness, and a lack of energy.

I propose something simpler, and possibly just as interesting. Why not review Ciria's career and cull a few ideas that emerged at the time and a few very acute quotations from the interpretations that have shared the spotlight with his work in the catalogs of some of his exhibitions? This review should start with the works created in late 1990 and 1991, which were presented in May, 1992, at the old I.C.E. in Munich. With the title of that show, Cry nude Europe, Ciria had already put us in three

situations or spaces, which tried to define the profoundly conceptual vocation of his painting: the word, the situation, and the place. Perhaps the action of lamentation referred to the loss of the old aura that surrounded any artistic manifestation during the period of the avant-garde movements. A cry for the naive and abandoned space, and for the powerlessness to transform the world. Nude, as the mirror in which painting has lost its old protagonism, ceding its place to other kinds of behavior, stripped of the clothing that distinguished it as unique. Europe, as the place from which our whole tradition is projected, renouncing the mistaken interpretations that link Ciria's work with American action painting and claiming a territory of his own that is shared with and more closely linked to the Spanish informalist school. At the time attention was already drawn to that fact that his works were accompanied not only by the title but by a little identifying code. When a viewer saw, for example, N2.R1. or N1.R3. beneath a painting, he could not help but ask himself what it meant. Ciria was indicating to us the pictorial level and the iconographic register that he was referring to in each one of his works. This «invention» is not recent, but rather became a key element years ago in every pictorial proposal by this exceptional artist.

Exactly when Ciria began to develop a theoretical framework parallel to his work from which he could launch his explorations and experiments is something beyond our ken. Ciria was a figurative (expressionist) painter before he took on abstraction, and never studied Fine Arts. Genius, as regards the spirit, manifests itself in many ways. Like many of today's great artists, no one would have bet on him in his early days, then suddenly he became one of the most attractive artists in Spanish painting at this turn of the century, and today represents an indispensable reference point.

José Manuel Ciria's next great appointment was the Adage exhibition, held at the old installations of the Afinsa-Almirante gallery (one of the most beautiful spaces in Madrid at the time) in early 1993. The title of the show once again orients us with regard to what was happening in his work. Naturally, that adage held a meaning of its own, and at the same time belonged to a broader group of works in which there was already a diversity of perspectives and the work was organized serially. Significantly, another group of completely different works from the Adage exhibition was presented simultaneously at the now defunct Delpasaje gallery. The series of that time maintained major differences, although their author was recognizable. It amuses me to observe from our perspective how the marvelous «Narcisos» series (Narcissuses; canvases folded in the center and stained, like the figure and its double) that was shown in Valladolid would become, over the years, the evolved and surprising compositions of the 1998 Carmina Burana series.

The commentary by Fernando Huici<sup>1</sup> stands out among the essays of that time and he notes: «The almost automatic sensation that the works in this series produced in me was the strange and impossible certainty -disproven by the same glance- that they were like glass. Through an absurd

suspicion, something associated them with that hard, shiny, cold, but also extremely fragile material, that substance that holds no secrets while at the same remaining mysterious, transparent, and reflecting, and which when faced seems to return to us what it has on both sides, as if trapped or frozen, merging the outside and inside worlds into one. (...) Painting understood as taking away, as the partial elimination of the preexisting rather than as the incorporation of matter, an idiom that predicates silences and negations. Inevitably we are reminded of a legendary example of the American avant-garde, that of the famous drawing by Willem de Kooning erased by Rauschenberg. Ciria's action in fact establishes a conceptual cadence of similar steps, except that, in this case, they provoke a resonance with different nuances. He does not erase gestures here -and with them a paradigm based on the idealization of subjectivity- but rather, to the contrary, the result of a random process, in which, through something like small negative gestures, he introduces precisely an intervention of a subjective nature.» Likewise, the inspired text by Javier Maderuelo<sup>2</sup>: «There is always a series of physical traits or conceptual winks that show the path to follow to get to know what we intend to judge. I must confess, however, that when I started to get to know José Manuel Ciria's work and I read what had been published about it, those traits and winks escaped me and I was left disconcerted; in my initial approach to his painting, everything led to a sensation of incoherence. That perplexity provoked in me the intention to discover the things that moved the artist to paint these works, with the secret aim of revealing them, but, even though I believe I could venture a few possible keys to the interpretation of his painting, I have the impression that José Manuel Ciria is quietly smiling now as he sees that, once more, he has managed to mock the intentions of his interpreters. (...) Every artist tries to force the redundancy among the elements that he believes best characterize his work, to stake out a formal terrain, and to configure a unique idiom so that his work may be unmistakably recognized as his without having to resort to looking at the signature, since every artist needs to assert himself through his work. Yet José Manuel Ciria is more subtle and offers in his paintings a very broad repertoire of artistic possibilities that, at first glance, may disconcert the viewer; but he secretly trusts that his works, independent of the various forms and techniques employed, emanate a sort of aura that characterizes them. The amazing thing is that he is right.»

In late 1993 the two apparently antagonistic series merge to offer us the characteristics that we recognize from then on as being unmistakably Ciria. The occasion that propitiated the presentation of those new works was an exhibition organized at the sadly defunct El Diente del Tiempo in Valencia, an exemplary gallery that we still miss today because of its singular approach and impeccable standards. The title of that show was *El uso de la palabra* (The use of the word), and its content, the confrontation of two brilliant series by the artist: *El uso de la palabra*, which would later

evolve into the series called *Máscaras de la Mirada* (Masks of the Glance), and the magnificent *Encuentros Naturales* (Natural Encounters). It should be noted that in the catalog for this show, Ciria proposed a sort of game, using words taken from the dictionary, paired with his painting, and which began with the letter «a». The modifications and slips introduced into the text make up a kind of sentence on the artist's intention<sup>3</sup>: «All art is susceptible to disbelief. Painting as body and concept as blood. Without looking back.» The text presenting the catalog was written by Juan Manuel Bonet<sup>4</sup>, who shortly thereafter was appointed the director of the Valencian Institute of Modern Art (IVAM) and who recently was named to head the Queen Sofía National Museum Art Center (MNCARS) in Madrid. I have selected a short passage from that essay: «Ciria aspires to ever greater purity, to ever greater essentiality, which has allowed him to cast off many side effects and concentrate on a project that is stripped down and leanly pictorial. (...) It is clear, and has been highlighted by various authors in prologs to his recent catalogs, that he has changed from an emerging voice in search of itself to one of the names that matter on the scene of our new painting, of what is left of it in this complicated end of the century.»

The next surprise was served up on a silver platter. I am referring to the exhibition *Gesto y Orden* (Gesture and Order), organized by the Ministry of Culture's National Exhibition Center in the incomparable setting of Madrid's Velázquez Palace in 1994. This is not the time to comment on the development and anecdotes of that show, but it is to assert that the exhibition constituted the moment in which José Manuel Ciria's work took off and consolidated itself. The works presented there completely joined the two series mentioned, *El uso de la palabra* and *Encuentros Naturales*. The impression that the exhibition made on the public was one of discovery and fascination, a real bang unanimously supported from different quarters. Ciria's work shone brilliantly, and the collectors of his work either treasure or are still searching for those splendid paintings. The catalog of the show was presented by Javier Maderuelo<sup>5</sup>, and included a pretty and inspired text by Fernando Castro Flórez<sup>6</sup>, from which I have drawn this comment: «José Manuel Ciria's painting is a beginning from the start, although it is not divorced from the dialectics of modernity, its inevitable leading of enthusiasm to exhaustion. The epidermal character of these works makes it possible, if one tries to reach a specific thought, to contemplate the compositional order as a fragment of the night. (...) When this painter turns his glance to his images, he produces a cracking, he dissects the pictorial tale; in that fragmentary self-interpretation warmth is reintroduced as a plastic element: each image is a beginning and rising of a night, 'of the unable-to-be-certain if it is possible to cross that line of shadows'.»

Between the exhibition at the gallery in Valencia and the show at the Velázquez Palace, Ciria was awarded a fellowship at the Colegio de España in Paris, sponsored by Spain's Ministry of Culture. In

Paris Ciria touched the stars when he offered us what may be his most timeless and fascinating series, Mnemosyne. Any explanation of those works is a pale reflection of what the artist was able to do in them, works that have since inspired countless young painters in an evident way. The ephemeral nature of that series, the transparency of the material, the very execution and the orchestration of the materials, have represented a clear point of reference in recent Spanish painting. I think that, of the various texts included in the catalog of that show, the one that stands out is the brief prolog by Ciria himself<sup>7</sup>, in which he sets down a series of declarations of his intentions: «After various works and experiments, two events came together in a natural way and at a concrete moment: my intention to execute a project dedicated to memory and a series of observations about the evolutionary chemical processes of matter. Later, having already decided on the idea of non-durability, all that was left was to contemplate the progressive wearing-away and degeneration of the different materials to be selected, to find an appropriate framework within which to execute the work -which ended up being Paris- and to carry out a few trials to optimize what then were still 'possible' results and variations. (...) Nevertheless, on the formal level there was another obstacle: after a reductionist stage, when the first tests were finished I could see an excessive proximity to a conceptual proposal, getting away from my desire to create only painting. The solutions that interested me were the works that overflowed with the pictorial, and so the only path to follow was to increase the morphology of signs. Curiously, this did not remain only in Mnemosyne, but rather jumped from those little trials to take over all my production. That was how series like Encuentros Naturales and El uso de la palabra emerged simultaneously. Today, all these elements refuse to be reduced, and I am not in a hurry to suppress them. (...) I agree with Bergson when he says that memories become images, but I believe that the image can also become dust, and therefore, memory.»

I do not want to shirk my responsibilities, but I have observed that the route that I have chosen to orient the reader of these pages and viewer of Ciria's work is turning out to be too long for an introduction to a catalog. Reserving for myself the right to a broader and more detailed look in the future, I propose a superficial summary of the major events involving this artist in the last few years, and then briefly to center our attention on the work now being shown in Kortrijk. That way, we cannot forget the excellent exhibition of works on paper held at the Galería 57 in Madrid in early 1996, nor the spectacular show Máscaras de la mirada, organized that same year by the Banco Zaragozano in Zaragoza, shortly before the artist's stay at the Academia Española in Rome on a fellowship from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In Rome Ciria delighted us with what then seemed his most inspired and esthetic project, in the sense of being unsurpassable. The works brought together under the name El tiempo detenido (Frozen Time) no doubt correspond to a very special moment in the artist's career.

The project basically tried to create an absolutely subjective vision of the painting of two great Italian masters: Uccello and Giotto. The pretext was the least important thing, the important thing was the artistic results that Ciria was able to offer us in those majestic compositions, a real pleasure to the eye that became an exceptional testimony to the inexhaustible possibilities of the practice of painting, contradicting the theoretical doomsayers about its meaninglessness.

We cannot stop here at each of Ciria's appearances in one-man shows and prestigious group exhibitions, so I will take the liberty of jumping from the ones mentioned to the Manifiesto/Carmina Burana exhibition held in late 1998 at the Salvador Díaz Gallery in Madrid. Just when it seemed that the «style» was established and about to be exhausted, according to the artist's detractors, Ciria, in a new turn of the screw, overwhelmed us with an exceptional exhibition full of surprises, running more risks than ever and demonstrating a mastery worthy of figuring among the very best work seen in Madrid in recent years. I am trying not to let myself get carried away, but I, a humble admirer and lover of painting, cannot help giving sincere praise when I face the works of this gifted painter. The exhibition at Salvador Díaz represented a true exercise in inspiration and a significant demonstration of what can be done in painting today.

To pick up the pace, I will skip some important events and stop at the recent show organized at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Badajoz (MEIAC). I will try not to continue down the laudatory path and to stick to quick description of the project Monfragüe, abstract emblems over the landscape. According to the artist himself, for some time Ciria had been trying to give shape to a project that represented an abstract revision of the elements that make up landscapes, taking references from everything from Romanticism to Surrealism -which interests him greatly- and centering on a specific landscape, that of the Monfragüe Natural Park. The show was divided into three sections: the Monfragüe series, the Manifiesto series, and the Máscaras de la Mirada series. Curiously, these last two series have transformed themselves again into something different from what they were in the beginning. The multiplicity of resources, the spectacularity of many of the works, an absolutely precise argument, the approximation of the compositions to an almost figurative nature (many corners of the park appear translated, in spite of the abstract compositions, with extraordinary fidelity), and above all the use of light. Here we find an analysis of the light at different times of day in the style of a Monet before the portico of the cathedral at Rouen, the magical and ruddy sunsets of a Friedrich, or the backlit clouds of a fabulous Millet, in addition to caprices in the style of Magritte's *The Empire of Lights* or the dark and terrifying reflections on the water of a Boecklin. I repeat, Ciria is painting.

Now, Kortrijk. The work that we have the opportunity to see in Belgium and which accompanies the present text, I suppose, represents a new step in Ciria's development. The works presented here are

a continuation and form a part of the same group of works that I had the opportunity to see in Strasbourg only a few months ago in the exhibition entitled *Espacio y Luz* (Space and Light) and at the last edition of the ARCO art fair in Madrid. These works do not belong to any specific series, and although they could be described as a prolongation of the *Máscaras de la mirada* series, the approach incorporates new parameters and some different solutions from its predecessors on a formal level. The work has grown in confidence, in risk, and, of course, in color. The backgrounds seem articulated on different planes. Two, three, four, five... colors form a kind of scenery or curtain cut geometrically or «compartmentalized». We have the feeling that we find ourselves before a patiently constructed work, over which gestures and shapeless stains have been spilled, which sometimes pierce those backgrounds, or play with them, supporting themselves on the edges of the geometric cuts like vignettes. The ingredients are the same once more, the geometric and the random, order and gesture, grids and stains. At the very least it is exciting to observe how the work evolves with new turns and denouements without losing a bit of its intensity, quite the contrary, even achieving greater drama, greater fascination.

I do not know how long Ciria will be able to maintain this ascent within his painting. The stretch traveled has been especially intense and the artist has not let himself linger in the formulas achieved, instead offering, with each new step, a new and highly suggestive approach. Now he has returned to the *Sueños Construidos* (Constructed Dreams) series and has begun to reflect on how the new works in the *Manifiesto* series should evolve. Polyhedral, I said at the start of this text. There is no doubt that working with different premises and absolutely differentiated series lets the work grow in an unusual way. Its evolution appears through advances and backtracking, with new beginnings and the recovery, at certain times, of old formulations. The theoretical and conceptual framework that holds up all these analyses and experiments, all these searches and plastic solutions, denotes an eagerness, yes, eagerness, to reach the heart of painting, of matter, of the spirit. The heart of the stars.

I invite you to keep watching this artist's career, follow his every step, read what is said about him, calmly enjoy the texts that he proposes, and try to understand that we are dealing with painting, and that is what Ciria is made of.

- 
1. Fernando Huici: «Bajo la piel», in José Manuel Ciria: *Adage*, catalog for the exhibition at the Galería Afinsa-Almirante, Madrid, 1993, pp. 7-8.
  2. Javier Maderuelo: «Afirmation de otra coherencia en la pintura», in José Manuel Ciria >, catalog for the exhibition at the Galería Delpasaje, Valladolid, 1993, pp. 7-8.



3. José Manuel Ciria: «El uso de la palabra», in José Manuel Ciria: El uso de la palabra, catalog for the exhibition at the Galería El Diente del Tiempo, Valencia, 1993, pp. 16-61.
4. Juan Manuel Bonet: «Lirismo y Construction», in José Manuel Ciria: El uso de la palabra, catalog for the exhibition at the Galería El Diente del Tiempo, Valencia, 1993, p. 7.
5. Javier Maderuelo: «El gesto de Dionisos frente al orden de Apolo», in Gesto y Orden, catalog for the exhibition at the Palacio de Velázquez, Centro Nacional de Exposiciones, Ministerio de Cultura, Madrid, 1994, pp. 11-19.
6. Fernando Castro Flórez: «Semillas de la noche, José Manuel Ciria», in Gesto y Orden, catalog for the exhibition at the Palacio de Velázquez, Centro Nacional de Exposiciones, Ministerio de Cultura, Madrid, 1994, p. 63.
7. José Manuel Ciria: «Sobre Mnemosyne y lo efímero», in José Manuel Ciria: Mnemosyne, catalog of the work executed as a fellow in Paris, Colegio de España en París y Centro Nacional de Exposiciones, Ministerio de Cultura, Madrid, 1994, p. 17.