

**José Manuel Ballester**

*El estudio (The studio)*

Painting and photography

17 January to 15 March 2017

Opening 17 January at eight p.m.

José Manuel Ballester (b. Madrid, 1960), painter and photographer, began his artistic career in painting with a particular interest in the technique of the Italian and Flemish schools of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. His painting started as being realist but it soon branched off towards a more personal language tending towards abstraction through light and sound. Since the nineties he has been composing images of contemporary architecture in which the human figure is almost always excluded and, although that language never disappears from his work, it does in fact give way to photography, which is currently his predominant medium of expression and the one for which he was awarded the Madrid Community Prize and the National Prize. Painting and photography are techniques which the artist uses simultaneously with the same intention, and both serve him as a reflection on the world and the human condition. When Ballester explains his transition from painting to photography he affirms that he tries to paint with the camera and photograph with brushes.

Ballester paints and photographs stairs, windows, facades, doors opening out to empty spaces, mysterious corners; he plays with light, a fundamental element in his work, and he seeks an exact beauty that is sometimes disturbing. He is attracted by industrial spaces, hotel rooms, garages, corridors, airports under construction, museums undergoing repairs. His passion for travel has led him to painting and photographing in numerous countries, especially China, the country for which he feels a special fascination.

The relationship between the gallery and the artist began in the '90s when the gallery was known as Estiarte and devoted itself to original graphic works. In 1999 he was awarded the National Engraving Prize and his first exhibition in the gallery was held. In 2000, the series of aquatints edited by Estiarte was exhibited by the gallery in the Palacio de Sástago in Zaragoza, organised by the National Copperplate Museum of Spain.

In that same year we exhibited his photography for the first time, on the occasion of Photespaña. Interiors and exteriors expertly lit, "A photograph in the style of Vermeer because suddenly it does not just provide an incarnation of light, it also converts it into something undulating, progressive, which advances towards the object and keeps us in suspense: a luminous expectation" in the words of Calvo Serraller, author of the text for the catalogue which the gallery published. In 2006 "Construction/demolition" was an exhibition in which photographs which Ballester had produced of the new buildings in China held a dialogue in a kind of confrontation with the images of Zhang Dali who was denouncing the excesses of demolitions going on in the old city of Beijing.

In these last ten years Ballester has been a constant presence in our stands at Arco, ParisPhoto, PhotoLondon, PhotoMiami, DeFoto, MadridFoto, etc., and he also took part in the collective exhibition of paintings held to mark the change of name of the gallery, in 2010.

His work has been evolving and projecting itself through various languages: parallel with solitary landscapes, bridges, urban architecture, empty interiors, containers, he has developed an interesting series of works on the appropriation of masterpieces from museums such as the Prado, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna and others, from which he has taken human figures; thus, Vermeer, Fra Angelico, Botticelli, Bosch, Leonardo de Vinci, El Greco, Velázquez, Goya have been photographed and emptied by him, giving rise to an impressive work which he has called *Paisajes Ocultos (Hidden Landscapes)*. His digital prints, taken at the real size of the original painting, seek to discover the secret elements handled by the artists. The latest example that we have been able to see, titled *Paisajes Encontrados (Found Landscapes)*, is housed in the Lázaro Galdeano Museum, and in a video based on *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, Ballester explains that in removing the narrative of this famous work landscapes charged with meaning have been found and he affirms: "Virtual reality is today as important as was the discovery of perspective in the Renaissance."

In the exhibition that we are presenting, the artist has directed his gaze towards his most usual and perhaps most loved environment; his studio, but it is not his real studio, rather it is a metaphorical mental space in which it is again light, the line, the disturbing framing, the stamp of memory, which conveys to us the magic of his work. As Lorena Martínez de Corral says in the catalogue to the exhibition *La abstracción en la realidad (Abstraction in reality)*: "Photography is magic and passion, not just reality, and this passion is the activating element for the majority of his works. Ballester expresses it in his work through tension, creativity, beauty and emotion, interpreting a familiar space beyond the limits of reality."

The exhibition is displaying a large format painting and several photographs.

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