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Artistic languages for the representation of identity. Self-portraits as a definition of the individual

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Abstract: - The interest in representing people as individuals has been a constant throughout the History of Art. Since classical antiquity, one of the original examples of the Roman portrait was the *Maiorum images*, masks of the deceased made from wax moulds that took the impression of the persons' face, which provided a high degree of symbolism (Centuries I BC. and I AD). On the other hand, the portraits of the *El Fayum* mummies found in Egypt and made in Roman occupation times (Centuries I and II AD) are also highlighted which involve painted portraits of the dead that provided a meticulous identity on the mummified body. The aim of the representation in both cases fulfils the commemorative function allowing the presence of the person to live on. Subsequently, especially in the Renaissance period, the portraits had been an important theme in the history of painting, drawing and sculpture that sought, without a doubt the recognition of the person represented and on the other hand the intention of making their presence prevail through time. In these cases, an agreement was needed that linked two parties, the one the carrying out the work and the one being represented. In this tandem, the render, after deciphering the formal attributes of the other individual, the represented, being the intention of art to then preserve the physical appearance and make them recognisable in posterity.

Key – Words: Artistic languages – Drawing – Self-portrait – Identities – Valencian heritage

1 Introduction

In artistic portraits, there is without a doubt, a clear objective to capture the individuality that is determined because one person defines another and since the author specifies and makes certain characteristics of the individual everlasting. However, there is another artistic representation, which, more intimately, defines the individual: the self-portrait. The artist is the one who represents himself in light of the need for self-reference. In other words, in this scene the close relation of dialogue between two people is done away with and focuses on a reflection as if it were a secret with oneself since there are no intermediaries than the author himself. In this case, more factors are involved apart from the mirrored image of oneself, given that the artists must reflect on their existence, posing questions such as: Who I am really. How would l like to see myself? How do others see me? How do I want to be seen?

2 Problem Formulation

Placed in the current context, we need to be aware that in the social conglomeration of today, identities and conditions of plural genders live together. In light of this situation, we consider the self-portrait as an artistic genre that has adapted to the present social patterns and has become the ideal tool to unlock conversations that vindicate the singularity typical of each individual.

Apparently, we are all categorised in extensive social groups that are made up of generic individuals. Each one of these individuals is included in the group and share common characteristics. That is, we are part of a certain collective, eventually dissolving in it. This is the result of the great databases that as consumers we are forced to comply with quite often. They oblige us to answer questions in which our individuality becomes a questionnaire that only contains the name, identification number, sex, age, address, marital status, profession and number of children.

This problem is analysed from the sociology sphere with the active work carried out by the author Lucas Platero, who delves into the intersections of identity and determines the three unalterable conditions that determine our "self" and almost forcefully our lives: the root, the genre and social class. Platero states, "the subject embodies these three characteristics, that give them form and identity" [1]. This present research applies this theme and proposes a way to criticise this dehumanisation through the self-portrait, this being the admirable artistic manifestation to reclaim the discernible "self".

3 Problem Solution

Art is defined as a polyhedral language, concerned about reclaiming this personal and diverse identity. In such a way that we find in the subject of self-reference a very effective argument to ask for a non-collective identity but different and own. We develop versions of "self", that cause authors coming from other plastic languages to converge their artistic works towards the same objective, and are able to highlight innate characteristics to themselves, appealing to questions of gender, identity, of trace and persistence in time.

The selected references are linked to four disciplines: drawing, painting, video and photography all of which have a common link: they are artists related to Valencia having lived here or having created their work here.

1. Drawing: The research group of the drawing unit within the Drawing Department of the *Universitat Politècnica de Valencia* have been carrying out research based on the reflection of the *self* through graphic techniques for more than 10 years. Drawing is the most original and immediate artistic language, characterised for the universality of its reading allowing for the representation of the person highlighting the differentiating and individual factors. With this axiom, theoretical-practical results have been developed that gather self-reference under different readings.

Esgueva, in her research, "The functions of the Portrait" [2], and the presence of the individual is highlighted through the absence of facial features so that the author extracts all possible information that allows for their identification. This is illustrated with the work *Los Fondos de la Unidad de Dibujo* and carried out with chiaroscuro technique. Fig.1.

Secondly, we highlight the work *Autorretrato* by Thamara Casany Gálvez (2015), which appeals to the question of gender and conventionalisms that go with it. This regular routine of a man shaving is represented in her image through a differentiating technique, with ink, with the finality of giving it more presence to the action and the razor. Fig.2.

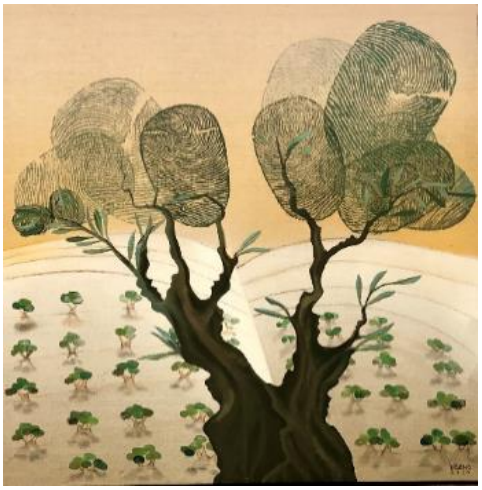

Fig.1. "Self-portrait", (s.a.), copyright © *Fondos de la Unidad de Dibujo*. Own photograph.
Fig.2. "Self-portrait" Thamara Casany Gálvez, copyright © from the author. Own photograph.
Fig.3. «*Los rostros del olivo*», Victoria Cano, *copyright © from the author.*

2. Painting: Victoria Cano, an artist from Jaen but living in Valencia, with a well-known international career spanning more than 30 years. She bases her research on the digital traces and in the profiles of the faces as an un-transferable sign of the person being eluded. Traces that are included in all types of art piece that make "flying books", painting, engraving, exhibits and sculpture. Here we highlight her pictorial work *Los rostros del olivo,* from 2010, for the allusion to tree-symbol that she uses to define human existence. Trees that flourish personal traces, establishing a metaphor with life. Immediately after Cano, proposes an exhaustive observation to recognise in the branches, the different profiles of the people close to her. Fig.3.

The artist presents her work under an intense storyline, in which she ties concepts and relationships that demand an interpretation of the symbols and iconography that continuously appear. The meaning of the work is

expanded since we know that those traces symbolise the vestige left by the people close to the artist, and that trace has influenced her by helping to build her identity.

Undoubtedly, the aphorism, *the power of the trace* is the common thread of her production. De la Calle specifies, "Traces never anonymous, since they have the secret of their own story and, without a doubt, fix the rubric and the memory of a personalised existence" [3].

3. Video:

To write about oneself far from being a narcissistic act, is normal and can move all sources of art. It links to the written biography (the written "self") and the visual "self "(the plastic "self") is the want of the trace, of the inscription on everlasting support and the want of building series throughout time. There is also a common desire to recuperate and build the look of others about oneself [4].

This quote by Guasch (2009) defines the vision of the artist Cristina Torrecilla Rubio, (1996-) which presents the video titled *16 minutos, 57 segundos* from 2017. It is a short documentary film made in Valencia, which the author defines as, "the intention to transmit through audio-visual language the autobiographical experience of facing cancer and the treatment process. Far from being an informative documentary, the objective is to show feelings and life lessons through a poetic vision" [5] taken from the personal point of view rather than the patient. Although of course it delves into emotions, one of the main objectives lies in looking for an aesthetic through photography. With slow frames, the calm and beauty of the images, with unsaturated colours, present a beautiful and pure human body stained by the imprint of a disease of feminine bias. The video without narration is completed with short handwritten sentences of great semantic content. (Fig.4) Cristina keeps to her initial proposal, based on the need and commitment from her creative profile to generate a narrative that, far from falling victim, will help other people.

4. Photography: The works of Antoni Tormo García (1993-) claim his body as support, while the author plays with sexual ambiguity. Through body painting, he builds different identities in an exhaustive exercise of transformism, where the painting does not remain on the canvas but instead is applied to his face. Tormo creates versions about familiar topics, the Ying-Yang, (Fig.5). The seven deadly sins. It alludes to the feelings of the individual, emphasising it through makeup, without being defined as feminine or masculine. Tormo's work has a social function that integrates the LGTBI collective.

It deals with how mutable identity can be, but also about gender issues. Many self-portraits help to empower individuals of small collectives of non-binary genres, to put aside the given social construction and begin to build themselves [6].

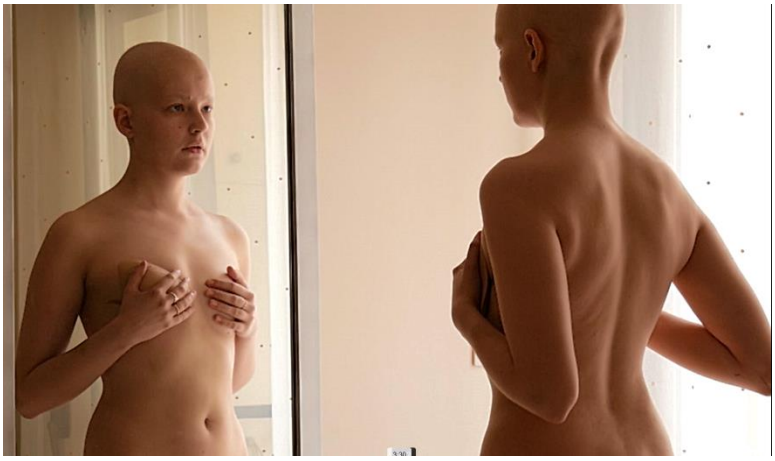

Fig.4. «*16 minutos, 57 segundos*», Cristina Torrecilla Rubio, *copyright © from the author.*
Fig.5. «*Ying-Yang*», Antoni Tormo García, *copyright © by the author.*

4 Conclusion

The development of this research shows that the artistic languages of the selected authors incorporating variants of a differentiated autobiographical vision. In this sense, they transmit the same idea to the spectator, claiming the self in a peculiar and specific way, different from the rest. We have verified that there is an

intersection between the community represented through common collective parameters, and the identity revealed through the most intimate self. For this, the chosen authors have deemed it necessary to understand the body as a place where emotions and experiences dwell.

It is also pertinent to point out that the perception of these artistic discourses achieves a parallel social task since they are capable of helping to visualise and integrate differentiated and plural identities.

To end, we highlight that this research focused on bringing together Valencian productions while at the same time successfully putting in value the artistic actions as cultural heritage of authors linked to the city of Valencia.

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