

Andrew Muñoz: Duality and Meaning

To think in terms of either pessimism or optimism oversimplifies the truth. The problem is to see reality as it is.

Thich Nhat Hanh

In 1936 the Hungarian photographer Robert Capa travelled to Spain to record the Civil War which was raging across the country at the time. On the 5th September he was in the Andalusian region of Cerro Muriano when he photographed *The Falling Soldier*. In this now famous image we observe an isolated male figure set against an overcast sky, he wears a white shirt, black leather cartridge belt and khaki trousers; he falls backwards on to an empty grassy knoll, the rifle he holds in his right hand slips from his grasp. He appears to have been shot in the head.

We know little about the combatant, there are no visual clues to the whereabouts of his comrades or those he fought against. Alone, arms out stretched, this captured last second of his life reminds us of a classical crucifixion painting, and that we bear witness to the intimate moment of death.

By Capa's own account the soldier's name was Federico Borrell García and he worked at a mill in the town of Alcoi before joining his local Loyalist militia. This image is also one of the first pictures to have held a major impact on the artist Andrew Muñoz. Like Capa's soldier, Muñoz's maternal Grandfather was Spanish and fought with a local loyalist militia, and like Capa's soldier, he was also shot by Franco's forces. Yet Muñoz Snr. survived, moved to England and married. Andrew Muñoz remembers his Grandmother recounting stories of his Grandfather's civil war experience and showing him photo books of the conflict as a child. This early stimulus offers us a key to unlocking an understanding of much of what inspires Muñoz's oeuvre, whose paintings investigate many of society's darker themes; themes such as genocide, war and the psychological effects of violence.

Just as in Capa's *Falling Soldier*, many of Muñoz's paintings depict individuals who appear isolated, alone and somehow at odds with society. Yet unlike Capa's combatant, Muñoz's subjects remain still, quiet and self-possessed. In *Hymnologist*, 2013, *The Bather*, 2013 and *Das Kind*, 2010, Muñoz presents an assortment of characters who don't seem to care if we look at them or not, who are locked into a world of their own.

In the painting *Das Kind*, we silently observe a solitary male figure; he stands naked and alone against a dark cloudy sky in what appears to be a low lying marshy landscape. His head is that of an adult Hitler set on the shoulders of a boy's body. The face and right leg are

painted in a sickly greyish green, as if to indicate some kind of gangrenous infection, perhaps it is the poison of hatred and prejudice which is destroying something pure; the promise of optimism, charm and purity which growth offers. The clouds in the background loom dark and forbidding in this sick portrait of a child Adolf Hitler. Sick, because what is unadulterated, natural and beautiful in the human form has somehow been contaminated by what is perverse; the pre-cognitive threat of destruction in the body of a prepubescent. Hitler's eyes are dark, they stare out at us with a cold blank expression, we are dead to him and he is dead inside.

This game of opposites is one Muñoz plays consciously. It is an attempt by the artist to state that sometimes what we think we know for certain when we look at visual material, is in fact contrary to the whole truth. Instead Muñoz presents us with the slippage of appearance; his subject is the revelation of a duality.

In the 2009 documentary film *La Sombra del Iceberg*, programme makers claimed that Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier* photograph was staged to look like a fighter being killed in action. They argued that in actuality it depicted a man tumbling backwards for effect. The programme went on further to state that Federico Borrell García had died whilst crouching behind a tree at a battle in La Loma de las Malagueñas and not at Cerro Muriano as Capa had claimed. That same year José Manuel Susperregui of the University of País Vasco in his book *Sombras de la Fotografía* concluded that Capa's famous photograph had in fact been taken on a hill at Espejo, a region 35 miles south of Cerro Muriano. Whether the claims that Capa's *Falling Soldier* was that of Federico Borrell García or not, was staged or not, or was recorded in Cerro Muriano or Espejo, what we do know is that the picture has a meaning, it stands for something beyond the representation of the death of an individual; it is the presentation of a universal image of human suffering.

By casting doubt over the authenticity of Capa's photograph we are able to see it either as a man being killed or as an individual losing his footing. In some senses this enriches our perception of the visual world as it reminds us that what we see is not necessarily the same as what we perceive. This idea was explored by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in his 1953 publication *Philosophical Investigations* in which he examined our alternating perceptions of the "[duckrabbit](#)" cartoon. The "[duckrabbit](#)" cartoon was originally published in the 23rd October 1892 issue of *Fliegende Blätter*, and was captioned "Which animals are most like each other?" It depicts a drawing of a duck, which, when the illusion is pointed out to us, we realise can equally be seen as a rabbit. Wittgenstein related this to ambiguous sentences, and explored how one view can sometimes be seen and understood in two different ways. This he described in terms of "seeing that and seeing as", in that sometimes we view something in a straightforward way – seeing that – whilst at other times we might come to notice a particular aspect of something – seeing as, which is not necessarily to do with the external world altering, but with an 'internal' cognitive change which occurs inside ourselves.

It is the feelings which accompany an internal cognitive change which Muñoz attaches to the material quality of the paint in his pictures. Applied relatively thickly, his medium acts as a metaphor for the emotional resonance we come to feel at the moment we begin to notice when one perception may in fact stand for something else.

Aside from single figure studies, Muñoz's oeuvre also contains paintings of pairs and small groups of individual characters, who, like his cast of individuals, maintain an air of self-possession, yet who also appear to betray some kind of slippage of appearance. In his painting *Telly Tubbies*, 2005, Muñoz presents four standing figures set in a line wearing coloured costumes. Flying above them in a cloudless blue sky are two birds, whilst in front of them stands a black dog.

With this painting, Muñoz has taken the four pre-school characters of Laa-Laa, Po, Dipsy, and Tinky Winky from the BBC children's television series *Teletubbies* and rendered them as trapped adults. The original TV characters who communicated with each other through infantile babble and wore brightly coloured outfits of red, purple, green and yellow, have in Muñoz's hands been corrupted; the colours of their outfits have been muddled, the fixed smiles of innocence replaced by the blank joyless expressions of men. In splitting the name of the original programme for the title of his painting, Muñoz seems to be saying to us that life is split too – that the joys of childhood are eventually replaced by the realities of grim adult existence, that one day the pleasures of innocence will be replaced by the drudgery of responsibility and the need to restrain complex adult desires. Muñoz brings together these two disparate concepts into one unified image and offers us the view of a metaphorical bridge which combines the states of purity and corruption simultaneously.

In an email exchange Muñoz described how “*Tele Tubbies* was made when I was thinking about the aesthetics in present-day children's entertainment where everything is ‘beautiful’, ‘sweet’, and ‘Good’ – I was comparing it to Hans Christian Anderson and The Grimm Brothers and thinking about the different effects on children's imagination. The faces of the figures are taken from various sources but two are from newspaper articles on the Bosnian war. I suppose I was trying to find a balance somehow between extremes; modern day sanitization of children's narratives and sensational media coverage of war and suffering.”ⁱⁱ

The balance Muñoz seems to be striving towards is the mid-way point between the optimism felt and expressed in the early stages of life against the cynicisms, setbacks and threats of the adult world.

Within every beginning is a blueprint for an ending. In biological terms this is known as the process of apoptosis, or cell suicide, where the systematic death of old and unhealthy cells makes way for the growth of vigorous new cells. If the rate of replacement is too slow, then

some cells can take on an immortal quality resulting in cancer, and if cell death is too fast then neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer's disease set in. It is a perfectly natural process, yet one which is delicately balanced. What we see in Muñoz's paintings is a form of social apoptosis; in *Telly Tubbies* we are presented with a bridge between childish innocence and the adult concerns of real war and social cleansing, whilst in *Das Kind* the seeds of holocaust have been sown into the body of a boy, perhaps not as a kind of gangrenous infection, but something more cancerous. Presenting paintings in this way, Muñoz reminds us that if left unregulated, our delicately balanced societies can become malignant.

Robert Priseman, 2014

ⁱ RWA Lecture Notes, Andrew Muñoz, 18th September 2014

ⁱⁱ Extract from and email sent by Andrew Muñoz to Robert Priseman on the 24th October, 2014