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Na linha de fundo

MIKI LEAL

16.03.18 - 05.05.18

Opening 19h - 22h, 16.03.18

At the baseline

According to David Foster Wallace, the best and most intense 'narrator' of tennis, to some kind of metaphysical beauty in a sport, it is probably needed some sort of abstraction and formality, that is to say, of 'game'. And on the basis of such opinion, he describes tennis as the most beautiful sport. A statement that Miki Leal most certainly shares as he is used to turn his own personal mythologies into his work axis; then, these are his referential universes or connotative spaces from which he addresses that, which represents the core of his career: the painting. In this way, the tennis is turned along these works into the playing field for dialoguing on the painting act itself, on genres and shapes, on culture, and its signs and symbols, and the way of depicting them.

Taking as reference this sport, from a view as physical and concrete as metaphorical, implies deepening into an area with important antecedents, in which names such as the abovementioned and well-known, Foster Wallace or the also North-American, John McPhee appear. The former one, in fact, in his novel-chronicle *Levels of the Game*, develops a truly racial and social dialectic regarding the competition. For its part, the film critic, Serge Daney, in his compilation of chronicles entitled, *L'Amateur de tennis. Critiques 1980-1990* (the Amateur tennis player. From cinema to tennis and vice versa), considers every match as a movie, as a short story since according to him: that who says rally, he or she refers to dialogue, even if the object that crosses the net is a tennis ball. Following this idea, Gilles Deleuze uses tennis to reflect both upon the 'style artists', those who create moves and introduce new tactics, and upon the proletarianization of this sport with the appearance of popular tennis. For Daney, there is also an evolution from the aristocratic to the popular, a hectic pace attached to a process of huge media coverage and sensationalism of this sport. Naturally, there are some iconic references like *Blow Up* by Antonioni, and of David Hockney. Finally, Jean Luc Godard, a great fan of tennis, prominently uses it as metaphoric area of dialectic confrontation and place of reflection on time and space.

All this is part of the work process of Miki Leal, who introduces imperceptibly or unrecognizably a group of readings, viewings and iconic references into his works as if his way of getting the ball back in play was precisely the mode through which he depicts this, and through which he moves it to the surface of his painting. That is the real point, of a discussion, as Serge Daney would state. The dialogue of the artist with the topic and with his or her own referents, with the practice of painting, with the shapes, and with the culture too.

If there is a core element in this group is the tennis court as such. That rectangle with its white lines that frames the playing field, its boundaries and whose surface can be made of several materials like grass, clay or synthetic track. The fact of turning this court into his mainstream creates interesting references that sends us to some aspects which appear frequently in Miki Leal's works: dialogue and tradition, and more specifically in this case, critics and tradition, the boundaries of the painting work, the implications of the picture and its background, and so on. If in reality, the surfaces, on which the game is developed, exhibit an

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homogeneous colour, his works change that surface that clearly refers in its literal transposition to the monochrome, in a motif for an iconoclastic gesture, for a 'comment' about the abovementioned pictorial sign where the important issue, finally, is the way in which it is shown. The lines which portray the playing field and establish its boundaries take us both to the matter of the own painting limits as well as to the link between the pictorial space and the painting inside the painting. Borderlines that provide a fertile land to enhance, once again, dialogue and discussion between abstraction and figuration. As he already did, he took as a starting point, the elements of tangram, using the chances it offers, that is to say its geometric shape and specially in this case, the planimetric representation, focusing, accordingly, on the point of view.

Yet, according to Serge Daney, the tennis court is also the place of the story. By revisiting once more the fiction universe of John Cheever and by completing the course of 'The Swimmer', Leal exhibits a setting influenced by The Mourning (Thinking of John Cheever). The geometric motif of the metal mesh, that is used to close the court, frames the scene establishing a fictional point of view that draws the spectator in. And there are not stories, but History set out in the painting, Foro Italico (Nicola Pietrangeli's Stadium), where it is established a dialectic between the glorious past, to which originally that Mussolini's architecture sends us back, and the general level which is exhibited to us, so closely connected with the point of view of such spectacularized sport by the media.

The signs of culture have always been a recurring topic in Miki Leal's works; in fact, he used again them in the series devoted to the players' t-shirts. The sport clothing with its decorative designs, its symmetry and asymmetry, is the field to investigate around the colour and line, the texture and transparency. His work elements around the stylization of the picture, the fashion and design resonate all the time here, as is always the case in his approach to cultural signs.

Pottery, a recurrent and creative line in his last years, is the natural place towards which his painting spreads along this project. Breaking the rigid framework and materializing is just one of his goals. The dialogue with the genres, and more precisely with the still life, is the medium for discussing with the history of painting about its shapes and motifs. A tennis landmark of 'still things', as requires the essence of any still life, in which the echoes of a tennis match still reverberate; and accordingly, the instability of its iconography and its connotations. And as it happens in all matches, there is a discussion between the different elements shown in his paintings and potteries. Dialectic and temporary flow are based on the dialogue between the fluid and the static, the fixed and the mobile, among which it is moved (the players, the tennis ball) and among which it is fixed (the tennis court, the lines, and the space). Completing the scenery, we find as a centre of gravity, the net and as a vanishing point, the baseline.

Therefore, the space between the net and the baseline appears overflowed by tennis balls with numerous trajectories and different speeds and strengths, in an exchange that reminds and redefines the old dialogues with the painting and the new possibilities of a new language, as Serge Daney would state. Once again in his career, the painting and its risks are used as a baseline.

Alberto Martín August 2017