

## **MJ Torrecampo**

### **(Un)Freedom**

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Demands for personal freedom and against discrimination are even now more than necessary. However, in recent years, the concept of identity has undergone a banalisation process - and this hinders those irrefutable demands. The word 'identity' often becomes a general term in common speech, not to mention its aberrational and discriminatory use in the so-called 'identitarian' ideologies.

What of single individual's identity in a period like this? Are the increasingly detailed choices that each one makes to define themselves real choices, and to what extent are they other-directed? In the time of 'mass distinction', an individual is no longer influenced by just the superstructures but also minimal, daily logics are adopted to define oneself and feel part of a group. This creates a sort of widespread and multiple 'pack mentality'.

Without direct proclamations, with the humility of an observer who stays behind the scenes, MJ Torrecampo explores this subtle ridge dividing identification and solitude, free self-expression and automatic response to the diktats of society. Diktats which are little apparent and yet influence even the most banal daily action - one of the features of the Spectacle defined by Debord, now interiorised by all, is its being permanent and thus all-pervasive.

Humility in the approach, mentioned above, means that the artist doesn't choose a predetermined position to go in search of a field-test. But the result is of great effectiveness, both aesthetically and conceptually. The artist, with a notable ability to summarise, transfers scenes that she has observed in person (mixed with others of pure imagination) onto canvas - groups of people caught when relaxing or during leisure times, fragments of desolate but sincere daily life. The suspended atmosphere, almost a 'veiling', suggests the seed of doubt - a feeling of silence and apparent calm offsets the strongly expressive tone. The people's gazes and the complex perspectives of the paintings ensure that the individual figures 'diverge' from one another while grouping and relating to each other.

The remixing of the perspective is, in effect, a fundamental feature of the paintings. In some works, for example *To his doctor appointment* or *Back under their roof*, perspective is altered by 'aerial view'. However, the visual system doesn't collapse; instead, the contradictions between the various vectors of the look create, overall, a composition that is surprising in its solidity. The different points of the described scene converse following a mental rather than perceptive map. The cognition of things (again, free or determined by the exterior?) affects their positioning, their conformation and their apparent vicinity or distance.

Three not perfectly coincident gazes merge and are summed in this subjectivity - those of the figures, the artist and the spectator considering the painting - with further diffractions that complicate everything, as both the artist's gaze and that of the spectator are double. The artist's contains the direct experience and also the re-elaboration of the scene while the spectator's has the observation of the painting and the memory of similar situations experienced personally.

Light is also subjective and has a marked influence on colour. And it should be noted that the smartphone, a tool never now ignored, even during socialisation, is an element that tangibly and ideally recurs (*Goodnight from Bushwick* is the most evident case).

Its suffused but assertive light is there both when the item appears in the painting and when it is absent, implied. Its inevitable presence in the pockets or hands of the figures always hovers over the scenes depicted. And it could be thought that the slightly dazzling light that is a feature of the paintings is metaphorically that of a mobile phone - an additional conditioning of the gaze and imagination, a further tool influencing individuals' will and desires.

The 'veiling' then introduces the viewer to the ambit of memory. Not only because the artist transposes her memory of scenes that she's seen in person to canvas but also because the scenes seem to be recalled by the figures rather than experienced. This was made explicit in some of the paintings divided into different sectors. For example, in *Nineteen years later and everyone left*, the more vivid scene in the upper part seems to belong to an actual or idealised past while the lower part shows a present that is certainly more melancholic, perhaps more realistic. The placid, vaguely Hockney-esque atmosphere of the upper part blurs into the 'washed-out' one below, where resignation, hope and tenderness cohabit. And it's in the paintings divided into sectors and the polyptychs like *In hop we trust* and *After happy hour* that one of the artist's most notable qualities is clearly shown, i.e. the ability to constantly vary the intensity of painting, the relationship between precision and fraying, clarity and blurring, from one painting to another and from one area of a painting to another.

Some other paintings have a simultaneous view of different actions making up a daytime. The accumulation of situations, meetings and activities appears to be a vitality resource but also accumulation that can potentially cause stress. And also here there is the doubt whether a day's agenda is studded with activities that favour the blossoming of an identity or whether it's stuffed with situations that people believe they have to experience to be in step with a society where even free time is subject to the diktat of productivity.

The most recent paintings still demonstrate complexity and compresence of different moods, but they also show a higher degree of compenetration between background and subjects – this feature can be found also in a picture like *Waiting for something to happen*, whose kind of expression is 'solid' and well-defined. And, as a consequence, an even more accurate balancing between characterisation and typification of people and situations can be found in these works. In an 'obscure' painting like *After happy hour*, then, the light's influence becomes paradoxically more intense: subjects are worked 'in negative' and the artist evokes (without quoting it literally) that particular kind of light proper of ancient art, which is dim but still blazes – nevertheless, we are still immersed in the contemporary melting pot so typical of Torrecampo's works.

'Recollecting emotions in tranquillity' was William Wordsworth's poetic motto - turn your experiences and feelings into artistic material only after reliving and reconsidering them calmly in the haven of your innermost sphere. MJ Torrecampo's strategy shares the stages of observation and reconstruction/re-elaboration with Wordsworth, without representing a post-modern version of Romanticism. But what counts more here is a further stage, rational and 'sociological' analysis, which makes her paintings exact because blurred photos of our epoch of hyper-determined but not completely free identities.

Beside this primary feature, most recent works focus on the emotional sphere. Even if a remarkable sense of melancholy is still prevalent and social analysis remains at the forefront, one can feel a strong sense of community and mutual support between characters: the 'ramshackle' but welcoming table in *After happy hour*, the moment of support and hope (revealed by the title) in *To his doctor appointment*, the embrace in *Back under their roof...* And even the almost desperate bore in *Waiting for something to happen* can be seen as a moment of community, despite divergent gazes. The circularity of forms unites people, objects and even the room in something like an embrace. Maybe, as these new conflictual paintings seem to suggest, a temporary antidote to social constraints and a momentary solace from 'phony freedom' could rise from the base, from the intimate proximity of everyday.