Una musa para dos artistas: el tiempo

La fotógrafa Catherine Opie y el pintor Philip Taaffe, cuyas obras están en las instituciones más importantes de Estados Unidos, conversan sobre su manera de trabajar y sobre el papel del arte en la sociedad. Por Rut de las Heras Brint

Coinciden en que ahora todo tiene que ser rápido. La sociedad debería frenar, dejar hueco a la observación

A Muse for two artists: Time

Photographer Catherine Opie and painter Philip Taaffe, whose pieces hang in the most prestigious U.S. institutions, talk about their way of working and about the role of art in society

Rut de las Heras Bretin

There is a slice of America in the heart of Madrid. It’s not a metaphor, it’s a fact, between Paseo de la Castellana and Serrano Street one can find the Embassy and the home of the U.S. Ambassador, James Costos. In the garden, a fountain by Cristina Iglesias, creator of the doors of the Prado Museum extension, leads to the entrance to an art gallery, the collection that Costos houses. Some 80 works by artists like Chuck Close, Antoni Tapies, Andy Warhol, Glenn Ligon, Catherine Opie and Philip Taaffe, among others. The last two names, photographer and painter, came to Madrid in March. To publicize and disseminate knowledge of American artists is one of the goals of the Art in Embassies project that was created over half a century ago during the Kennedy Administration and now spans 200 locations around the world.

The collection will be opened to small groups that want to visit it. The fingerprints of the Ambassador and his partner are reflected in the works selected for this space, their home since 2013, and to which they incorporated part of their collection, of Spanish artists and of friends, such as Catherine Opie (Sandusky, Ohio, 1961). The photographer, known for her work giving visibility to the LGBT community, underscores the red brushstrokes on the canvas by John Singer Sargent, Dwarf with a Mastiff, Copy after Velázquez, hanging close to her series of photographs on the second floor of the house. She discusses with Taaffe (Elizabeth, NJ, 1955) what the Prado means for them, and they agree on one name: Goya. The painter emphasizes the brightness of the cardboard studies for the tapestries: “I love the color. The emotions expressed in such a simple way, the celebration of life.” Opie, however, prefers the black paintings of the Aragonese painter and all the mythological references that can be found in the museum.

The relationship between the work by Taaffe and Spanish art is evident, he repeats ornamentation used in Islamic art, works that look like latticework. He lists among his influences Catalan medieval paintings, the Alhambra or the Real Alcazar of Seville. About (Opie) he indicates that some of her works reminds him of Ribera.

Opie, when asked whether they prefer to talk about their work or do it, doesn’t think for a second and says: “Create!” She knows that explaining (art) is also important, she’s a professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, and part of her work is for students to build their own discourse. “To make their ideas captivate and penetrate.” Although when it’s her turn to do so she has some difficulty: “I have a strange and complex relationship with time. When speaking about exhibited work, it may have been years since I created it and I’m already thinking about a future project.” Taaffe explains that his brain is totally divided for these two tasks. “I have two parts: the creative part and the language part. When I’m in the studio, the work is completely private, it’s a kind of a ritual. Solitude is
essential; otherwise the work would not be unique. I cannot think about how I'll explain it. When I finish, I take a step back and I put words to it. It's important to describe what I do, but I cannot do it during the process.”

About the creative process, both artists have points in common. Opie finds it in that solitude referred by Taaffe. Her work is more social, she puts the focus on demonstrations, on people; but when she wants to capture landscapes she needs the solitude the painter speaks about. She takes a long time –hours– to observe the light, examine how it changes slowly, “it’s almost a mystical process," she says. Philip adds the idea of “waiting, giving importance to the moment.” They both agree that in today’s world everything is fast and that society should slow down, leave room for thought, observation, reconsidering. “Not to make immediate decisions.”

Taaffe believes in the social responsibility of art; he believes it can liberate mindsets, transform them, improve life. (He encourages) acting personally, not to the tune of the media that give the same packaged message for all. The change that occurs is individual and can be extended in time, there’s no urgency. Music, poetry go directly to the individual. Music and poetry is present in the rhythm, in the symphony and repeating motifs of his works. Opie does not have such an optimistic vision: “You set out on a path, create a dialogue, but 20 years ago I was more demanding. There are artists who say my work inspired them, that I changed their lives.” Taaffe likes cities like Madrid, where he finds beauty in the streets, in the squares. He doesn’t like contemporary architecture; he writes it off as too functional. His project for Ground Zero in New York, where he lives, was to return it to the origins, leave a land devoted to agriculture. Opie tells how one of her students once tried to re-take the streets of Los Angeles. He completed a project which built a set of colorful seats made of clay, handmade, which he distributed all over the city - the Mayor’s Office took just over a month to remove them.

Cultural fusion is one of the features of the Art in Embassies program and these two artists take advantage of it. After the talk they were planning a visit to the Sorolla Museum, near the Embassy. Opie likes the idea of seeing the painter’s studio, she recounts that she visited Munch’s, small and variegated, and that these spaces speak of the creators. Painter Joaquin Sorolla was a Spanish ambassador to the U.S. with his paintings for the Hispanic Society and through the portraits of characters of the high society in the country, including President William Howard Taft. The portrait of the current president, Barack Obama, made by Chuck Close, is present in the conversation. Obama was just that day on an official trip to Cuba. “A historical event,” says Opie. “Ten years ago I would not have imagined it.”