

JOSÉ MANUEL BALLESTER

Un día en el zoo / A day at the zoo

From the 16th of January to the 10th of March, 2020

Opening: 16th of January at 8 pm.

José Manuel Ballester (Madrid, 1960), painter and photographer, started his artistic career as a painter, paying particular attention to the techniques used by the Italian and Flemish schools. To begin with, his painting was realistic, but he soon started using a more personal, minimalist language, leaning towards abstraction through light and shadow. He shows great interest in architecture, painting and photographing stairs, windows, façades, doors that open onto empty spaces, mysterious corners. He plays with the light, an essential element in his work and he looks for a precise beauty that at times is unsettling.

Ballester's work has evolved and been projected through different languages, and simultaneously, at solitary landscapes, bridges, urban architecture, empty interiors, containers, developing an interesting work involving the appropriation of masterpieces from museums such as the Prado, the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum and others, from which he has removed all the human and animal figures, therefore Vermeer, Fra Angélico, Giotto, Botticelli, Bosch, El Greco, Velázquez have all been photographed and emptied by the artist, giving rise to an impressive work that he has called *Espacios Ocultos / Hidden Spaces*. The digital prints, the same size as the original paintings, attempt to discover the secret elements handled by the artists and show them.

Ballester has always shown his love for landscapes and nature, which ultimately is under a serious threat by the predatory and irresponsible attitude of human beings. The climate emergency, the terrible fires in the Brazilian Amazon, the droughts, desertification, the accumulation of plastic in the oceans, are all questions that greatly concern the artist and that he faces up to as a citizen and obviously, as an artist, reflecting in some of his works all his unease due to these disgraceful actions and his wish to awaken consciences and pitch in with a task that involves everyone: that of conserving nature and reversing the negative effects of this destructive conduct that could lead to a disaster with very serious consequences. His passion for trees leads him to photograph them frequently: in cities, fields, streets and every time a tree is cut down unnecessarily, he suffers as if someone were stealing a piece of his life from him... In 2017, he exhibited *Al árbol / To the tree* at the Universidad Internacional de Málaga, a show curated by Lola Durán, which showed a broad selection of photographs taken in different countries of an element as universal as the tree, "some millennial, ancient and others anonymous, but always showing their nobility," Ballester states in the foreword to the catalogue that he wrote for the show, which includes a series of poems dedicated to the tree, chosen by the artist, making a beautiful anthology.

This time, the exhibition that we are presenting at the gallery responds Ballester's concern, which we fully share, for the animal world. Its title *Un día en el zoo / A day at the zoo* already tells us that we are going to see zoos, in this case the ones in London, Madrid, Melbourne, Lisbon, amongst others, where he took many photographs, from which he removed the animals in a clear allusion to the wish to bring an end to these places where the animals are out of their natural habitat, not always in good conditions and that Rafael Doctor, the author of the foreword to the catalogue, defines as "grand theatre, an educational and perverse farce that lies in the idea of human supremacy over the other beings that inhabit this common home called Earth. And essentially, what he is trying to show is not the difference, but the power of the person who observes *in a free way* over the being that is confined in order to be observed."

Ballester, painter and photographer, is the winner of the Comunidad de Madrid 2009 Award and the 2010 National Photography Prize. His works form part of the collections of many museums and public and private collections in Spain and countries such as the USA, Brazil, China and Japan.