

# **PAINTING WITH LIGHT AND GAZING THROUGH THE WHITEWASH**

Spanish photographer and video artist Anna Malagrida (b.1970) creates large detailed pictures of concealed social subject matter, aesthetically loved behind veils or glass. Often in half-light or dazzled to the point of disappearance, she develops a photographic language she partially explains through her Southern origins – i.e. less descriptive than the expressions coming from a more Northern inheritance. She works her images by referencing art history – photography then impersonates other mediums, like painting and sculpture – while appearing to be the only possible answer to the picture on offer. Whereas developing her own artistic speech and hinting at social and political issues, her works remain abstract enough to mirror each viewer's personal conclusions, which are drawn from the visual clues. She shares her process and explains her approach to Cristina Sanchez Kozyreva for *Pipeline's* special issue about photographers. ►



Untitled (triptych) by Anna Malagrida, 170 x 330 cm, 2006

Malagrida came to photography after she discovered the work of Argentinian artist Humberto Rivas (1937-2009). Realising that there was a medium with a powerful expressive capacity, she started to look at more artists. "I had no idea you could use photography in such way before I was 20," she recalls. "I studied at the *Ecole Nationale de la Photographie d'Arles*, the school that emerged from the photography art festival. There, the medium is approached professionally by also training historians and curators", such as the current photography curator of the Centre Pompidou, Clément Chéroux. "I was interested in photography from a theoretical point of view, within the contexts of mass media and advertising, as in the role that photography is playing in contemporary society. Prior to that, I was making travel photography.



Untitled (triptych) by Anna Malagrida, 170 x 330 cm, 2006

I had always been interested in the medium as both a way of personal expression and also as a form of metalanguage, just never for photojournalism," says Malagrida.

For her first series *Los Telespectadores* (Television Viewers), and then with *Interiors*, she worked the light closely, as one would with painting, especially using a graduation of light similar to chiaroscuro and creating the composition in reference to painted portraits. However, she did so with such a strong photographic presence that one could not have achieved the same results with another medium but photography. "The relationship with painting was not about copying, but about doing something very specific. That specificity has a political dimension - I am talking about the world we live in now - people who watch television and ►



Untitled by Anna Malagrida, 170 x 330 cm, 2006



computer screens, they are interconnected and yet very lonely, they are in the zone, in a virtual space," says Malagrida, explaining that the chiaroscuro light was created by the TV screens. "They are photographs of my friends and family when I was moving countries but it was not intimate or autobiographic" she notes, "through my perception I wanted to arrive to a more universal place."

While working on those portraits in 2000, Malagrida developed a series of photos of a Parisian building's facade in the Montparnasse neighbourhood, as a metaphor of what contemporary photography is - a place where everyone can project themselves - voyeuristic, but barely revealing because of its two-dimensional limitation. "The work belongs to a real space, because they are people's home, but it is also very impersonal. I realised that the two

series can be presented together as the narratives were similar," she says.

"The size is very important in my work, as for example the windows in the *Point de Vue* series with the anonymous marks of Spanish white paint. The photographs are analogue and printed in real size with many details. They echo the real whitewash of the window," says Malagrida, adding that although photography can often be best experienced through a book, for her works a book will always just be a catalogue. The physical experience is also important for her videos "A Woman Dance, a video of a veiled window in a Jordanian desert shelter, is a trompe l'oeil where the photographic medium explores sculpture", she says. Malagrida was working on the idea of the women of the desert being locked up, "you never see the wives and sisters when you visit Jordanian homes". ▶



Untitled (Façade I) by Anna Malagrida, 99 x 138 cm, 2002





Untitled (Four Seasons Hotel) by Anna Malagrida, 140 x 180 cm, 2007

But then, the same veiled window installation was shown at the prison of the Forteresse de Salses and the experience was completely different with no possible reference to the hijab or women. For both artistic expressions – video and photography – Malagrida insists on the physical experience and engagement in the moment.

The questions in her works are always revolving around what is vision, what is the eye looking at and what is on the other side. “There is a back and forth that has to do with doubting what one sees,” she says. Malagrida is specifically referring to her latest photography series of shop windows, and to the video of the window cleaner – reminiscent of action painting – describing an intellectual process that had started with the series *Point de Vue*. This earlier series consists of window shots

from a to-be-demolished holiday resort on the French-Spanish border. “It was an objet trouvé by Duchamp – something that already existed which freed me from the decision-making and perhaps the emotional or biographical charge of choosing. But at the same time it was biographical because it is about seeing Spain from France and vice versa, which was similar to my life as I was between the two countries,” says Malagrida. She got interested in the entire process of witnessing memory, the marks left on the windows’ dust and paint, the thoughts temporally left there. “All of them are as many filters and ways of reading the image,” she says, adding that it was then and there that she started working on polysemic subjects – questioning the meaning of an image, may it be a window – and adding or subtracting layers of significance. “Because of the whitewash

on the glass, the works make references to paintings by Jackson Pollock, Antonio Tapiès, and the entire 20th century. It shows how the photographic medium is capable of reproducing other mediums,” observes Malagrida.

For her series *Veiled Views*, made from the higher floors of the luxury hotels in Amman, “the initial impression was the one of seeing the city as a theatre stage. The distance refers to a form of power and protected point of view,” she says. There was an accident with the security x-ray machine and one of her films got fogged. Malagrida used it as a new departure in her approach. “I fogged all my films, and brought all the images to that very white space, which still allows you to see details up close. The work went back to something more essential, the idea of seeing, the dazzling light in those Southern countries and the personal experience,” she notes. As a result there is

more political charge in this work. The image disappears but it does so because of security reasons, “a sign of power but also of being a target, and it is revealing of a certain fragility in the security response.”

Coming up, the artist is exploring further video and photography projects. Themes will include Malevich white, glass, windows and the position of the artist in society, for when paint is thrown onto a surface – as seen in some forms of action painting – the physical act of painting can sometimes be interpreted as stoning. But this project is susceptible to change while the work remains in the creative process. Malagrida admits that while departing from a specific intellectual concept and framework for a new series, she often takes clues from accidental happenings along the way, developing the works towards more layers of meanings and aesthetic renditions. ■



Rue de Charenton by Anna Malagrida, 145 x 230 cm, 2008