

June 2022

Juan Muñoz: Drawings

It was well known that Juan Muñoz drew constantly, and yet only a small number of his drawings were shown in exhibitions during his lifetime. It is thanks to the programme of the Centro Botín in Santander that a retrospective of Muñoz' drawings can now be realized, for the institution has set itself the task of mounting exhibitions of the great masters of drawing at regular intervals – starting with Goya, followed by Millares and now Muñoz. The retrospective I have curated opened a few days ago.



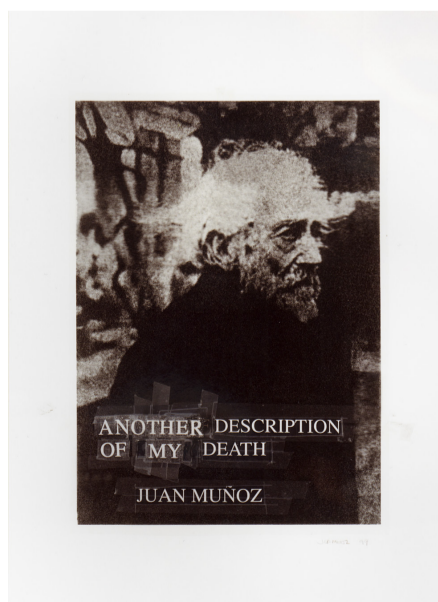
The exhibition is displayed across twelve galleries, which have been inserted especially for this purpose into the large hall of the museum designed by Renzo Piano. Twelve galleries, twelve chapters ordered chronologically or, even better, twelve little shows that each present a facet of Muñoz' graphic oeuvre. They demonstrate his approach to drawing: on the one hand, drawing was for Muñoz a constant record like a diary. Among the drawings of this kind there are sketchy formulations of ideas alongside laboriously executed sheets; however, there is a complete absence of study sheets for three-dimensional pieces that are often part of a sculptor's practice. In Muñoz' drawings in ink or sepia, he created scenes involving figures with just a few strokes of the pen. Muñoz the storyteller dispensed with any flourishes or halftones. In contrast to these works there are others in which Muñoz relinquished his own signature entirely and turned to other graphic means of expression – here, the drawing acted as a tool, the correct instrument to achieve a particular goal. The means were chosen for the rooms that he invented; their visual impact held the person who entered into them spellbound. Muñoz had learnt from artists such as Mario Merz or Jannis Kounellis that, basically, there is no difference between the genres with which an artist might work; it is simply all about how an object or drawing can be placed suggestively in a space.



At the entrance to the exhibition there is a piece that at first appears to have little or nothing to do with drawing, "Una habitación con una puerta abierta" (An apartment with an open door). On closer examination, however, the drawings engraved on the doorposts come into view; this is an early attempt by the artist to link drawing to the world of things. In this work, the question of which side the viewer is on – inside or outside of the open doors – remains unresolved. The uncertainty is also communicated by the drawings of balconies, which hover in isolation over the surface of the paper, without any architectural context or any visible figures.



Muñoz' "Raincoat Drawings" depict furnished interiors without a hint of emotion in their execution, and are drawn with white chalk on large-format cotton fabric dyed black – turning lively spaces into a negative. The "Back Drawings" – views of men's bare backs – and a series of drawings of half-open mouths are also fragments, which resist being brought together to form a whole. In the case of illustrations for a story by Joseph Conrad, Muñoz tried to enter into the idiom of English book illuminators of the 19th century. Photographs served him as templates for two later series of drawings. One is a photo of Luchino Visconti and Maria Callas in the theatre dressing-room in front of a mirror. Reserved distance and physical proximity are united in this image and can be read at different levels – mediating between man and woman, director and singer, artist and model. A photograph of the poet Ezra Pound was used by Muñoz in 1999 for the fictive cover of an autobiographical book with the title "A Brief Description of My Death." Via the copy of the likeness of his poetic alter ego he found his way back to himself – the self-portrait that he never drew. Two years later Muñoz died unexpectedly, and so this group of drawings marks the tragic end of the exhibition.



The portrait of another person stands in for the self-portrait that is lacking. Muñoz' drawing takes visual illusion as its starting point; he uses his own means to indicate what one cannot see, is unable to speak about or describe. The motifs he depicts – balconies, furniture, corridors, faces – are really only blanks. The drawings are always oriented towards something else, that something which is absent.

The exhibition "Juan Muñoz: Dibujos/Drawings" continues until 16 October 2022.

Dieter Schwarz