

Nicolás Ortigosa
Working at the Limits

Ángel Calvo Ulloa

The idea is to dissociate everything from work that is not immediately involved in the organisation of functional resources; to refrain from any subjectivity or imagination. This type of work is rational, not emotional, concentrating on the equilibrium of the form. It can only be seen from this perspective.

Arnulf Rainer

I re-read the conversation between John Ashbery and Henri Michaux, which was published by ARTnews in 1961. Ashbery speaks there about the place where Michaux lives in Paris, an area of dilapidated mansions, and describes the scaffolding that has been erected to prevent the staircase from collapsing. In the apartment itself, he is filled with the sensation that it was once part of a larger one, and he passes through the rooms, where, despite the presence of some beautiful old furniture, a neutral effect reigns. He enters an abandoned garden, phantasmagorical in appearance. Back inside, he sees just two pictures on the walls, from which Michaux warns him “not to draw any conclusions.”¹

My one visit to Nicolás Ortigosa’s studios took place at the beginning of November 2018. The first studio is a large warehouse in a semiderelict industrial estate on the outskirts of his city, with no artificial lighting. Dozens of large-format drawings are stacked facing the wall, their corners protected with thick blocks of india-rubber. The second studio is an unkempt dwelling amidst a landscape of rocky outcrops and vines, where it is reached by an impossibly steep ramp. Below it is another neglected garden with a fig tree, beneath which dozens of fallen figs now form a sweet, viscous magma to the delight of the insects. Formally sober, the house retains the character of a forgotten summer retreat, with plastic chairs cracked by exposure first to the rain and the cold, and then to the baking sun that suffocates these lands.

The interior contains a succession of shabby rooms, which look as though the furniture and objects that once occupied them had been carelessly removed. A fireplace and a few lamps and fixtures remain, and a couple of religious images hang crookedly on walls whose paint and wallpaper are among the place’s last memories. No conclusions should be drawn in this case, either. The rest of the pictures are reached by a narrow passage where dozens of canvases of the most varied sizes are resting against the walls. They are distributed chaotically all around the rooms and corridor, and all are black. The dim evening light that still filters through the windows and the weak glow of the few surviving filament bulbs start to influence the surfaces of each of the paintings, revealing a series of forms and textures underlying the layer of apparently uniform black oil. Various peculiarities then emerge to differentiate them, not only because of their varied sizes but also because of the contrasts the blackness acquires upon each of them. This denotes

¹ John Ashbery, *Una entrevista con Henri Michaux*, in *Minerva: Revista del Circulo de Bellas Artes*. no. 4, Madrid, 2007.

not so much an intention behind the gesture of applying this film of oil as the evidence that several years of masked painting palpitate beneath it.

Beyond this initial contact, these spaces where everything is happening must be taken as the reference point for any analysis of the work of Nicolás Ortigosa, with their atmosphere of self-imposed solitude, and their absence of comforts or decisions except for those that have to be taken on the spur of the moment. All the covered paintings by Ortigosa between 2002 and 2018, never exhibited, now rest piled up against those walls, unified under a common denominator, numbered and reduced to uniformity through the irrevocable decision of making all of them into one and denying them any particularity from the outset.

A devotee of long processes, while his painting was occupying each of those canvases between the years 2005 and 2014, when there was still some time to go before his drastic decision, Nicolás Ortigosa produced an interpretation of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, which he decided to sketch out while reading the text pencil in hand. Through various techniques, Ortigosa then started to recapitulate the images that had arisen in his mind as the reading had progressed. The breadth of formats and supports bears a relation to his urgent annotations on any piece of paper that happens to be at hand, and the whole series acquires a lyrical rather than an illustrative character, where Ortigosa returns to drawing to decipher the scenes suggested by each canto, one by one. The form eventually taken by this project situates his practice in a drawing tradition that is perhaps linked more to an abstract language than to the figurative solution it seems to point to. What it hides has perhaps more to tell us than what it displays.

Nicolás Ortigosa's *Divine Comedy* proposes a staging that prefigures a perspective commonly supported by architectural motifs, yet which also superimposes layers that correspond to a different compositional scheme based on the type of stroke or the pressure of the graphite on the paper. The architecture that occasionally appears in the form of a staircase, a passageway or simply a horizontal line across the picture plane seems a representation of itself, producing flat structures that never seem to want to contribute any notion of depth. In many of the drawings belonging to the canto of the *Inferno* where Dante begins his ascent, the solution is presented as derived from an initial scene that includes Dante and Virgil, and which is permanently repeated with more or less protagonism, occasionally centering the scene and sometimes becoming a spectral presence. The way Ortigosa resolves the drawing bears a relation to an almost romantic attitude of dazed wonder before the vastness of the scene narrated by Dante.

Seen at one remove, his relationship with the medium is indissociable from the profound ties he feels for surfing and the way he talks about it. The ephemeral architecture offered by the sea to those who know how to penetrate it allows them to gain this type of experience, diffuse, agitated and possessed of an abstract nature. Except for the rare occasions when a camera manages to record them, such moments become capsules of oral tradition that depend on the epic solidity of the discourse to stand as valid narratives for the memory of each place. In any case, drawing always permits an immediate approach, something only granted by those practices which have accompanied us since infancy, and which allow us to give form almost instantly to unrepeatably images projected like *a flash* onto our everyday life, or perhaps recovered from the subconscious.

In a lecture given in 2017 at the Menil Collection in Houston, the artist Terry Winters used two pictures of the caves of Lascaux and El Castillo to illustrate the importance of drawing: "Drawing is direct, quick and easy. The most accessible tool we have: chalk, charcoal and graphite. The dry materials ease the process and permit a direct representation. Drawing is prior to writing. It's a way of thinking and seeing, a method for discovery."

The drawings by Nicolás Ortigosa that make up the *Divine Comedy* retain the fresh immediacy of graphite and of the formats that sustain it. That method of which Winters speaks, which situates drawing in a scenario prior to written expression, acquires value on these papers which Ortigosa executes while working through Dante's opus canto by canto. Paper and pencil function here like a simultaneous interpretation that allows the text to be understood and contributes a personal vision of the relationship with

the beyond, with life and with death. This *Divine Comedy* acts as a guide helping Ortigosa, and perhaps only him, to situate what he has read and comprehend it spatially, giving form to the broad symbolic repertoire gathered there by Dante.

Terry Winters stresses the importance and the infinite range of possibilities offered by the blank sheet, and it is on this plane that Ortigosa's relationship with surfing acquires its full value and gives special meaning to his words. The mutability of the sea, the detailed scrutiny of the site before deciding on the best way to tackle it, the uncertainty reigning in the midst of confusion, and the slight element of chance, always present no matter how straightforward it may seem, that can ruin an execution: all this configures a pristine space where everything and nothing is possible.

During my brief encounter with Nicolás Ortigosa, surfing was barely mentioned more than a couple of times, and never in relation to painting. It is only now, months later, while organising a series of notes I took then, that I understand how surfing, an activity Ortigosa has practised since his teens, concentrates many of the key aspects that permit us to embark on an analysis of his work as an artist. I am also aided in this realisation by some old interviews found by chance, where Ortigosa is questioned as a surfer. There I find in him a capacity for abstraction that allows me to understand his position towards it all, whether it be sea or paper.

While the drawings that make up the *Divine Comedy* cover ten years of his production leading up to what he considers his first exhibition, which he regards as having initiated his maturity as an artist, his series of covered paintings was born when he took the decision to coat all his work on canvas to date with a layer of black oil paint. The 115 covered paintings since 2002 have become a single work that resurrects the old conflict between the hidden and the revealed. The uniform layer of black eventually brings traces of the previous painting to the surface, awakening doubts and forcing us to look at them against the light, searching for forms, gleams and clues to the reasons for this decision, which acquires almost the scale of an epiphany. We cannot help thinking of other exercises in purification, like John Baldessari's gesture in the seventies of burning all his pictorial production, making cookies out of the ashes, and promising himself not to make any more dull art. Between 1968 and 1972, Remy Zaugg took a series of old paintings and covered them with a flat layer of sky blue that eliminated the surface colours and textures, although a few remnants of the previous composition were deliberately left around the edges. Also, though this time unintentionally, one of the copies made by Malevich of his black square eventually started to crack, revealing traces of colour that gave rise to many theories. Ángel González said of this: "The sun has been defeated, and with it the things it made visible. Its defeat is no less than the defeat of the world of objects; its defeat and its burial."²

However, the figure to whom the evolution in Ortigosa's working processes is unconsciously most indebted is perhaps Arnulf Rainer. In the summer of 1951, Rainer went to Paris to meet André Breton, but the encounter turned out to be a disappointment. Rainer, who had taken his first artistic steps in the late Surrealism that was then firmly established in Vienna, nevertheless discovered the informalist trend in Paris, leading to a radical change in the way he approached his work. On his return to Austria, he lived from 1953 to 1959 in a retreat far from Vienna, an abandoned villa he had inherited from his parents. That period saw the appearance of his series of monochrome repaints of old works of his or by other artists like Sam Francis or Victor Vasarely, who collaborated by contributing their pieces. The result, energetic tangles painted with oil bars, is born of a meditative, ritualistic, ceremonial and almost sacred act referred to by the artist as "spiritual exercises" or "tests of balance."

The decision to cover up his pictures one by one in 2018 falls under the heading of a previously assimilated action, and Nicolás Ortigosa has resolved to embark on this enterprise in full knowledge of what the monochrome plane has meant and still means today for the not so recent history of painting.

² Ángel González, *El resto. Una historia invisible del arte contemporáneo*. Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao - Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Bilbao - Madrid, 2000.

Nevertheless, the truly salient fact that soars above any other similar exercise is his determination to turn everything he has painted so far into one work, making the conflict evident while revelling in the process. Afterwards, a possible hidden pleasure in seeing the past gradually disappear takes a tighter hold the more the rooms start to resemble one another. In all of them is the same picture, which has forced the painter, and now the viewer, to move around it in a kind of ritual dance, allowing them to find the details that the new layer starts to reveal. Covering to reveal, like an initiatory encounter with the magic of photography. Gleams, textures, reactions and tonalities whose result is that no two are the same, with each one recovering its particularity while managing to seduce us as a set owing to the extraordinariness of the task.

Here the decision, unlike Rainer's, is not solely physical, since in this respect there is little importance in assuming the task of covering the canvases one by one. The true value of what is now presented under the title of *Covered paintings* (2002-2018) is a raised awareness of what it means in some way to bury the past. When Arnulf Rainer refers to spiritual exercises, then, that is the point where Ortigosa emerges with his latest work, as *Engravings 2017-2018* or *Drawings 2018*, on an expedition in search of the limits of artistic expression. When he attacks those large sheets, advancing on them from different fronts, he also confronts a discovery that has more to do with himself, his physical and mental capabilities, his capacity for abstraction, and the fine line that separates extenuation from control when the time comes to take a break. The painter keeps a firm hold on the key that allows him to stop in time, just before he spoils everything. Here, the gesture is neither a display of virtuosity nor the fruit of a learning process. The gesture acquires the value of representation in itself, like a signature on a document or on the picture. It is the word which longs to be a sign, signifier and signified all at once. So too were the calligrams of the poet Uxio Novoneyra, who sought with words to produce a physical and mental image of the ancient Atlantic forest he observed from Parada do Courel: "COUREL dos tesos cumes que ollan de lonxe! / Eiquí síntese ben o pouco que é un home..."³ Ortigosa's prints also recall this vindication of the gesture as axiom.

The captivating thing is not understanding where this manner of drawing comes from, discerning possible influences or appreciating his ability to know when to cover the paper completely or stop at the first line and deem it finished. What is perturbing is the reason that has led him to draw again today in a manner that seemed superseded, but which a little further thought shows to continue referring us to an everyday world where marks on walls still offer us information, as they did when Brassai wandered the streets of Paris in search of graffiti: "Beauty is not the object of creation, it's the reward. Its appearance, often tardy, announces simply that the broken balance between man and nature has once again been reconquered by art. What remains of contemporary works after this confrontation?"⁴

Nicolás Ortigosa's drawing brings back a post-war gesture close to Hans Hartung's obsessive tracing of lines, or Zoran Music's ability to touch bottom in showing us that Goya's *Witches' Coven* or *Feast of San Isidro* could also be Dachau. In a way, this type of gesture looks back to Paul Celan's words after Auschwitz: "We dug a mass grave in the air, where there's no straitness." In all of them, and in every mark that is still made today directly on the wall or on a support destined for the wall, there is a dissident gesture on the basis of which a more or less controlled violence is exercised, one which occasionally survives us by centuries and becomes its witness. "All the walls of a city that family tradition had persuaded me was utterly mine were witnesses to all the martyrdoms and all the inhuman underdevelopment inflicted on our people."⁵

The way in which Nicolás Ortigosa intervenes on paper denotes an obsessive need to determine the limits of the support itself, of the big bars of graphite, and of the space within his arms' reach. The critic Michel Tapié was to say in 1952 that "the path of art appears to us as the path of contemplation

³ "COUREL of hills whose flat summits gaze from afar! / Here what little there is to a man feels at ease..." in Uxio Novoneyra, *Os Eidos. O libro do Courel*. Árdora Exprés, Madrid, 2010.

⁴ Brassai, "De la pared de las cuevas a la pared de las fábricas", in *Graffiti Brassai*. Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, 2008.

⁵ Antoni Tapiés, *Comunicación sobre el muro*. Rosa Cúbica, Barcelona, 2004.

appeared to St John of the Cross: steep and uneven, and stripped of any accessory satisfaction.” After Nietzsche and Dada, Tapié asserted, art emerged as “the most inhuman of adventures.”

In Ortigosa’s practice, I sense a certain inclination for that introspection which keeps him isolated, worried about nothing but what happens within the walls of his studio. Interested perhaps in finding a closer link to the word, the result of his works suggests a poetic rapture that often seems elusive and hard to explain. This is where I understand that surfing provides an activity in which organisation is paramount: observation, waiting, decisions and action. In no case is the order of the factors changed, and never is it the man on the board who wins. The sea beats on as always, with its rhythms and its rules.

Nicolás Ortigosa
Having painting

Julio Hontana Moreno

I met you in the storm.
I met you, sudden,
in that brutal rending
of darkness and light,
where the depth is revealed
that escapes day and night.

Pedro Salinas

The title of this text is a quotation from Ramón Gaya¹ that illustrates the way in which Nicolás Ortigosa is situated in painting, and the spirit of the comments habitually made around it, though also around the themes of the pictorial, creation, or the duty of the painter in the face of his irrevocable vocation—remarks which could easily appear to the inattentive to have been lifted from the writings of the lucid Gaya. “In art, which is not invention,” the Murcian painter said, “everything exists beforehand.”² And it is hard to argue this truth, which acquires a tautological hue to anyone who has tried to do art and still persists at it. The range of resources painters enjoy today—including, as always, the History of Art—is the most extensive they have ever had at their disposal. Unfortunately, though, rather as if the painter were suffering the agonising punishment of Tantalus,³ the “painting” he hungers and thirsts for flees from him by land and air, and he is unable to grasp it even though sunk “up to the chin” in what seems to be an idyllic lake full of inexhaustible delights.

Whenever I have a picture in front of me whose surface is black and apparently impenetrable, like some of the lugubrious backgrounds in 17th century paintings where I have never been able to tell if the darkness is retreating or advancing to conquer and smother the motifs, I think that the painter in question is suggesting some kind of retrospective referentiality aimed at a new investigation of the supposed origin of modern painting. From that point, instituted as the triumph and genealogical beginning of contemporary iconoclasm, the goal is to refound painting for the umpteenth time. Fortunately, the black colour that covers Nicolás Ortigosa’s pictures is not in this case present as a false stratagem, a deliberate déjà vu to whisk oneself back to a phase of painting that has already been fully reviewed and, perhaps, exhausted. This does not stop us from quickly finding a relation between his Covered paintings and that other historic painting, likewise covered, square and black, which has peopled the imagination of painters and critics, often in a “chain,”⁴ since it first saw the light. And let us not think only of Malevich,

¹ Title taken from “España, País de pintores”, in: Ramón Gaya. *Obra completa. Tomo II. Pre-textos*, Valencia, 1992, p. 25

² *Ibid.*, p. 146.

³ Homer, *Odyssey*, Book XI.

⁴ George Kubler, *La configuración del tiempo. Observaciones sobre la historia de las cosas*. Nerea, Madrid, 1988, p. 144. The author is referring to Göller’s “chains” of forms, “which differ gradually from one another until the possibilities of the class have been exhausted.”

since it is an arduous task to make a list of similar resurgences over the course of time of the use of black to cover the picture surface. They range from Ad Reinhardt or Robert Motherwell to Manuel Millares.

In Nicolás Ortigosa's 115 *Covered paintings*, black is not used to blindfold but to reveal, rather as I fancy occurring with the material property of his immense graphite pieces when the light slides across the walls and floor and over their scaly surfaces. Let us make it clear from this point that the black oil paint which he covers his paintings with has nothing to do with the kind of spiritualism that darkens everything with the excuse of producing a perfect setting for the disconcerting contemplation of the light that comes to its rescue, or for the fortuitous reflection infused with the desire to see further. Nicolás Ortigosa is aware that the simple appearance of things has been ceaselessly imposed on us, obstructing the repose necessary to explore painting more deeply. It is an appearance constructed on a perpetual rebirth, a gratifying state of "to be continued," as denounced by Cioran with his usual precision: "The interminable is the speciality of the indecisive. [...] They are ideally apt for a nightmare."⁵ And in this perverse state of society and art, our undeserved agony is protracted while our pulse beats on indefinitely in this episodic existence. A time in which we are meekly wrecked, justifying Donald Kuspit's complaint that art had become a "depressing way of passing the time rather than reaching beyond time."⁶

"Wrecked" is a verb used here intentionally. Nicolás Ortigosa travels around the world until he comes across seas and oceans that make waves as furiously as he does, and in whose waters he spends hours swimming with his senses on the alert.⁷ He puts into practice what Novalis posited as a frankly dialectical position between man and nature, one which allows him to be "between two worlds, enjoying the most complete freedom, and sweetly conscious of his strength."⁸ It is in the sea that Nicolás Ortigosa spends all the time he is not in the studio. In short, he dedicates his life completely to the solitary reading of the variables of nature and painting. In a way, he spends his life going from one solitude to another. In the absence of one, he switches to the second. In conversations with the artist, I have come to understand the symbiosis between painting and the sea, between perseverance in front of the canvas and the savage onslaught of the waves. When I ask him how he knew for sure that he had to act in the way he did with the covered paintings, I always receive an abstract reply, as though he were still painting them and this prevented him from concentrating on his answer. Applying that greasy layer of pitch, which would have led anyone else to the irreversible extinction of his oeuvre, contributed metaphorically to the floatability of the picture and the revivification of its images. That black of his, an impermeable agent, arose from an action lacking in premeditation and slotted into the continuum of painting.

In front of a black picture, we strain our eyes so that the challenged gaze will traverse the picture surface haptically. It is then that we perhaps perceive the same stupor felt by Tanizaki in that Japanese interior where "a profound darkness fell, as though suspended from the ceiling, dense and uniform in colour, and the wavering light of the candle bounced off it as though it were a black wall."⁹ That light "of irreducible thickness" is our eye in front of Nicolás Ortigosa's pictures. He covered them himself with the heavy blackness that was forever to hide what used to be a recreation of light, colour and perspective, opening it up to a world whose novelty does not thereby make it monochromatic. Tanizaki asked: "Have you ever seen, reader, 'the colour of darkness by the light of a flame'?" And he answered the question himself, before we might get the idea that there would be nothing there but an unobservable darkness, the antechamber to Dante's *inferno*: "[that darkness] seems to be formed of corpuscles, like a faint ash whose particles glimmer with all the colours of the rainbow."

⁵ E. M. Cioran, *Del inconveniente de haber nacido*. Taurus, Madrid, 1998, p. 65

⁶ Donald Kuspit, *El fin del arte*. Akal, Madrid, 2006, p. 131.

⁷ Towards 1866, Mark Twain and Jack London were caught up in the same fascination. Mark Twain, *Letters from Hawaii*. University of Hawaii Press. A Grove Day, 1975. Mark Twain, *Roughing It*. Hartford, Connecticut. American Publishing Co, 1872. Jack London, *Stories of Hawaii*. A Grove Day, 1985. Also Jack London, *Cruise of the Snark*. Penguin Random House, New York, 2004.

⁸ Novalis, *Los discípulos en Saïs* (ed. Félix de Azúa). Hiperión, Madrid, 1988, p. 52.

⁹ Junichiro Tanizaki, *El elogio de la sombra*. Siruela, Madrid, 2018, pp. 78-79.

We can speculate whether the artist's initial purpose in deciding to cover the pictures with black paint was to relieve the gaze of the obviousness of colour, to which we are continually over-exposed, or whether he was perhaps trying to distance himself from the artist's bad habits, which wander through the memory of the history of art as the source of his learning. Or perhaps, after putting a halt to his chromatic enthusiasm, he realised the picture still had a life to live, and demanded that it do so. It does not seem a bad choice if we read Odilon Redon's conclusive defence of the colour black: "Black is the most essential of colours. [...] We ought to respect black. Nothing prostitutes it. It does not please the eyes or arouse sensuality. It is a much better agent for the spirit than the most beautiful colour of the palette or the prism."¹⁰ He concludes that "l'austérité du noir" is an ineluctable quality for the artist. This austerity is similar to the "luminous darkness" which the poet Émile Verhaeren invited artists to discover for painting.¹¹

Although covering his work with black might sound like a hasty action, Nicolás Ortigosa had been working for years on his existing oeuvre. For the covered paintings are not to be understood as a single accidental picture but as "pictures." In his own words, "I conceive painting beyond the picture itself. I conceive it as a task the artist inherits and has the duty to transform and bequeath. And so the use of painting, if it has one, is painting in itself: nothing else. Painting has nothing to do with the picture: painting is in the picture. In my case, and under my circumstances, I've found the picture by covering it, never negating it. And these covered pictures have given me the chance to be nobody again." Covering pictures is common among painters when the canvas shows incomprehensible deviations or hopeless failures. Studios are full of such works, tucked away in corners to await a miracle. Covering, burnishing, sanding, polishing, and ultimately turning surfaces into palimpsests are activities every artist has performed from the very beginning. But what we are speaking of here is not the destruction of an oeuvre but its completion. In fact, I perceive something Solanesque in the use of black by Nicolás Ortigosa, whether in painting, drawing or engraving. Perhaps its apparent cruelty is a product of the critical conscience that every artist turns on his work, or maybe he has adhered strictly to Gutiérrez-Solana's advice in the epilogue to his *España negra* (Black Spain): "We must break away from the superficial and the trifling, going as far as crime if need be."¹²

Kafka's last wishes for his literary work were carried out by John Baldessari with his Cremation Project (1970), in which the artist himself burned the whole of his pictorial production from 1953 to 1966, and made cookies out of the remains. As repeatedly occurs in art, despite the destructive efficiency of fire, the product of combustion becomes a material of limitless use to the artist. The creator has countless motives for seeking the changes his art requires, acting with enormous violence until putting an end to the work and occasionally to himself. I sometimes imagine the viscous black advancing mercilessly over the canvas, covering what has formerly won praise, and I discover to my relief that the product of this metamorphic aggregate is the apothecic immolation of today's act of seeing. One covered picture, or even a dozen, would have constituted a liturgical anecdote. The sacrificial volume of 115 covered paintings constitutes an unexpected hierophany.

In the pictures, we barely glimpse some faint shadows of the forms hidden under the black paint that protects them, reluctant to reveal their enigmatic presence to us. Now trapped by that fathomless nocturnal light, the heartbeat of the paintings they once were remains. These pictures shared the artist's studio space with his drawings and engravings, born of a silent dialogue between the sacred and the profane that was induced by a perturbing reading of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. For years, until reaching the conviction he had brought his own *Divine Comedy* to its culmination, nothing and nobody came between Nicolás

¹⁰ Odilon Redon, *Confidence d'artiste. Janvier 1913*. L'Échoppe, 2011, pp. 9-10: "Le noir est la couleur la plus essentielle. [...] Il faut respecter le noir. Rien ne le prostitue. Il ne plaît pas aux yeux et n'éveille aucune sensualité. Il est agent de l'esprit bien plus que la plus belle couleur de la palette ou du prisme."

¹¹ Émile Verhaeren, Darío de Regoyos, *España negra*. Imprenta de Pedro Ortega, Barcelona, 1899, p. 47: "Oh! The moon," he exclaimed, "how little it's been understood in painting! [...] there remain the night and its dark light, or rather its luminous darkness."

¹² José Gutiérrez-Solana, *Obra literaria (II)*. Fundación Santander Central Hispano, Madrid, 2004, p. 170.

Ortigosa and the literary work of Dante Alighieri. Time, Panofsky shows us, always acts as a “revealer”, not just as an implacable “destroyer”.¹³ For this reason, far from illustrating the text or even insinuating that the cantos correspond to any drawing in particular, we perceive how the artist experiences his own ascent while the art grows with the perfecting of its graphic resources. Nicolás Ortigosa’s *Divine Comedy* is not only peopled by Virgil, Dante and all its other worlds and characters, from the dark and voluptuous Monsters to the pure and radiant Beatrice, but we furthermore find the corrente linearistica of Botticelli¹⁴ contrasted with the impastoed black and white of Picasso’s Suite Vollard, the divine luminosity of Rembrandt and the massive compositions of Doré. The choice of drawing does not seem a matter of chance when we consider that in the period when the *Divine Comedy* was written, drawing came to be considered the “fondamento dell’arte”¹⁵ thanks especially, as Vasari pointed out in his Lives,¹⁶ to Cimabue and his pupil Giotto, who are similarly referenced by Dante in his *Purgatorio*.

However, the prints and drawings of the *Divine Comedy* needed a larger scale for the painter’s gesture to undergo a broad development. While the first culminated in the *Paradiso*, the others—the enormous graphite works on paper—follow the opposite path, condensing a previously unknown passage in their plots, with the intention of honing a procedure that will lead him towards a knowledge of drawing and of himself. These drawings, some of them resting sculpturally on the horizontality of the floor, ask the viewer to peer down from the edges into the abyss. In his recent chalcographic prints, on the other hand, some elegant lines draw an authorless signature into the wax on the metal, opening up a space of simulated personification through unattributed gesture. The signature pretends to be advancing distractedly while growing towards the dreamed representation it will never achieve, unequivocal proof of the twists and folds of the human. His powerful drawing in the large graphite works and the refinement of his graphics in the delicate engravings situate him close to the oriental calligraphers, and even to Henri Michaux’s choice of the toughest route, the one where the sign’s “bridges to its origin” are cut off.¹⁷ And although the impulse of any artist is to rebuild them, preserving the semantic order that is assumed for any graphic sign that draws inspiration from human communication, it is only possible to trust the tools that still preserve their usefulness, as Michaux put it, for “abstracting more all the time, capturing the tendency, capturing accent, speed, space. Capturing what underlies.”¹⁸ The engraving and drawing of Nicolás Ortigosa are the functional parts of these tools. But they are also the plane of action propitiating the reform of a discipline sick with self-centredness. From the outset, Ortigosa’s graphic work flees determinedly from that vain individuality ruled by a gratuitous and symmetrical gesturalità, which proves nothing but the artist’s resignation at his inability to violate his own mannerisms. The large drawings based on dense strokes of graphite thus form themselves into a barricade, one we might well understand as a reminiscence of the black paint in the covered paintings. A beautiful obstacle blocking the passage to what lies hidden behind the symbolic interpretation of the form, of which the drawing is often the most beautiful nothingness. It is then that the drawing appears as a bastion for taking refuge and feeling its inspiring energy, remote from comforting similitudes.¹⁹

As usual, Nicolás Ortigosa enters the studio or the sea with the security that comes of feeling safe from any chromatic waves while riding the board of Ramón Gaya’s words: “The first tiny symptom that shows a future painter has a pictorial vocation is an irresistible appetite for colour. The second major

¹³ Erwin Panofsky, *Estudios sobre iconología*. Alianza, Madrid, 1972, pp. 106-107.

¹⁴ Using the definition of B. Berenson cited in: Francesco Negri, Simonta Prosperi, *Il disegno nella storia dell’arte italiana*. Caricci, Rome, 2003, p. 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁶ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, p. 55. “Cimabue was, as it were, the first cause of the renewal of the art of painting. Giotto, although he was his pupil, inspired by a worthy ambition and helped by providence and his natural gifts, aspired even higher. And it was Giotto who opened the door of truth to those who have subsequently brought the art of painting to the greatness and perfection it can claim in our own century.”

¹⁷ Henri Michaux, *Ideogramas en China: captar mediante trazos*. Círculo de Bellas Artes, Madrid, 2006, p. 15.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁹ “My pictures inspire and do not need to be defined.” Written by Odilon Redon in “Odilon Redon à soi-même (journal 1867-1915),” and quoted in the exhibition catalogue: *Dibujos de los siglos XIV al XX*. Colección Woodner. Museo del Prado, Madrid, 1986, p. 276.

symptom of his serious pictorial vocation is that colour is no longer of any interest to him.”²⁰ No sooner said than done.

²⁰ Ramón Gaya, *Op.cit.*, p. 155.