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Salamanca. A Photographic Project (extract)

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The uniformity of the environment is what focusses the work of Xavier Ribas, who has preferred to focus his gaze on the periphery, where the loss of identity and therefore the deconstruction of the concept of place are most evident. The spaces contemporary architecture gives us are ubiquitous and indifferent to the environment. If in traditional architecture each and every building element refers to a social group and a particular geographical location, as a product of what a society and a history are in the end, in contemporary architecture most of those features have disappeared. In Salamanca, for example, we find the weight of the architectural tradition of the city expressed in the materials used in some of the new buildings in the historic centre: stone slabs, from the same or similar quarries where the blocks of the great 16th and 17th century buildings were extracted, are used to face the modern residential buildings. But the outskirts are something else: the purest form of one of the main features of the contemporary landscape. Speed.

In 1835, Carl Gustav Carus published his *Letters and Notes on Landscape Painting*, which he called the culmination of the process of artistic evolution from the plastic to the visual, a culmination which calls on man to sacrifice the adoption of “a pure vision of the beauty of the world”. But that purity demanded by the Romantics starts from the assumption that nature is unchanging, that its aesthetic value is only discovered by the trained eye. But although in the previous century, the century of the Enlightenment, people were concerned to transform nature to adapt it to their landscape criteria, in Carus’ aesthetics there is no room for an intervened landscape. Hence his rejection as the origin of the pictorial genre views of cities or paintings done from a preliminary sketch. However, nothing remains of that nature the Romantics learned to appreciate when the threat of human intervention began to loom over it, or rather, the phenomenal change of scale of that intervention and with it the speeding up of the transformation of the environment. Today ours is an unstable landscape, which has nothing to do with the one that preceded industrialization. A landscape where man has introduced the speed factor through the reduction of the time in which transformations take place and, with it, the growth in their size.

Working in that recently intervened territory, the outskirts, Ribas examines the features of that new landscape of contingency, in permanent transformation, and, in many cases, with no clear organization, leaving bald patches in the new uses (zones which are no longer designed for what they once were –countryside– but which are not yet residential or industrial estates), bringing the new and old meanings of territory face to face and arousing that feeling of permanent temporariness given off by what the property developers pompously call ‘residential parks’.

However, the result of the association of those two terms is alarming. The first meaning of the word 'park' is "a fenced area of land with plants for hunting or recreation", while 'residential' has economic connotations: "part of a city designed mainly for housing, where the better off classes usually live." The aim is economic status, to signal one's belonging to a particular class, and, if necessary, sacrificing the first term in order to do so. The residential takes pride of place over the park and thus adapts to a series of stereotypes which, when we see them expressed in the images in the series, at times make us lose the notion of scale. The reason is that what we are seeing represented is already an image in itself, although the small details always show it to be imperfect and the series ends as the true sign of residence: the enclosure or fence that marks the boundaries between public and private.

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