

# JOAN GENOVÉS: FROM THE SCENE OF FEAR TO THE SCENE OF LONELINESS

HIS GRAPHIC LANGUAGE, INFLUENCED BY A SERIES OF RESOURCES USED IN THE MEDIA, ESPECIALLY PHOTOGRAPHY, FILM AND TELEVISION, INCORPORATES A WIDE RANGE OF REPORTAGE-IMAGES SUCH AS ARRANGEMENTS IN SERIES, PARALLEL MOUNTING, ALTERNATING PLANES OR STILL PHOTOGRAPHS.



ROMÀ DE LA CALLE DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTE FOR CREATIVITY AND AESTHETIC INVESTIGATION, UNIVERSITY OF VALENCIA

**M**any of the vivid images which Joan Genovés (b. Valencia, 1930) brought to life with his own brand of *political realism* (Peter Sager)—especially in the sixties and seventies—have now earned a place among the best visual imagery related to the dramatic expression of violence, flight and death within the existential context of repressive societies in recent history. The mastery of his powerfully effective graphic language, heavily influenced by a series of resources borrowed from a wide range of compositional elements used in the mass media, especially photography, film and television, not only make it the ideal vehicle for communication in a given situation—as a chronicle of the surrounding reality—but also as a general paradigm of what Josep Renau so accurately described as “the scene of fear”.

It was a way of incorporating a wide range of *reportage-images* into painting,

where arrangements in series, parallel mounting, the compositional use of contrast, expressive framing, alternating planes or still photographs impress the viewer with the “aesthetics of urgency”, with the sense of the critical instant, where risk and the limits of experience become an eloquent visual testimony and purgative.

It could be said that the explicitly unrestrained ethical roots of his painting led his figurative approach away from the habitual indifference and informative irony of pop, towards an immediate radical protest and interpretation.

Joan Genovés studied at the Sant Carles Escola de Belles Arts, in Valencia. Restless and nonconformist, he quickly joined in a number of different artistic movements—something very common throughout this period—from which he defended the search for new aesthetic approaches. In 1950 he joined the group *Los Siete*, and in the middle of this period

he formed part of the first phase of the *Parpalló* group, in Valencia. Later, after moving to Madrid, he joined the *Hondo* group, formed at the beginning of the sixties, during which time his concern for the anxiety of man’s situation and its urgent artistic transformation reached its maximum expression. It was during this period that Joan Genovés discovered the elements that were to make up his own particular language.

Thus when Peter Sager, in his study of “new forms of realism”, associates Genovés with what he calls *political realism*, he is effectively drawing attention to the fact that the decisive element in his artistic style is not—in spite of first appearances—the high degree of information his images convey, but the level of plastic intensity with which he stimulates both the spectator’s understanding and his feeling. Achieving this level of communication through visual images involves taking on the oversaturated atmosphere





of information that surrounds us. This calls for a skilful combination of subject matter and the use of certain media techniques—as mentioned above—which he incorporates in his visual language.

In fact, Joan Genovés's international success and acclaim show that his work—without any prejudice to the source of his images or the particular intentions by which they are characterized—symbolizes generally applicable human situations with a profound intensity.

In this respect, the "anonymity" and the characteristic simplicity with which these situations are recreated—indicative of a reality which is fixed in the memory—emphasize this sort of descriptive, and even, sometimes, neutralizing remoteness of the reportage, which in fact increases the critical effect, the emotional impact and the understanding which are the real objectives of his work.

Thus the reaction set up between his ethical testimonial approach and its corresponding aesthetic approach has allowed Joan Genovés to develop his creative work uniformly, using sensual and formal plastic values which are always fully in harmony with the living values that arise spontaneously from life itself. However, as from the eighties, in response to the changing situation of our recent history, Genovés's art concentrated on other aspects of everyday life, though never straying away from his "poetry of mankind".

Many of his works could well go to make up a "chronicle of the political transition". The human figures in his pictures, which are generally still anonymous, no

longer run or try to escape. Now they march together in a demonstration, they embrace in groups as if celebrating some kind of reunion, or else they walk the streets with all the day to day urgency of their existence.

Alongside this development in his subject matter, the colour range of his compositions increases, not without a certain restraint and austerity. However, he still resorts to the depersonalization of man, the reinforcement of collectivity and the emphasis on space as a surrounding element. But there is a definite reduction in the earlier symbolic references and the psychosocial pressure of fear has also decreased.

It is important to remember that space was the "medium" in which flight took place, fear was experienced and isolation came about. Joan Genovés always bore this context in mind, obsessed perhaps by the expression to be captured in an instant, deeply attracted by a gesture, an object or a shadow made gigantic by panic itself, and thus converted into an abstract message of power.

Nevertheless, following this career in which art and reality go hand in hand, for some years—especially in the middle years of the present decade—Joan Genovés has become increasingly interested in the role played by the *Urban Landscape*. The city setting now appears completely empty, a fact which obviously involves a change of emphasis in his usual figurative elements and perhaps also a slight tendency towards new forms of social and human problems.

It is true that the urban environment has

been the setting for Genovés's subject matter, but it is also true that this setting was rarely portrayed as playing a recognizably independent role. Rather it was the spectator who had to guess the urban nature of the setting. In fact, the city formed a background against which crowds and groups of people—the story's real focal point—acted out their presence, their meaning and their actions. In fact, with the present period, devoted to the "urban landscape", one could say that the situation has been reversed and the city as a setting for activity and co-existence appears to take over a central role in the picture: we have, in a way, moved from "the scene of fear" to "the scene of loneliness".

This eloquently deserted landscape appears frozen, petrified, in the mystery of an unmovable stillness. The medium—the city—dominates man, and even reduces the public demonstration of group feelings. This absence of the human pulse becomes a powerful metaphor for the perplexity and isolation of the individual, just at a time when a large part of the dreams, demands and aspirations seem to have been distorted, and even joint participation in common tasks fails to give a real sense of change.

There is no doubt that the work of Joan Genovés forms an eloquent historical record of the ups and downs to which our day to day existence has been subjected. And certainly his creative approach continues in this direction, following on the various options and alternatives that have, over the years, shaped and defined his career as an artist. ■