

**A LIFE OF ONE'S OWN**  
**ANTONIO SAMO**

The neoclassical Academy attached greater importance to historical painting, followed by portraiture, landscape, and, in the last place, life last. Courbet already enunciated, in his *Pavillon du Réalisme*, the end of these hierarchies between artistic genres. In his monumental work *The Painter's Studio: A real allegory summing up seven years of my artistic and moral life*, Courbet presents a diverse number of types of humans, objects, reproductions of his own paintings within his studio, animals ... all this as a compendium of what made him, as an artist, reflect and what he has perceived as valuable. He is represented in the center of his painting as he paints a landscape; a destitute child and a naked woman observe him in this task; a cat plays, while philosophers, writers, beggars or patrons parade to one side and the other of his painting surrounded by objects: a lute, a dagger, books, a skull and a hat. The painting recreates his own study, thus we see a series of landscapes painted by himself in recent years hanging on the walls. This is the statement of the new artistic movement that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century: Realism.

In the exhibition by Antonio Samo currently on view at Set Espai d'Art we can also find a series of objects, landscapes and people that have surrounded the artist in his studio in recent years. But these realities, clean, common, popular and everyday, are our same objects, landscapes and people produced in series, standardized and perfect, that cross the screen of our mobile phones at full speed, without hierarchies and without prior choice.

In the process of preparing the exhibition, when visiting his studio in an industrial warehouse in Alboraya, those objects waited to be discovered by us by removing the plastic that protected them from dust. Antonio organized the sculptural groups of one of the hundreds of variables that he had been rehearsing in the proceeding weeks. Together, we began to recompose the groups, associations of objects and figures that referred us to the ideals of health, beauty, culture or well-being.

*Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* Richard Hamilton asked himself this in 1956, and in response he offered us a series of consumer objects and bodies, images of the desire of a growing middle class emerging from the harsh post-world war years. Samo shows us his own collection of desirable objects: sneakers, creams, clothing, a cap, decorative plants and people, all of this extracted from the daily parade that crosses our screens through applications that bring us closer to these unreal worlds.

The objects and figures in front of us are pure idealizations of the products that we consume every day and that represent a healthy, satisfying and complete lifestyle, an image of happiness. These sculptural groups, accompanied by photographs that act as a backdrop, are the scenographies of our lives. This *atrezzo* accompanies us in a kind of baroque theater, full of symbols and references to our lives. Like a contemporary *vanitas*, Antonio Samo's sculptures remind us that those skin care creams will not make us stop aging, this beautiful plant will one day wither, the folded, soft and clean

socks will end up getting holes and at some point we will lose our favorite cap. Only in these ideal objects placed in the gallery does the illusion of eternity remain, with the photographic backgrounds which frame that unreality.

Through the eyes of the artist we see the stagecraft and mechanisms of our theater of objects and images that keep us stunned in the continuous illusion of our particular *Truman Show*. Seeing the materiality of the wood that shapes his sculptures awakens us from sleep. The sanded and polished grain, the flat colors applied in very thin layers of paint, the very simple shapes of these pieces explain, through minimalist exaggeration, how the white, bright, very clean images which cross our Instagram profile operate.

Neoclassicism sought to represent the ideal forms of Antiquity, recreating the purity of its lines and the perfection of its compositions. This classical culture rediscovered in Herculaneum served to dedicate an entire century to its creative efforts in the search for perfection through enlightened idealism. In the case of our contemporary artists, the inspiration to recreate this ideal is much closer to us, specifically on the screens of our mobile phones, and their creations are impregnated with a critical sense that, as we observe in the work of Antonio Samo, leads us through irony to reflect on the perverseness of pursuing these ideals of life through consumption. These mass-produced objects are here represented in wood, carved one by one, carefully sanded, and sometimes partially painted in pleasant pastel tones. This meticulous artisan work carried out by Samo in his studio for hours, weeks and months contrasts with the mass production and immediate consumption of those same objects he represents. Samo, as a ritual, recreates these forms and these bodies, like contemporary kuroi. Let us remember that these statues of archaic Greece were originally made of wood, although what we currently know are their Roman stone replicas. Their forms, tending towards geometry, inexpressive, hieratic, show us, as in Antonio Samo's work, young ideals. In his work, those smooth surfaces sanded to exhaustion affect the placidity of sleep, far removed from the brutalism of Balkenhol's sculpture, which, while also hieratic and inexpressive, is endowed with a certain violence. In Samo this violence is suggested, hidden behind the normativity and standardization to which these characters are subjected.

The photographs that complete some of the sculptural groups are part of an ensemble. Sometimes they are shown as a backdrop, and sometimes as a *souvenir* photograph. In the diversity of their sizes and installation modes, they play with wooden sculptures, carrying out a dialogue with them and opening up their meanings. Picturesqueism was an aesthetic category typical of the 18th century that reclaimed those landscapes worthy of being painted. In these romantic paintings one could find from small characters surrounded by an imposing nature to details and anecdotal elements that completed the scene or provided it with a suggested narrative. In the photographs that embrace and surround the figures of Antonio Samo we also perceive something similar: an approach to the most everyday and anecdotal, sifted through the filter of an ideal romanticism that fixes its attention on mountains, flowers and monumental-scale architecture.

Samo's work is, therefore, a compendium of objects and images of rapid consumption that, when recreated as works of art, are presented to us with an aura of stillness and beauty that generate an apparent satisfaction. But in this act of production there is a subtle irony: it is about manual and imperfect copies that generate the disappointment of its uselessness. A hat that we cannot put on our head, a T-shirt that we cannot unfold, or a bottle of water that does not open or contain any liquid all frustrate our attitude as consumers of goods. And it is precisely at that moment when we realize the detail: we are in front of a work of art.

**Daniel Silvo**

Curator of the exhibition