

## Time's an affair of instants spun to days

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Sebastian Espejo's work invites comparisons with both modern and historical masters, but his true lineage lies in the quiet, contemplative traditions of the still life. While the domestic intimacy and pastel-lit surfaces of Bonnard and Vuillard resonate with his technique and mood, a sharper connection emerges with the self-taught eighteenth-century painter Jean Siméon Chardin. Chardin, known for his pellucid still-lives and quotidian domestic interiors, drew heavily on the seventeenth century Dutch *pronkstilleven*, the jewel-like, meticulously arranged compositions of Clara Peeters, Willem Claesz Heda, and Pieter Claesz which often carried symbolic eschatological references on time and mortality. These works are defined by stillness, reverence for objects, and an acute awareness of the passage of time. Espejo is not a traditional still-life painter, yet he can be seen as a 'burglar of moments,' capturing fleeting instants with a precision that suspends time and imbues his imagery with a quiet, anticipatory glow. As John Masefield writes in *The Widow in the Bye Street*,

'Times an affair of instants spun to days....Life's an affair of instants spun to years. Instants are only cause of all these tears'

Through his examinations of nature and objects, Espejo unfolds temporality into layered space, drawing viewers into a heightened awareness of the present moment while echoing the meditative contemplation of past masters. In this way, his art becomes a bridge between the symbolic rigour of the Dutch *pronkstilleven*, Chardin's domestic meditations, and a contemporary sensibility which celebrates both the stillness and the passage of time.

If we are searching for lineage, and if the question concerns art history and time, then after Chardin we indeed need to consider Bonnard, whose loving domestic vignettes of his wife, Marthe de Mélny, set within intimate interiors and rendered through saturated Post-Impressionist colour and the artist's flirtation with Japonism, translate very well into an Espejo aesthetic. And then we have the precise, almost factual still-lives of Giorgio Morandi, whose tightly packed arrangements of bottles and jars on tabletops draw an immediate connection to Espejo.

Within the receding forms of Espejo lie the many gods of nature; as Keats writes in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*,

'Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness.

Thou foster child of silence and slow time,

Sylvan historian who canst thus express.

A flowery tale more sweetly than a rhyme:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape.

Of deities or mortals or of both'

In Sebastian Espejo's work, time seems suspended, lending his imagery a warm, aureate glow that hints at events just beyond the frame. His paintings capture fleeting moments with such precision and care that each object, figure, or scene feels charged with significance, as if something is about to unfold. This delicate adumbration-the subtle foreshadowing- creates a sense of expectation in the viewer, inviting them to dwell in the quiet tension between presence and anticipation. In this way, Espejo transforms ordinary domestic interiors and natural objects into a meditation on temporality, continuing the lineage of still-life masters who revered the passage of time, while adding a contemporary sensibility that celebrates both stillness and the unfolding of life itself.

The Asian influences in Espejo's art are worth exploring. His work resonates with the aesthetic delight in imperfection encapsulated in the Japanese notion of *wabi-sabi*- a heightened appreciation of irregularity. This sensibility is evident in the singular Korean white moon jar, Buncheong ware, Chinese Tang dynasty pottery and of course Japanese Raku, used in the tea ceremony. Espejo references the moon in a painting in the exhibition, recalling how the great Chinese poet Li Bai marvelled at its reflection in a lake.

The principles of freedom achieved through rigorous routine and self-discipline, along with the daily implementation of the *Dao* (the Way), resonate as clear influences on Espejo's art. Another facet uniting Western still-life thinking and Zen (*Ch'an*) Buddhist precepts is the immateriality of the object- a profound existentialism that questions what we perceive. In the Western canon, this is revealed through *memento mori*, while in Asia it manifests in actions stripped of extraneousness.

Espejo works economically and essentially, without unduly expending energy, which is why his compositions achieve a cohesive *gestalt*. The roundness of form in Asia signifies family togetherness, which is why mooncakes, the comestible marking the Lunar New Year, are traditionally circular. This sphere appears throughout Espejo's paintings, demonstrating how his work connects with both cultural symbolism and the essence of true reality.

Aristotle's sublunar world is far less celestial than Li Bai's poetic moon; his definition emphasises growth, decay, corruption, and change. Interestingly, this conception finds a companion in the appreciation of Chinese *lingbi* and *taihu* rocks, celebrated for their sonority, cavernous voids, and slow changing appearance over time. In both cases, the world is valued not for perfection, but for the temporal, mutable, and experiential qualities that reveal the passage of time and the dynamics of natural processes. It is also relevant to note that small *lingbi* rocks, placed precisely on carved black *zitan* wood stands, were considered essential accoutrements of the scholar's desk, forming a kind of literati still life in which natural form, materially, and spatial arrangement were carefully balanced.

Sebastian Espejo's seasonal images, such as *January* and *June*, employ colours that evoke the character of each month-marine blue for the winter chill, golden lustre for the warmth of summer-recalling the sensibilities of Eric Rohmer's *Contes des Quatre Saisons* and its cinematic, tonal evocation of both the year and the shifting moods of human life. So much of Espejo's art is about sense and sensibility: the immediacy of colour and shape and its fleeting effect on the human psyche. Yet, despite this fleetingness, his work possesses a temporal, film-like continuity which seems to defy the moment, as if each image is suspended in time while simultaneously unfolding, inviting the viewer to experience the flow of seasons, sensations, and human perception as a continuous, layered whole.

In Sebastian Espejo's work, the touch of nature's colours on inanimate objects-seen vividly in *Persimmon*, *Yellow Planetarium*, and *Old Cherry Blossom*-conveys more than surface beauty; it suggests a compression of the distance between time and space, giving his paintings a subtly quantum quality that resonates with existential thought. Colour sucked into the objects, transforms the moment into a layered continuum, where moments are spun into hours and hours are spun into years in a single pregnant instant, evoking the eternal in the everyday. *Old Cherry Blossom* exemplifies this metamorphosis: the object becomes space, and space becomes the object, while a rosy glow adds a sybaritic, almost sensual dimension. Such careful orchestration of colour and spatial placement aligns Espejo with the lineage of past masters- Chardin, influenced by Pieter de Hooch 's interiors, and, in technique, even Vermeer, whose stippled, almost impressionist colour vibrates and resounds. Central to all of this is Espejo's mastery of positioning - of objects, of moments, and of time itself - revealing that the greatest art lies in creating an eternal moment, a supernal thought, and that still-lives, or stilled life, best illuminate the truth.

In *La Sombra del Verano*, the umbra aligns the season with *chiaroscuro*, emphasising the shadow over the object that casts it. The tree is absent and yet there is something deeply existential in this suspended moment: Godot never appeared, and yet his imprint lingers. Footprints leave traces, recording the passage of time and motion. There is an equipoise in Espejo's work, not in its appearance, but in the delicate balance of the present and the absent- an emotive reflection on the ultimate human experience: the absence of someone who will never return. This profound tension is mirrored in *Ramo y Escena*, where the vase extenuates its presence and conveys, through the interplay of object and void, the coexistence of presence and absence in the fourth dimension. We intuitively understand that absence is a form of presence. We live dual lives, there is no separation, as Nietzsche has it in *Beyond Good and Evil*, 'There are no moral phenomena at all, but only a moral interpretation of phenomena' and as T.S. Eliot writes in *Thomas a Becket*:

'Neither movement nor stillness; neither

Advance nor retreat; neither the agent nor the

Patient; only the eternal stillness of time.'

And

....'Neither does the agent suffer

Nor the agent act. But both are fixed

In an eternal action, an eternal patience'

In Espejo's work, absence and presence, object and shadow, are two sides of the same coin: no one and nothing truly leaves us. While matter may dissipate, its essence endures, ever present, undiluted, an emollient for the soul.

In works such as *Floods* and *Moon and the River*, Espejo constructs a dual narrative, juxtaposing static, glacial foreground objects against painted riverine landscapes. The solitary boat in *Moon and the River* lends the work an Asian aesthetic, while the animated, distinct brush marks across the backgrounds imbue the scenes with gestural expressiveness. *Floods*, with its more vigorous animation, conveys the dynamism of its subject, yet both pieces reveal a subliminal debt to Asian compositional traditions.

In contrast, *Mariana Trench* and *Punto Fijo* are among the most abstract works in the exhibition, abandoning the polarity of object and space to present instead a time/space continuum. Here, colour resonates and rebounds, creating layers that the viewer must navigate, much like penetrating dense foliage to discover a hidden walled garden. The efflorescence of objects, energised by radiant colour, make these pieces some of the most life-affirming in the exhibition.

*Ten* and *Small White Light* mark departures from Espejo's familiar format, resembling landscape études. *Small White Light*, panoramic and beautifully measured, evokes a literal sea of emotions.

The solitude and hopelessness experienced by the Modernist Korean poet Gi Hyeong-do in his poem *Empty House* encapsulate a sense of emotional absence and the inability to express true feeling, a condition that pushes one toward an inner life from which a more profound freedom ultimately emerges.

Having lost love, I now write

farewell, brief nights-

Winter fogs that drifted beyond the

window –

candles that knew nothing, farewell.

Whitepapers that waited for fear,

Tears that stood in for hesitation-

Farewell, longings that are no longer

Mine.

Like the blind, I now fumble and lock

The door.

My quiet love is enclosed in an empty house.

*Ten*, in a Symbolist fashion, depicts flowers piercing radiant light and colour, illustrating the phenomenological interplay between atmosphere and object that is central to Espejo's practice.

Espejo's work naturally attracts poetic reflection, and who better to articulate its depth than the metaphysical bard John Donne, whose lines from *The Good-Morrow* resonate profoundly with the artist's vision.

'My face in thine, thine in mine appears  
And true plain hearts do in the faces rest;  
Where can we find two better hemispheres,  
Without sharp north, without declining west?  
Whatever dies, was not mixed equally,  
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I  
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die.'

This forensic ode to enduring, indivisible love mirrors Espejo's artistry: his paintings fill the void with meaning, presence, and consequence. Each work is both life-affirming and soul-elevating, embodying philosophical reflection, temporal meditation, and aesthetic precision. Through the interplay of object, colour, atmosphere, and abstraction, Espejo transforms ordinary elements into extraordinary experiences, demonstrating some of the most poignant examples of contemporary philosophical art.