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Juan Béjar's Poisoned Sweets



Transparent, nearly always swollen little faces with generous double chins. Dark eyes that show little or no emotion. Self-satisfied little mouths; ringlets; perfect outfits. Such are the children's portraits by the Spanish painter, Juan Béjar (1946). But they are not real portraits; not replicas of real people but metaphors.

Béjar, just like Pablo Picasso, was born in Málaga; but whereas Picasso moved to Paris at an early age never to return, Béjar is to this day a man of Málaga. He is a highly-reputed artist in his country of birth. In Spain there is a waiting-list for his work, which makes Béjar proud but at the same time stressed. His production is limited on account of the immense amount of work put into each painting.



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His "children" nearly always look straight to the front, unmoved. They appear to be staring at us, and at the same time their gaze transfixes us. At times they seem to be inexpressive, staring dolls; their ageing heads are far from infantile. They stand rigid and static or sit with their little legs before them, attired in elegant outfits like adults in miniature. They bring to mind the Infanta Margarita of "Las Meninas" (1656) by the famous Spanish painter, Velázquez.

It is curious that Béjar's children should have blond, almost golden hair like the young Margarita ... a technical detail by which the painter obtains a full contrast of loveliness. If you draw close to the painting you see in the hair Celtic or Moorish motifs that intensify its vividness.

But there is more. At the same time these figures have a certain kinship with the female dwarf to the right of Margarita. At the Spanish court these "dwarfs" were very popular. They were adopted as curiosities. The "jester" appearance of Béjar's figures is accentuated by a multitude of little bows and decorations. These external adornments are of a perfection that contrasts with their bearers' lack of emotion. Although they have toys such as a hoop, a skipping-rope or a building-box, they give no sign of knowing how to use them. Play requires fantasy, spontaneity, creativity.

Their rigidity arouses compassion. (We all know how rebellious a stubborn child can be.) Some of them have an air of sadness in their eyes. Mostly they are arrogant, mocking or defiant. These Spanish "children" are spine-chilling!

After a while alone with these paintings in the studio I need to get out and away from their lost gazes. Are they demanding something of me or scolding me for some reason?

In no way are they happy children. Innocence forms no part of their lives. They do protest, because they ask concrete things (like children they are young and innocent). These paintings fascinate. Their maddening and magic elements confuse us. Juan Béjar describes his work as "poisoned sweets"; at first glance they attract, but whoever tries them soon realizes their real nature.



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This 62-year-old painter is a modest, extremely pleasant person. In the peace of his small studio he works unrelenting on his marvellous creations, which he defines as a Spanish version of magical realism blended with a touch of naïvety.

Béjar is obsessed with detail. He pays the closest attention to a tiny pearl ear-ring, a little bow, a satin ribbon around a chubby little waist, a small lace-frill around the neck or the wrinkles on the brows of dogs or cats. With the same dedication to detail he executes the background of the painting; at times a garden, architecture or a landscape. In recent years his landscapes have become more and more plastic, rather in the manner of an impressionist.

His work is very elaborate; it seems aged, as if worn by time. Layer upon layer in "faded" earth-tones, flecked with clear or intense accents. Symmetry plays an important rôle in his compositions. It is his way of expressing order, since under the semblance of tranquillity there springs passion.

We perceive the muffled resonance of Luchino Visconti's films, in which moral decadence and the class-struggle is repeated, often against a backdrop of social criticism. The word that prevails when we see his work is, "decadence", according to the dictionary: "very refined and devoid of expressive force". It is a sensation that is valid for many of Béjar's figures.

When we closely observe certain details they seem to create a symbolism. Our forebears – particularly those of the 17th century – were taught to recognize and interpret these references, which often have a moralizing nature. Early-ripening cherries in a small hand are cherries that from ancient times announce springtime and are also "celestial": in heaven it is always springtime. In the art of painting the cherry is known as "the fruit of paradise" and symbolizes a sure reward for a virtuous life. In his paintings orange-trees appear very often; for Spaniards they have for centuries symbolized luck and satisfaction (at weddings orange-blossom is an important component of the bride's bouquet). What is more, the orange-tree symbolizes the tree of good and evil. It is a persistent element in the symbols that Béjar repeats and that often have a double meaning. Thus the frog symbolizes both wealth and long life and worldly pleasures and even sin; and winged creatures which at first glance seem to be butterflies but on closer examination turn out to be wasps (symbols of evil thoughts and



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feelings). A dog symbolizes loyalty (but may bite), a cat is associated with the moon and may symbolize both wickedness and fertility.

A child has a bird attached to a string; in days gone by a relatively common practice when caring for it as a domestic animal or playmate, but nowadays quite unthinkable and unacceptable; or it is a bird flying away, symbolizing the soul departing the body bound for heaven, but it is restrained to prevent escape (tied to the Earth). Virtually the child is toying with death.

In the background of an apparently innocent portrait there may suddenly appear a snake slithering in a tree or a distant house that is almost certainly haunted. It is the magical element, the fable, that gives Béjar's paintings an intriguing atmosphere and the feeling that something is about to happen.

The sources of light produce a surrealist sensation. The light that illuminates a person falls differently from moonlight, which illuminates the whole scene and throws strange shadows. The shadows have a life of their own. The more you observe, the greater the alienation.

In this world, which at first sight appears absolutely safe and convincing, Juan Béjar asks questions of himself. He creates doubts and confusion where silence seems to rebel. It is a complicated but fascinating world that provokes concern and disquiet.

His paintings represent a mournful tribute to the private life of his subjects, sweet and poisoned at the same time. Which is as if the artist were trying to recover what is lost, like Marcel Proust in "À la recherche du temps perdu", where the main character talks of his life and memories: his parents and love but also snobbery in fin-de-siècle French society. Béjar's memories are not always personal either; at times they are memories of a bygone Spain. The Spain of the feudal system with a rigid Catholic hierarchy and frequent contradictions that continue to this day. Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) in his famous "Don Quijote de la Mancha" (1605) describes the life of a noble knight and his fat, lazy squire, symbolizing idealism as opposed to materialism.

Béjar's children show us similar contradictions. His children, aristocrats, are the "disinherited" of history, excluded and eliminated. With their pale, almost transparent faces they bare to us the state of their souls.



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Their lovely clothes are but tinsel, like the emperor's new clothes: when all is said and done they are naked figures, although they seem unaware of it. It may seem comical, but reflects tragedy, bitterness and sadness.

The desire to get away from these penetrating paintings goes hand in hand with the sorrow of parting from them. It is hard to leave them behind. And you will never entirely forget them. The apparent tranquillity they irradiate cannot be detached from a feeling of disquiet and alienation. The contradictions are linked to an undefined environment; a world in which significance is sought; a world in which each person comes face to face with his own forms of anguish.