

ARTUR RAMON ESPAI D'ART

Fictions

Josep Santilari, Pere Santilari
and Spanish Golden Age still life

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Pedro de Campobín, *Florer*, c. 1650. Oil on canvas, 72 x 51,5 cm.

Josep Santilari and Pere Santilari

A conversation with Artur Ramon

Every meeting with Josep and Pere Santilari is a revelation. When they come to the gallery, they usually bring new works, which we discover together as genuine gifts. Today they arrive empty-handed, but willing to explain their concerns, the journey that takes them from idea to artwork, the way in which they share a vision of reality through art, and how they complement it in a dual way.

Artur Ramon (AR) Tell me what this new exhibition, *Fictions: Josep Santilari, Pere Santilari and Spanish Golden Age still life*, means to you.

Pere Santilari (PS) Right now I am reading a novel by Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety*, which clearly defines the idea of fiction when one of protagonists says “I believed that fiction was the art of constructing truths from false materials”. In fact, all figurative painting is the representation of a reality, the one that the artist chooses, but at the same time it is still a fiction. We start from a tangible reality, the things we see, and we decide to create an artwork, which is a figurative reality: the way to bring together the elements that make up the painting, the distance between them, the lighting, are our false materials.

AR Therefore, from that fiction, how does the artwork arise?

Josep Santilari (JS) Usually, when we start working on new themes we reach them after having remade others: one painting leads to another, as in a continuous transfer. There are recurrent elements: *vanitas*, flowers, food. Furthermore, looking at the classics we get inspired and we explore new paths that they have already walked. It is about taking advantage of tradition to try to contribute something new.

I once heard singer Noel Gallagher say that songs “came down” to him like a kind of mental flood. Well, paintings “come down” to me in the

same way. That does not mean that I see them, but I can sense them. It is more an emotional matter than an intellectual one.

AR In short, we would say that a part of the idea is structured and emerges from reality, but at the same time there are a series of pictorial influences and images that are created through things you see. What is amazing about the two of you, and even interesting from a psychological point of view, is that this process of creation occurs simultaneously between you both. How does that happen, and how is it shared? We are talking about two artists, twin brothers, who share the same studio ... There is a parallel mutation.

PS Our job, essentially, is to think. We obsessively reflect on the themes of our paintings all day. For instance, now, in this series of still lifes, we work with elements of food, of flowers, because we come from there, but we do not know where it will take us. Thus, I pass by a place and think “I will pick this flower”, for example now that it is the time of almond trees. All these things remain pending, it is as if you had a great hotchpotch, and when it is time to create a new work, you take ideas for the composition.

AR Do the two of you participate in an initial intellectual work to share your ideas?

JS We can both be painting in the studio, and by midmorning say, “Listen, what we talked about yesterday, could it be solved this way? How about...? We share ideas and continue painting. We think about it. We often write it down in a notebook.

AR Do you make preparatory drawings?

PS No, no. The structure of the painting is always composed at the time of creation. It is very curious that from what you can imagine to what you find afterwards, the work varies!

With regard to the paintings, there are three very important questions. The first is to know what elements of the scenery we will build, as if they were the characters on a stage. The second is to take into account the spaces between these elements, because what is there is as important as what is not, and my brain does not control that, I need to see it. The third is enlightenment; everything varies depending on how the light hits it. We have invented a thousand things to be able to create scenarios where there are elements illuminated in different ways. The lighting is always real. What happens is that depending on how you move the objects, depending on how much depth you give them, one part or another lights up.

What is very curious, once you are creating, is when you had thought about it in one way and reality suggests another. More than having everything well thought out, it is about applying the inquiring gaze, to see what is happening and to know how to take advantage of it.

AR So chance plays a role, but of course you have to be involved. I would like to reflect on the dialogue between your work and that of classical artists. I would like to do a brief historical review.

The first literary and historical quotations on still life painting go back to the famous passage that you already know by Pliny the Elder, of those two Greek painters, Zeuxis and Parrhasius, who argued about who of them best painted a bunch, so that the birds would go to peck at it...

PS The deception yes. In the first exhibition with you, I made a painting that refers to that, where you can see a still life with a beehive and a bird that comes to peck at it.

AR This explains the painting as a *trompe-l'œil*, as a delusion of reality. It is the essence of painting, which in your case, obviously, is also transferred to drawing, because in my opinion a very interesting aspect of your work is that there is no distinction between drawing and painting; they form an organic body. That is to say, drawing often works as preparation, as a project, but your drawings have the same level of finished work, of final work, as painting. But there is that point of deception to the eye. What does it consist of?

JS Basically, the sketches you mentioned are the photographic work that we do. What do we get?

A reality in two dimensions, the photograph is real. In order to be able to work the necessary hours—whether with a model, a fruit or a flower—we crystallize that reality in a photograph. Many people have said to me: “Since you do the drawings in black and white, why don’t you take the photos in black and white?” And I answer them: «Because there I see the color, and if I see the color, my head already knows how to translate the images into black and white».

AR Of course, when I read that passage from Pliny the Elder, that is the origin of the description of painting, I thought that your work shares that illusion. There is a factor in your works that cannot be ignored, it is technical virtuosity, and today, leaving the birds aside, let’s play with photography. I would like to set out a debate between painting and photography.

PS If I took a photograph in black and white and wanted to transfer it into drawing, it would be a problem, because the whites, grays and blacks would not be explained exactly the same as when we pass them to drawing. We treat the drawing. The concept of drawing is the same as that of engraving: balancing black and white. Keep it in mind that for any subject that we have thought about making a painting, we take more than forty photos. The same with different lighting. So, there is a lot of information, some elements are lighter and others darker, and what do you end up doing? From that large volume of information—you can have up to five or six different photos—you make a drawing.

JS Some time ago, in the last exhibition that we presented in the gallery on Carrer de la Palla, after four or five years without exhibiting, a lady came up to me and said: «Hey, I really like what you do, I remember your last exhibition». And she added: “Now there is something different. The drawings have a different density. I do not know what it is”. I thought, “I do know”. In the previous exhibition, the reality from which we started was analogue photos, and now we work with digital photography. If with analogue we had “a ten” of information, let’s say, now we would have five hundred. Even too much! So, from the photos we have to stay with what is essential.

AR In the middle of the 19th century, the appearance of photography influenced painting. Doesn’t



Josep Santilari, *Série Fantin-Latour, I*, 2020. Graphite on paper, 32 x 27 cm.



Josep Santilari, *Panetone i vanitas*, 2015. Oil on canvas, 27 x 27 cm.

it give you the feeling that it introduced changes, by the fact of dividing the vision?

Painting begins with the eye of the painter, which is what generates the work, what we see, from 1415 on. It is a key point in Brunelleschi's perspective, the world of Alberti and the first Quattrocento, when artists "break the glass". We enter the perspective of what Vasari said, "pierce the wall". That is what the painter does, and from there, the artist's eye remains practically unchanged for four centuries. There are more revolutions in the field of light than in the depth of space, which stays unalterable to the canon.

Since the appearance of photography, the pictorial space is broken. The artist not only looks with the eye of perspective, but with that of the fragment. The compositions change. Look at how Degas composes, in a photographic way. Don't you think?

PS The incorporation of a medium such as photography allows an access to reality that until then was unthinkable. But it can also be dangerous. The great challenge when painting is creating the feeling of depth. Thus, the difficulty in explaining that idea of depth or relief is greater, and when the painter starts from the photograph, there is a great risk that the work will remain or appear flat.

AR Given this, let's review the genre of still life throughout history, which largely missed out on these paintings. In Greek painting we find practically nothing, and in Roman painting something through Pompeii, very little. Painting flourishes in the medieval world, but still lifes continue to be almost non-existent. We find it again in the late Renaissance and, above all, it constitutes the great invention of the Baroque. In that period there are a series of artists, in the north and in the south, who begin to work on the still life, although it appears as a minor genre, because then the important themes were religious and historical.

I would like you to tell me about the different types of still life: Dutch or Flemish, with an almost miniaturist precision, and still lifes from the south, such as *The Basket of Fruit* by the first Caravaggio (Pinacoteca Ambrosiana), or those that we find incorporated in some compositions by Zurbarán and Ribera.

You started with a light background, I remember, and then you went to a black background. I think there is a clear influence of Baroque painting here.

PS Yes, definitely. I introduced the still lifes with a black background because I considered that I had come a long way on the light background, and I wanted to go beyond drawing, so that the dominant element was not the white on the paper, with the little pencil line above it. I wanted it to be exactly the other way around. That is, that the dominant element was the disappearance of white, because that brought me closer to the world of engraving, which has always interested me a lot. One of its most notable aspects, especially looking at Rembrandt, is that it is dark. So, I posed it to myself as a great challenge: trying to make that ancient language evolve. The black background requires further analysis of reality; Even though you have already solved a large part of the painting, it forces you to work much more with the light.

JS But it is not a total black, because we paint thinking above all in the classical tradition and the aerial perspective. The theory would be: a black one meter square, and a white one meter square. Look, black and white. If I take them to the horizon, they will both be gray. Then, a black background in a painting would come completely forward. Our painting is made based on grays, and the drawing as well; The only thing that the drawing allows for that black background is that it be a total black. But the black we are talking about is surely not a black equivalent to that of the tube. So, both the drawing and the painting continue within the aerial perspective, with very pure colors, but when they move away everything turns gray. With the black background it is as if there is a light that comes from within.

AR It radiates light as from within, because you eliminated the background.

JS At the same time, that connects us with Dutch still lifes, which are paintings with a lot of detail. We are painters more in the Dutch tradition.

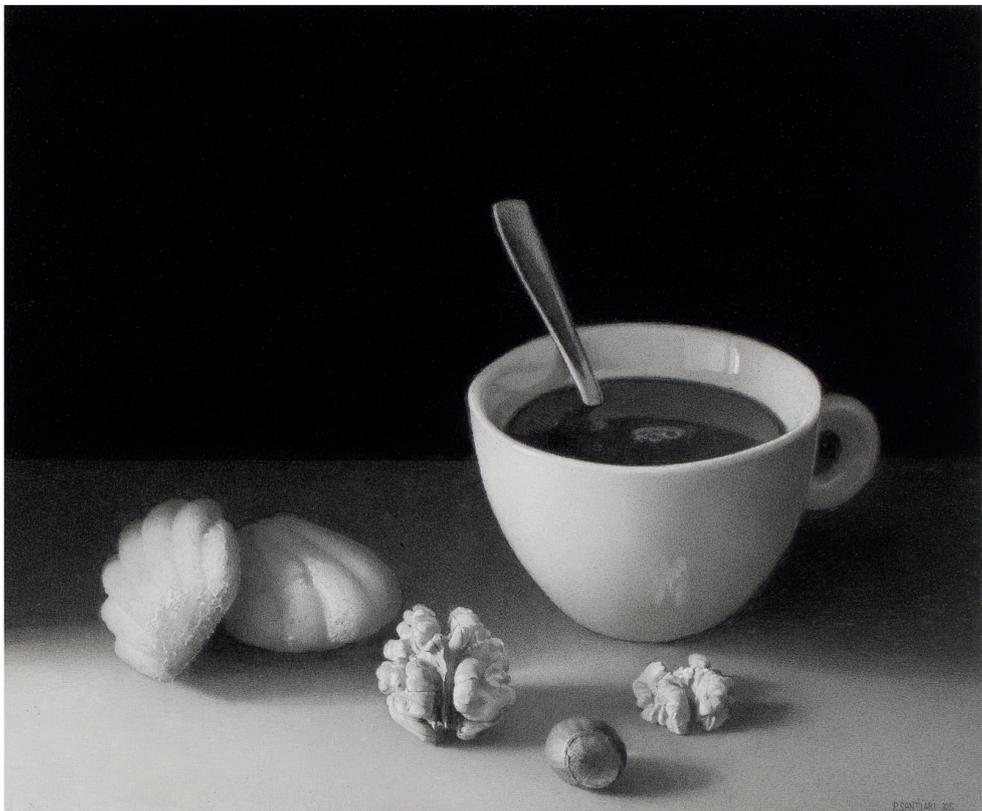
AR I wanted to ask you that, being painters in the northern tradition, and with those references already from a very young age, have you ever considered working with the camera obscura? Those painters worked with the camera obscura.

JS We have never worked with the camera obscura, I would not know how to build it.

AR There is a good book, *Eye of the Beholder*, by



Josep Santilari, *Magdalena i nous*, 2014. Graphite on paper, 21,5 x 24 cm.



Pere Santilari, *Bodegó XLVIII*, 2015. Graphite on paper, 20,5 x 24,5 cm.



Ignacio Arias, *Bodegón*, c. 1640-1650. Oil on canvas, 58 x 85,5 cm.

Laura J. Snyder, which deals with the influence of the camera obscura on Dutch Golden Age painters. It was used not only by Vermeer, but also by most of the Dutch painters of his time.

JS But Vermeer used it fantastically. Everyone had the camera obscura, but no one was like him.

AR Pieter de Hooch is very good, but he is not Vermeer. Gerard Dou is also very good, but he is not Vermeer ... As for Vermeer, there is an impressive aspect. His atmospheric painting, both indoors and outdoors, plays with a concept that later became very popular in literature, which is the ability to compress time. He is a painter who knows how to play that game of time, and that is why Proust admired him deeply, more than any other painter. In his work *In Search of Lost Time* he dedicates several pages to the *View of Delft*, which he came to define as the most beautiful painting in the world.

JS It is said that it was the most beautiful painting in history.

AR I thought about all that one day. I mean, if you were able to build a camera obscura, which is challenging, you would have the formula of what Pere sometimes said, “these little theaters that we set up based on light.” Painters have invented a thousand things. Caravaggio, in the first house he had, had a hole made in the ceiling so that direct light would enter it, and he also built his paintings with almost theatrical representations. But he wanted the light that came from the ceiling. The painter uses everything he can to capture reality.

PS Everything that can help ... You have to have everything close, to do what Delacroix said: use it to do something that goes further.

JS There are many people who paint with photographs, starting with many hyperrealists, and who have gone down in history as complete copies. Because, for example, the postulates of hyperrealism speak of “copying the tonalities and values of a photograph”. Well, that’s a lie, that’s not what they do.

AR No, because everything remains very cold. On the other hand, some painters of the same generation who do not follow these postulates are

much more interesting, such as Andrew Wyeth. And Edward Hopper himself.

JS However, those artists do not fit with Caravaggio, because they have nothing to do with him. Sometimes they tell us that we are hyperrealistic but we are not, we come from realism...

AR Well, because people label and get confused by your virtuosity, which is also difficult, because it is unique and goes very against the current. I mean that you have that aspect that makes it difficult for them to define you.

In our exhibition —*Fictions: Josep Santilari, Pere Santilari and the still life of the Golden Age*— for the first time a very interesting dialogue is established between the classical tradition and your work. Are they painters who have influenced you?

JS I really like Luis E. Meléndez. There is an aspect with regard to Meléndez that is repeated with Caravaggio and with the Dutch painters, a common denominator, which is the way to explain reality. However, they are all very different artists, because if you look at the Dutch and you look at Meléndez, they have almost nothing in common. Let’s take an example that unites them all: they all solve a bunch with certain aspects in exactly the same way, and they have not seen each other. Another example, cherries and their stems. You look at Caravaggio’s still life, where there are cherries, and the stem, very small, changes colour; And at the end, when it finishes on a kind of flatter base, there are two or three different taps of paint, millimetric. Meléndez has this as well, and Caravaggio and Meléndez never saw each other. It is just an example to illustrate that they are united by the same pictorial grammar. We apply that to our work.

PS It is there, you just have to look and find it!

AR It is part of a universal language.

PS You have to know what you take from that universal language to transfer it to the painting. What do you take? Well, that which catches your attention, that when you see some paintings you think: “This explains it in this way, doing this, changing the tonality this way, from here to there ... Why do I like it? Because at the end I am seeing the image of a painting that I would like to do”.



Pedro de Camprobín, *Florer*, c. 1650. Oil on canvas, 72 x 51,5 cm.



Josep Santilari, *Vas amb flors de primavera*, 2020. Graphite on paper, 27 x 27 cm.



Josep Santilari, *L'artista. Vas amb flors II*, 2018. Oil on canvas, 27 x 27 cm.

JS And they all explain it in exactly the same way.

AR This means that art does not evolve, what art does is mutate, in a loop.

PS Sure, but each artist gives you a different image of the still life. What happens is that they maintain a constant. It is like in line drawing, sometimes the figure is thicker, and other times thinner; It depends on where the light and shadow are. If we look at reality, the way to translate it is this. Where the light hits, the line disappears, and where there is shadow, the line becomes more visible. The structure of this language is maintained in both painting and drawing through the centuries, and the great masters know how to apply it in their paintings.

JS If you look at a head drawn by Raphael and another drawn by Rembrandt, you see that they explain the head exactly the same, and they had surely never seen each other. There is a common language that when you discover it, you have a powerful tool. But you have to know how to see it. There are many hyper-realistic painters who paint all the hairs, all the veins. Don't! The human eye does not see that! And what happens? They take the photo, see the vein and paint it ... But I think things go the other way.

AR What does light mean to you, and how is it expressed in drawing and painting?

PS It is essential, because whenever an image is created, everything is conditioned by how the light falls on the objects. Therefore, we have to represent the light, because otherwise we would have a totally black work, in which nothing would be seen. If a reality is seen it is because of light. Our obsession is always to explain how light passes from one place to another, and the obstacles that it encounters on its way, which are the objects; How the light falls on these objects, and how it arranges them, and that it is understood if they are further forward or backward.

AR Therefore, the object has to be there, with a certain light, at a certain time of day, right?

PS Yes, as well. But many times it is a sensation.

JS Sure! I paint for sensations!

AR What does that mean, "painting for sensations"?

JS Picasso, who has very interesting phrases, said: "An artist does not paint what he sees, he paints what he feels, what he tells himself about what he has seen in reality." This is the key. For me, art is still the search for beauty and harmony.

PS Here many things come into play, you establish a dialogue with the painting. You do some things and it gives them back to you, and you fail and rectify, you throw away your memory and look for balance, and you say "I have to make this more dark", because you play.

JS It's a game. Perhaps it is a cliché, but it is like walking on a wire; If you fall here, bad, if you fall there, it can be a miracle.

AR And doesn't it happen to you, that there are days when you fail?

PS Of course, I have had drawings that I have said: "That's it!". And since we cover them with plastic so as not to touch them with our hands, you think: "It's finished." One day you remove the wrapping and you get a scare, you realize that it requires at least two more weeks of work. Everything is disjointed, you have lost direction.

AR Wouldn't it be a good metaphor to think that creative process is a journey? A journey in which you carry a compass, but you don't know where you are going. You know where you want to go, like Columbus, who was going to India and ran into America. It's a bit this game.

JS Once we are dead, we leave behind our complete work. You look at it and say: it is not that I have created a painting, because perhaps we have made a thousand, but if the whole resists and explains something, it will have been worth it.

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Pere Santilari, *Vas amb flors de cirerer i presseguer*, 2019. Oil on canvas, 26 x 25 cm.

Front page, details of:
Josep Santilari, *Sèrie Fantin-Latour, I*, 2020. Graphite on paper, 32 x 27 cm. (left)
i Pedro de Campobin, *Flores*, c. 1650. Oil on canvas, 72 x 51,5 cm. (right)

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