

PÉREZ SIQUIER

The photographic oeuvre of Carlos Pérez Siquier (born Almería, 1930) arises from a fertile space located between spontaneity, an interest in the human condition, irony and an awareness of the power of the photographer's gaze. From this location he exercised an increasingly complex practice based on surprise in the face of the everyday. More than six decades of activity made Pérez Siquier a key figure in the development of modern international photography as a daring interpreter of his time and one who has subverted the art of the spontaneous image in a free-thinking manner. His works reflect the transformation of an entire country and possibly the world from the peripheral location of Almería where he has lived all his life.

This borderline position did not prevent Pérez Siquier from making radical breaks that went against prevailing artistic ideas, nor did it prevent him from becoming a driving force behind the most influential photography collective of his day, the AFAL group. Without moving to any of the country's major centres of artistic production, he opted for Neo-realism in his photo-reportage "La Chanca", a series that makes use of spontaneous photography to express the identity of a working-class barrio in Almería which acquires its own voice in this work. Subsequent projects from the 1960s onwards, including "Informalisms" and particularly "The Beach", made Pérez Siquier one of the pioneering figures in colour photography, a technique previously little regarded for artistic investigation. His move to glowing, strongly contrasting colours can be associated with his interest in the new, kitsch consumer society that emerged with the arrival of mass tourism on the Mediterranean coastline and the perplexity it aroused in him.

In Pérez Siquier's work bodies and objects speak for themselves: from the self-respect of the inhabitants of La Chanca to the uncanonical bodies in "The Beach" and the strange forms of the urban environment, its paraphernalia and advertising, all of which reflect the so-called welfare society. This photographic corpus, located between tenderness and irony, reveals the visual paradoxes of a moment in Spanish history. His late work acquired a more intimate gaze through a focus on increasingly silent landscapes and interiors that suggest a peaceful alienation and a retreat for an artist who had said "now all that's left is my gaze".

Carlos Gollonet - Carlos Martín

Curators of the exhibition

"La Chanca" 1956-1965

"La Chanca", a series defined by Pérez Siquier as "pure photo-reportage", is the result of various years of work in the barrio of that name in the capital of Almería. Sloping down from the hill crowned by the Alcazaba, La Chanca unfolds in the form of caves dug into the rock and cube-like houses with a dramatic history of underdevelopment, bombing and hunger. The photographer, who regularly visited the area over the course of some years, chose not to focus on its most shocking aspect and rather set out to find a way for the barrio to represent itself with the aim of creating a framework for presenting an optimistic vision of everyday life based on survival.

Separated from both the middle-class centre of Almería and the tourist locations that were a priority for the Francoist regime at this period, La Chanca allowed Pérez Siquier to undertake a direct, spontaneous photographic project devoid of any type of construction or staged settings. This is a photography inspired by the Neo-realist preference for "natural actors" and by an interest in articulating figures in the particular type of semi-urban slum areas that were left behind in Spain's progress towards modernity. In the artist's own words: "What I most liked about Neo-realist films was how the crowds worked in the image on screen. It wasn't about imitating this in my photographs but rather that when I saw groups of people I was very struck by that combination of faces and movements."

According to Laura Terré: "The photo-reportage 'La Chanca' was not intended as social critique using photography to illustrate preconceived ideas, but rather allowing those specific people to project its reality." In fact, without renouncing the "moral indignation" that Juan Goytisolo perceived in him, Pérez Siquier was able to project a pure image inspired by humanist photography and one in which the barrio has been able to recognise itself over time.

"La Chanca in colour" 1956-1965

In the 1960s Pérez Siquier modified his own discourse with "La Chanca in colour" in which he appeared to reverse the Neo-realist sense of the series in 35 mm and black and white through the use of colour and a larger format allowed by a Rolleiflex medium format camera with 6 x 6 cm film. He offered a more abstract gaze based on the chromatic sensuality of the barrio created by the warmth of the diluted aniline dyes which the local people used to paint their houses every year, and also on the human coexistence with these unique architectural structures and exterior textures.

Colour added a new level of information and a greater transparency to Pérez Siquier's photography, in addition to a more abstract and formal emphasis. The documentary, narrative approach of the early years of "La Chanca" disappears in some of the images in this series, which recall the abstract surfaces and dense plays of colour of Informalist painters. While the walls were already painted in the black and white of photo-reportage, the change to colour produces an immediate visual association with the era of development and the fabricated optimism that the Francoist regime aimed to impose during these years of the country's opening up. However, it also emphasises Pérez Siquier's intention of not imposing a fatalistic gaze on La Chanca and its inhabitants. In the words of José María Ridaó: "With a surprise that he fully translates into the photographs, Pérez Siquier discovers that a universe parallel to the barrio exists on La Chanca's walls, even that another Chanca exists which reproduces the scenes and architecture of the real one."

"Informalisms" 1965

The photographs that Pérez Siquier took in 1965 of the peeling walls of houses and caves constitute the chapter that concludes the series "La Chanca", begun in 1956. The City Council of Almería had decided to take action in the barrio as its under-development was at odds with the modern image that the city aspired to present in the context of tourism. This clean-up operation involved knocking down some of the slums in the upper part of the barrio with the result that some of their interior walls were left exposed. In Pérez Siquier's words: "I realised that the walls, which had been painted by their previous owners, in different colours, had very interesting textures if they were peeled. I took a series of close-ups and organised an exhibition of them. They were photographs of concepts and were extremely important. Apart from their aesthetic aspect they had a social one. It was a kind of reading of the passing of time. A family had passed through that house and the wife had painted it yellow, for example. But ten years later another family had passed through it and painted it another colour. I went and scratched and all kinds of strata appeared, like geological ages."

These isolated, fragmented walls with their sediments of colour recall Informalism in painting as well as the quest for pure abstraction that Pérez Siquier tended towards from that point onwards, looking for autonomous forms and an emphasis on flat colours. These are also prodigious collages which bring to mind Aaron Siskind's monochrome photographs, Brassai's scratched walls, Willem de Kooning's Expressionist gesture, and Antoni Tàpies' concept of the wall as communicatory space: abstraction, but within the context of a barrio at risk of collapse.

"The Beach" 1972-1980

The degree of provocation, innovation and rupture that exists in the series of photographs entitled "The Beach" is more difficult to appreciate in the present day than at the time of its creation in the 1970s when artistic colour photography was in its nascence. In 2013 the photographer Martin Parr wrote: "Some images within the history of photography are so radical people just don't know where to place them. The beach images of Carlos Pérez Siquier look as fresh now as the day they were taken and we must bear in mind the context of contemporary photography in both Spain and Europe at the time." Decades later, the freshness and relevance of these photographs remain as striking as the challenging, nonnormative bodies depicted in them.

The avalanche of tourism that swept over the beaches of Almería and the rest of the Mediterranean shoreline finally brought work to a historically depressed area that suffered from mass emigration. Pérez Siquier experienced this phenomenon with a mixture of rejection and curiosity, aware that in a short time this invasion would redefine the paradise that sustained it. The series thus contains a sub-text of critique, albeit approached with irony and humour. These canonical and uncanonical bodies led the photographer to the point of disturbing the tourists' tranquility, as he never used a zoom lens.

"The Beach" was created in the dazzling sunlight of Almería and along the Mediterranean, without need for flash or a light meter and based on intuition. This is a light that transmits clarity and marvellously emphasises the colours of the swimming costumes and caps, the beach umbrellas and towels and the gleam of flesh rubbed with oil, and make-up, and the blue of the sea and sky which balance the saturated colours with their weight. The series functions in an accumulative manner. While the images initially show the setting and complete human figures in strange scenes, this documentary account gives way to abstraction, geometrical forms, the body and its creases, and fabrics and prints, which gradually occupy the entire space of the composition.

"Traps for the unwary" 1980-2001

In the final decades of the century Pérez Siquier continued to explore the evolution of consumer society through the landscape and objects that it generated. People again disappear and are replaced by their creations or vestiges. These everyday, commonplace spaces have become standard motifs in contemporary photography but this was not the case when the photographer started to depict them in the 1980s in the manner of spectral presences due to the absence of their users. The very process of investigation announced in "The Beach", with its games of fragmentation and ambiguities, becomes the protagonist in this group of images which Pérez Siquier termed "Traps for the unwary" in reference to the delusion from which they arise and the visual confusion that they provoke. These dazzling, humorous photographs return us to the origins of perception while suggesting a fascination with the absurdity, humour and appeal of certain human constructs that duplicate reality. This is comparable to Luigi Ghirri's interest in these phenomena, understood as a type of secondary world of substituted reality.

Pérez Siquier made inventive use of this landscape filled with kitsch elements, located between the playful and the vulgar and between crude advertising and fairground attraction. This is the most Pop gaze to be found in his work and one that is not shocked but rather fascinated by the visual paradoxes and the aesthetic that generate it. Our landscape is filled with such images but they pass unnoticed as elements of spontaneous or chance creativity (in the Surrealist taste), becoming trapped forever in photography with an ambiguity that prevents us from discerning if we are in the presence of objects, memories or phantoms.

"Encounters" 1991-2020

Pérez Siquier's vision is a notably contemporary one that focuses on the spaces around him; harsh, everyday, anodyne places of tiles, plastic, gilt metal fly curtains, over-stuffed or abandoned cars and party walls. He depicts them without any concessions in a direct, judicious and brilliant manner and from an original viewpoint that transforms them into long-lasting images. They become fixed in the mind like the remains of a speech of which only the echo persists or the backdrops of a darkened theatre. This particularly personal version of the Pop aesthetic led him to be attracted to everything in which others found only desolation.

In the artist's own words: "Seeing the blue of the sky as it blends with the sea. Appreciating the emptiness of the landscape as something aesthetic. Understanding the power of the Cape, the Sierra de Gata as it reaches the sea. There's something earth-like in all of this, a volcanic force. There's something there that gives you strength." In "Encounters" only the space remains, perceived as a broad substance vibrating with colour and light, a gradation towards muted tones which Pérez Siquier reached through a gradual accumulation and refinement of experience over the course of his photographic activities, an intentional silencing from the maximum stridency of "The Beach". That constant equilibrium between documentation and creation here focused on the landscape of Almería in some of his most eloquent images, which are characterised by greater aesthetic resonance and in which it could be said that we are witnessing a type of all-embracing and curiously pleasant distopia.

<<La Briseña>>

More than forty years ago I made the right decision to buy a shepherd's house separate from the neighbouring estate of the Viscounts of Almansa from my doctor, who was from a titled family.

The house is known as La Briseña as it's across from the city of Pechina, the ancient Bayyana, a flourishing Mediterranean port according to 10th century Arab historians and geographers. The sea breeze reached the door of my house, hence its name in the village of Benahadux (to which it belongs according to the property registry), and El Reuini, where it's actually located, was the meeting place for the most important Sufism of the day, where they would philosophise on the human nature of this world and the divine nature of the beyond.

It's inevitable that later on I was somewhat influenced by Sufism, or at least its tradition, and I reflected not just on the transience of life but also devoted my leisure time to keeping up the house, restoring its walls and respecting the passing of time on the objects inside it, as around it the light drew calligraphic signs on its whitewashed walls, sometimes producing original visions that I try to capture for eternity with my little camera.

It's a peaceful spot, far from nosy neighbours, noise and bother, it's the ideal retreat for contemplating an austere landscape of spaces that open out to the eye, listening to the birds chirping at dawn and the song of the crickets at dusk while I water my desert garden, and it's among this peace that I sometimes recall the wise reflection of a poet from Al-Andalus: "The basil plant in my house is more precious to me than paradise itself."

Carlos Pérez Siquier, Almería, 2017