

LOW KEY

A text by Iria Candela

Seven artists who display similar concerns presenting works that may be viewed as part of an emerging trend within contemporary artistic practice are gathered together here under the title of *low key*. Looking at their work one glimpses the possibility of new art forms based on an economy of means, in which the quality of being handmade, the use of poor materials and an emphasis on smallness, the domestic and the unassuming, able to express the sense of vulnerability and transience that is motivated by the phenomena of uncertainty assailing contemporary society.

The words *low key* describe a stylistic quality derived from simple and economical resources. Small scales, modest budgets, low tech, cheap materials, fragile finishes, insignificant forms... and in a broader sense, any structures of forms and discourses that are built on modest, intimate and unpretentious criteria, in opposition to projects that could be described as more sensational, loud and domineering. It is an art, therefore, written in lower case letters, whose low volume, sometimes barely a whisper, takes a dissident stance high definition art and its most commercial forms.

low key provides exposure for an alternative type of production that, to a certain degree, represents the opposite of high tech production. Regardless of whether it is the result of budget restrictions or premeditated choices, it entails discarding new technologies and state of the art technical developments, perhaps as a way of criticising the over-technicalization of the world of art, in which the use of new technologies immediately and indisputably implies being “more modern”, while the use of any other kind of techniques and resources, whether new or not, denotes being “old-fashioned”.

The *low key* works also avoid involvement in any kind of project that exceeds the artist's skills and capabilities, or whose production entails the use of expensive materials, a large number of assistants or high precision technology. At the present time there are companies, such as Carlson & Co. in Los Angeles or Mike Smith Studio in London *(1), who work exclusively to execute artistic mega-projects. These companies are regularly commissioned to make works of art that are too large and complex for artists to undertake alone in their studios or even with the help of an assistant. Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami are representative of this practice, but they are not the only artists who leave the physical part of creating their work in the hands of specialized companies.

low key art, to the contrary, exploits the inalienable resources available to the artist, close at hand, mainly out of necessity brought on by the lack of budget to buy materials or to rent a studio. This is usually a phase experienced by most young artists starting out on their careers when limited resources are linked to an eagerness to experiment and take risks in search of a personal vocabulary. As a result some of these *low key* works acquire a degree of transience bearing the hallmarks of something made by way of experimentation, like a variation in the exploration of an idea, or a form; like a process of searching and researching the medium.

The young artists gathered together here, from Fernando Renes to Jordi Colomer, stick quite closely to this idea. Carlos Bunga, for example, explicitly referred to his first

models as “experiments”, at a juncture when he had stopped painting to experiment with space and three dimensions. Sometimes it is the case that this lack of resources during the early stages of an artist’s career transforms over the years into his or her artistic trademark, and finally, thanks to a personal determination to create from minimal resources, or to a commitment to craftsmanship, this initial necessity becomes consolidated as *low key* practice. Anyone who has closely followed the careers of Santiago Mayo and Jesus Palomino will be able to observe this process of consolidation in their respective oeuvres.

Cartons, plastic bags, wire, cables, adhesive tape, pieces of wood, poles, bottles, sheets of paper, large amounts of paint, hoses, but also toys, small mechanisms, electronic devices, home video techniques... there is a total freedom and unfussiness about the use of the materials, and if poor, banal and found objects can be recycled in this art so too can cheap and widely available ones purchased in a “one dollar shop” shop or in a ironmongers as opposed to in traditional fine art shops. Unexpected juxtapositions are built from this complex-free, unconventional mixture of materials and techniques, craftsmanship and handmade approaches, and pre-fabricated objects and elements.

All these weak and precarious elements confer the artist enormous flexibility in their handling, and at the same time show less resistance to the contingencies associated with the passing of time. These artworks may change during their exhibition, underlining the fragility of the structural and aesthetic qualities of an object. In a sense they rebel against the authority of the material by carrying its degradation within them. The installations-collages that Palomino builds from boxes, wood and plastic seem to be on the brink of collapse, in a similar way to how Mayo’s tiny sculptures show certain signs of imbalance.

In these regard, the production process with its imperfect and irregular finish reflects the fact these pieces have not been executed by a machine, but by the irreplaceable hand of the artist; even the medium of video displays a manual and home-produced quality, reflected in both Rene’s hand-drawn stills and Ochoa’s hand-held camera. Maté buys plastic pieces made in China, but when he builds his castles he positions hundreds of them one by one by hand; similarly, Rene draws up to a total of three or four thousands drawings from his animation films. In these cases the artwork itself displays in some sense the length of the creative experience, the real-time of its making, and it stands as a recompense for the maker’s patient labour, which has been deliberately put to the test during the process.

Accordingly, *low key* art strives to grant pre-eminence to the material and the processual aspects over the optical qualities of the resulting art object. Indeed, its end appearance must act as an index of its making: the tracks of the actions are displayed and rendered explicit. The artwork shows the physical effort and the work that has been put into it, like when Bunga, staging a twofold process of construction and destruction, fragments his cardboard structures with a box-cutter or with the brute force of his own body.

The aesthetic pretensions are usually quite measured and derive always from the material employed. We are contemplating an art in which the tactile is more important than the optical at the moment of artistic appreciation, inverting Clement Greenberg’s

tradition of modern criticism, with a group of works obsessed by materiality and showing tangible, physical things in counterpoint to an increasingly virtual and digitalized visual world. Ordinary textures, commonplace objects and techniques like do-it-yourself or recycling connect to a materialistic kind of everyday experiences, and they produce countless associations to which the spectator reacts according to his or her personal context.

There is a common concern about being able to see how the works have been shaped, how they are made on the inside, how their structure is held up, how their pieces fit together, so that the spectator may quite easily discern what the making process consisted of. And this determination for transparency echoes some constructivist ideas, which bear certain tenuous parallelisms with *low key* art.

Pieces that are the product of low technology require one to pay special attention to the production conditions of art. It is important for the artwork to invite the onlooker to view its very genesis from this perspective, and to consider how this determines the meaning of its aesthetic discourse. By eluding the logic of industrial manufacture and the fact that the artwork is the outcome of craftsmanship can be interpreted as the embodiment of non-alienated work, whose human imperfections act to counter its standardization. They are the exponents, in Negrian terms, of that “surplus of being” which broadens the creative capabilities of the individual beyond the productive orientation of the system. Once again we observe that doubt is shed on the machine and on technological advances as signs of a hypothetically liberating progress. A different matter altogether would be to scrutinize the workings of this new critical view of the alienation of mechanized labour and the commercialization of mass-produced objects by exploitation methods inherent to the art system and, in particular, to its market.

These *low key* artworks choose to reject permanence, stability, solidity and durability for something more changeable, and this applies equally to their contents, which defy interpretation, encouraging ambiguous meaning with a multiplicity of reading and evocations. These meanings are usually open and numerous, working on several different levels. Their unfinished forms, their indistinctness due to inhabiting an intermediate terrain between the figurative and the abstract – with echoes even of the old *anti-form* movement, of primitivism and *art brut* *(2), and the fact they look as though they are not entirely finished, rounded off or furnished with the last details – expresses a lack of resolution which implies they may never be viewed as conclusive forms and discourses. The notion of “uncertainty” that characterizes this kind of approach was coined recently by Anne Ellegood to refer to sculpture reflecting a state of anxiety in reaction to overpowering nature of modern life.*(3)

In effect, *low key* displays a certain quality of crisis; it seems to have interiorized the imminent danger of extinction, as well as the idea of rebirth and starting over again from scratch. Its proposals are sensitive to the natural phenomena of erosion and entropy, as well as to the social frictions and changes taking place around it. Its awareness of vulnerability corresponds to moments of historical instability, war and when nature lashes out causing seemingly unpredictable dramatic experiences. In the face of this world climate, the artist employs withdrawal tactics by seeking refuge in an intimate familiar atmosphere, which in some cases involves a regression to childhood and to the babbling verbal states characteristic of pre-linguistic individuals. *(4) One has the impression with *low key* artworks that they are looking for meanings on their

own initiative and are attempting to compose an totally different image of the world, be it alternative or critical.

Fernando Renes recurs to his automatic imagination when he draws, which often leads him to childhood recollections. His latest animation film, *Soylento* (2008), begins with calligraphic letters that recall handwriting exercises on the ruled paper notebooks he used at the school. In his sculptural installation *Medieval* (2008), Mateo Maté employs a similar approach when introducing the school maps with which he memorized national geography as a child. Toy pieces, however, enable him to build structures quite unlike those indicated in the instruction manuals, namely an imaginary castle-fortress that Maté built with the help of his son – just as Mayo's recent works have involved the participation of his son too – and which ironizes Spain's national identity and its terrible frontiers.

Santiago Mayo also seeks to instruct this childhood *self* in a poetic and anti-authoritarian way by means of homemade reproductions. *Los elementos*, *La isla* and *Los amantes* (2008) stage on a tiny scale the sources of energy that move the earth and make it spin: the eolic, the solar and also the affective forces. With regard to Tomás Ochoa and his splendid video *5 puntos* (2005), the result of a workshop held in a prison for minors in Mendoza, Argentina, there is now an allusion to the end of childhood and to the loss of innocence brought about these disciplinary institutions, which Michel Foucault theorized about in his day. Accordingly, the teenagers record themselves as half-children, half adults, whose social codes move between innocent play and pure survival in a series of striking self-portraits.

Scale models and figurines form an essential part of the *low key* practice. The models embody ideas of potentiality, which due to their project – like quality are at a nascent, germinal stage. They are incipient ideas that may never come to fruition. Jesús Palomino designs strange laboratories composed of filters and transformers with which to yearn for the setting in motion of mind-changing processes. In *Circuito de agua & 5.000 carteles de la DUDH* (2008)*(5), his new temporary installation in Villa Iris, the artist will compare the importance of water with that of human rights in the earth's life cycle, at a time when there are alarming signs of a lack of both. Built into his installations is a demand for self building, recalling emergency solutions used in situations of under-development where precarious and provisional architectonic shelters or engineering are installed for group survival.

These self-built solutions are also highlighted in the work of Bunga and Colomer, led by *Sin título (maqueta 16)* and *Sin título (maqueta 20)*, both from 2004, encourages an improvisation of architectonic forms in which juxtaposed surfaces and colours refer back to Neoplasticism and its proposals for flexible, de-hierarchized architecture. Whereas the models Colomer made for his *Anarchitekton* (2002-2004) project of urban intervention question precisely the opposite, the rigidity of constructed architecture and the impossibility of its occupants to make alterations or *détournements*.

low key reviews a style that arises, as we explained earlier, from a lack of material, technical and human resources, that often employs pre-technological, craft techniques (where it is easy to distinguish the making process from the materials it is made of), that is a bearer of individual discourse or minority stories and that supposedly possesses a limited capacity for exposure, sometimes going unnoticed or being short-lived. It

employs forms of precious, fragile or subtle consistency, which oppose the imperishable and authoritarian hyper-technologies. Its presence acquires an air of temporality by giving the impression of being on the brink of collapse, by including the possibility of imminent disappearance owing to the disintegration of its materials or the obsolescence of its cognizable form. And this reflects an awareness of transience that makes it function as a *vanitas* of contemporaneity.

NOTAS:

*(1) See “The Art of Production”, the section about the industrial manufacture of contemporary art, in *Artforum*, October 2007, pp. 304-359.

*(2) In his manifesto for *art brut* Jean Dubuffet called for “those small works that are generally undervalued. That are considered rudimentary and coarse. However, for that very same reason they present the mechanisms of the spirit more immediately and they present the mechanisms of the mind more vibrantly and crudely” (in *Escritos sobre arte*, Barral Editores, Barcelona, 1975, p. 92) With regard to other forms that do not come from the stylistic magma of High Western culture, see also the catalogue by Jean Hubert Martin, *Magiciens de la Terre*, exh.cat. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989.

*(3) Anne Ellegood (ed.), *The uncertainty of Objects and Ideas. Recent Sculpture*, exh. cat., Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, 2006, p. 24. See how the ideas of the aforesaid exhibition project were salvaged in another exhibition at the New Museum in New York. See the catalogue *Unmonumental. The Object in the 21st Century*, Phaidon Press, New York, 2007.

*(4) This approach has a number of similarities to the way in which Germano Celant described Arte Povera in 1969: “It is a moment that tends towards deculturalization, regression, primitiveness and repression, towards rudimentary, spontaneous politics, with a predisposition towards the basic elements of nature (the earth, the sea, snow, minerals...) and of life (the body, memory and thought) and of behaviour (...)”. Germano Celant, *Arte Povera*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1969.

*(5) DUDH: Universal Declaration of Human Rights.