Leslie de Chavez and the Sleep of Reason

by Tony Godfrey (2016)

"The horror! The horror!"' We are appalled, but we are intrigued – fascinated even.

Two months past I visited the studio of Leslie de Chavez to see the work he was making for a show in South Korea. His paintings and installations often have symbolic or allegorical meanings, but I often don't initially get these particular meanings because being English I fail to recognize the references to Filipino politics and culture. A lot of his work has dealt, however indirectly, with the corruption that seems so endemic in the Philippines, and the collusion between state, church and business.

Looking at the painting he was working on then which had two bearded heads in a black shape against a gilded background, I said that they looked like bearded saints, that they looked like medieval sculptures of the apostles. 'Yes,' he replied, 'they do look like that, don't they! Actually they are the heads of Syrian army soldiers beheaded by Islamic State and put in a cooking pot.'

He then told me that supposedly a woman had been looking for her son and was given a pie by some Daesh (ISIS) people. Only after she had eaten some of it did they tell her that they had killed and cooked her son and that was what she had been eating. Whether this is true or just a new modern day myth I don't know, though one has come to believe Daesh possible of any vile atrocity by now.

How should you respond to such horrors? And how as people in the art community can we cope with or respond to the shocking imagery that Daesh produces with apparent technical and aesthetic expertise? 'Do you look at the Daesh imagery on the web?' I asked Leslie. He did. 'Did you even watch the Jordanian pilot being burnt alive?' I asked. He did but couldn't watch it to the end and felt guilty.

Horror and fascination go hand in hand: it is difficult to draw one's eyes away from that which shocks and appalls us.

The title for this latest exhibition by Leslie de Chavez comes from Goya's famous print *The sleep of reason produces monsters*, the 43rd print in his 1799 series of 80 prints *Los Caprichos* (whims or fantasies). In it, as the artist sleeps, a flock of cats, owls and bats gather round him, their faces half human and malevolent. His interest in Goya is not surprising for, as he says, "Goya? The more you read, the more you realise how his problems were like ours."[i] But his choice of title is more than revealing: it is also problematic. What did Goya mean exactly by it? What does de Chavez?

Although often fantastical, many of *Los Caprichos* were attacks on the corruption and absurdities of the Spanish state - the cruelties of the inquisition, child prostitution or superstition. But they do not constitute a coherent critique of the state and the religious institutions that went hand in hand with it. Goya's imagery and position slides between satire and the fantastical, and no figure was ever recognizable as a particular individual.[ii] They were made during a brief moment in time when liberals and reformers (people who believed in the Age of Reason) were in charge of the Spanish government – but were published just afterwards when repression had re-established itself.[iii] No doubt, Goya was wary of prosecution, but more importantly he was not just making jokes and jibes about the Madrid society he lived in – a society which both fascinated and repulsed him: he was, firstly, making comments about how humanity in general acts and, secondly, he was letting his imagination run free.

Although many interpreters have sought precise political meanings Goya always disclaimed any exact satire: "in none of the compositions," he wrote, "has the author proposed for ridicule the particular defects of any one individual…Painting (like poetry) chooses from the world what it considers most appropriate to its ends: it combines in single fantastical figure, circumstances and characteristics which in nature appear spread over many… themes from the multitude of follies and wrongdoings which are common to society."[iv] It was such general significance that both interested him and let him be free to make prints that still haunt our imagination. We look at them not so much to learn about Spain at the end of the eighteenth century as to learn something about ourselves.

There are in fact two groups of prints: the first 42 focused on social misdemeanours: the marriage market, vanity, drunkenness, prostitution, charlatan doctors and the brutality of the inquisition. All the prints in the sequence after no 43 are of fantasy and witchcraft. It seems probable that he originally meant to issue these prints separately from the earlier prints with *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* as their frontispiece. Under a second preparatory drawing for this print he wrote, 'Universal language: drawn and etched by Francisco de Goya: Year 1797. The author dreaming. His only intention is to banish harmful common beliefs and to perpetuate with this work of *caprichos* the sound testimony of truth.'[v]

Leslie de Chavez is as embedded in the social, political and religious turmoil of his own time and country (the twenty-first century Philippines) as Goya was in his, but like Goya Chavez is making a "universal language". Just as the Goya scholar Tomás Harris said, *Los Caprichos* "invite imaginative interpretations,"[vi] so likewise, Chavez's paintings, drawings and installations invite imaginative interpretations. Although Goya offered his own interpretations or commentaries they never excluded the viewer's own reaction and thoughts. They are never definitive. For example, Goya's own later interpretation of Plate 43 was 'imagination abandoned by reason produces impossible ministers: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the source of their wonders.'[vii] Which sounds rather common-sensical for such a strange and haunting image. There is so much else one could say: the pose, for example, of the sleeping figure is like that he used for his portrait of an admired friend Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos and is ultimately derived from images of melancholy – especially that by Dürer. Melancholy was seen in Goya's time as something that artists were both especially prone to and benefited from. Taking this, one could start to have very different thoughts: that such melancholy and such monstrous dreams are in fact the very stuff of art.

Similarly, with plate 65 of *Los Caprichos* (*Ensayos* – trails) Goya wrote on the preparatory drawing, "trial of novice witches on their first flight and they set to work with fear." But his final commentary was less direct, "Little by little she is making progress. She is already making her first steps and in time she will know as much as her teacher."[viii] The old witch has taught the young women to hover just above the ground. Behind them a giant goat, presumably the devil, watches on. In front, beside a beautifully drawn jug and skull, one cat looks at them and another cat looks directly at us.

De Chavez too often includes such witnesses and such beautifully wrought objects in his paintings. Look for example at the rat, photographer and bowl in *In the holy theatre of operations*. Looking at Goya helps us understand how these paintings by de Chavez are simultaneously both powerful, emotive statements and art. De Chavez is conscious of working in a long tradition of art-making. Like Goya, he too often provides the viewer, or reader, with commentaries on his work. He gives one, for example to his painting *Staging the popular.* This was inspired by sale of Francisco Botong 1969 painting *Camote (sweet potato) diggers* at auction for 22,000,000 pesos (USD460,000). How ironic it seemed that an image of abject poverty, (an old woman and her grandson digging up root vegetables with a stick) should be so valuable! This was the starting point for

de Chavez's painting but he doesn't mention it in his commentary. His text is more elliptical and wry – as Goya's texts can be, though less elliptical and mysterious as Jasper Johns' famous text for his painting *Watchman*[ix]. The text by de Chavez doesn't tell you what the painting is "about" so much as give you things to think about in relation to it. It is not so much a description or explanation of the painting as a meditation on it. If we have borne in mind Goya's print *The Sleep of Reason* we will recognize that the figure (artist?) on whom the camotes have been piled is like Goya's sleeping figure. Bats hover above too, but the other monsters have been replaced with an auctioneer and a grim faced hoodlum.

Curiously, there is another way in which he is like Goya. They have both made cartoons in the old fashioned sense of the word, templates to be copied. Albeit in different way: Goya made such cartoons of ordinary people in Madrid for tapestry makers to work on. De Chavez starts by making tracings of people and poses that he either finds on the Internet or from photos he has taken himself. They are simple, elegant outline drawings not unlike Flaxman's neo-classical drawings or Warhols's late drawings.[x] He has made 200 or more of such drawings from figures since 2010.[xi] They form a repertoire of figures he can call on and stage. When transferred to the paintings they are changed and adapted, becoming more like stereotypes or everyman figures than recognisable, particular people.

What drives him to work is anger at the corruption that permeates Filipino society, violence, hypocrisy. But his paintings are not just diatribes. Making such well-made paintings shows other drives: the longing for a *buo* (complete, well made) painting and a pleasure in making, in brushmarks, the delicate lines made with a fire . Anger may get him to the studio but it is these other things that keep him there. Above all, he is like Goya – or any major artist – creating a vision of the world: a vision that is highly personal and in which the world around him is refracted. It is a world where things of this world co-exist with the imaginary, and even the fantastic.

De Chavez's working methods are unusual and personal: to establish the composition he makes sketches – but on some pre-existent surface, an old certificate or the board he has been wiping his brushes on. This, of course, links to the interest he has in old, objects that seem to have memories embedded in their surface – and which form the starting point of his installations. The surface of both sketches and paintings matters a good deal: since 2012, abstract elements – flecks, slashes and spots – have flickered in and through his paintings. He talks of how he wants to activate the surface and how he like the spots and tears of damage you see so frequently in the old murals in the local Filipino churches. He also emphasizes in conversation that these "splotts" are all done very carefully, and that in the painting *Faith is an illusion by which we measure our fears* the gaps in the gold grid are deliberate.

The way the flesh of the figures is drawn is strangely uncanny too. These are impeccably drawn but the lines are not blended as they are in all other parts of the paintings. They are like the pen drawings of the engraver Goltzius who drew much as he made engravings - with endless cross-hatchings. In de Chavez's paintings it makes for a somewhat disruptive language, different from the rest of the paintings – as if the figures inhabited another dimension. Like many other major painters of today (Dana Shutz in the USA, Neo Rauch in Germany, Nigel Cooke in the UK for example) he is unable to just simply representational pictures: the picture is constantly invaded and infected by other types of mark or gesture. Painting may be an art of stasis where everything is stopped but these painters insist on making paintings where the surface is unstable, as if doubt must be accepted as a necessary condition. As Richard Shiff wrote recently, 'Artists devoted to painting believe in it, but they also doubt their belief. Their doubt opens painting, as well as its artists, to living.'[xii]

We may also add that like Schutz, Rauch and Cooke, the space of his paintings is getting increasingly complex, baroque in its convolutions and uncertainty. In his case this is very tied to light and darkness. Since 2004 his paintings have been dark as though in the murk of night – or of some post-apocalyptic time where the sun no longer shines through. Why? Is this gloom symbolic of existential or spiritual darkness? Darkness is a necessary condition for light to appear (witness Rembrandt, Titian or Caravaggio) and light – and with it colour – is key to his work.

This group of recent paintings is distinguished by the frequent use of gold leaf.[xiii] When we look at icons and mosaics in Greek orthodox churches such as those in Ravenna or Torcello we see Christ, the Virgin and all the saints standing against a gold background. The gold represents heaven. Likewise in early Italian Renaissance paintings gold leaf as a background stands for heaven and divine illumination. Often a thin gold line joins God and the virgin's womb at the moment of incarnation.

The title of one of these gold leafed paintings (*Faith is an illusion by which we measure our fears*) ultimately derives from John Lennon's 1970 song *God* which begins, "God is a Concept by which we measure our pain," and carries on to list many things he does not believe in including the Bible, Jesus and Buddha. But de Chavez goes to church with his family every Sunday.[xiv] He says he has nothing against religion but hates how institutions such as the church manipulate people. He believes in faith.

The tension between the glamour or appeal of evil or corrupt people and an ethical position underpins his work. Here we can make another useful connection: with the paintings the American Philip Guston made from 1969-1980 after he had rejected abstract painting but didn't want to go back to the socialist realism of his youth. The hooded figures of the Klu Klux Klan, violent right-wing, racist vigilantes who he satirized in early work re-appear frequently in his last works – but now his attitude is no longer the accusatory, righteous on of his youth: 'They are self-portraits," he wrote. "I perceive myself as being behind the hood. In the new series of 'hoods' my attempt was really not to illustrate, to do pictures of the Ku Klux Klan, as I had done earlier. The idea of evil fascinated me [...] I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan, to plot.'[xv] 'I started conceiving an imaginary city being overtaken by the Klan. I was like a movie director. I couldn't wait, I had hundreds of pictures in mind and when I left the studio I would make notes to myself, memos, "Put them all around the table, eating, drinking beer". Ideas and feelings kept coming so fast; I couldn't stop, I was sitting on the crest of a wave.'[xvi]

These bad figures have energy, vitality.

What of his installations? They often evolve from finding some old object and re-contextualising it. It is an essentially poetic way of working. An object, just as the word or image suggests other words or images to a poet, suggest another object, an adjustment. They are allusive rather than denotative. It is worth pointing out that in the Philippines and Indonesia unlike elsewhere it is the painters who make the best installations.

His installations often seem like ceremonies: the water pouring over the five Michael Jacksons in *I just can't stop loving you.* Of course, it refers to the way he supposedly whitened his skin but it is also what happens at baptism. Then we see the cultic figures of the *Lapiang Malaya* sect gather in a semi circle, gesticulating in unison. A visionary group that believed in political freedom and the imminent second coming of Christ in 1967 380 of them marched in Manila in a futile attempt to overthrow president Marcos. Their supposedly magical amulets were no protection against the machine guns of the police. It is a strange story: but throughout

the world we can find other groups with charismatic leaders who launch them on equally unreasonable mystical endeavours.

The installations are haunted by images, and by the ghosts of images. Memories linger in these old objects.

So it is with a painting such as *Ghosts of Orapronobis*. The figure echoes the pose of Han Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* painted in about 1520, but it is cut up and buried in earth – a shallow grave, not a tomb. Close looking, as so often in his work, pays off: the top level of soil consists partly of skulls and bones; above in the dark soldiers search for any surviving rebels.

Although he has sometimes been described as a later day social realist he, like Goya, presents things in a much less direct way. He creates worlds rather than shouting at us. His paintings may not be as higgledy-piggeldy as those of Neo Rauch, who has a more comic view of the world; nor as funky and chunkily visceral as those of Dana Shutz; nor as mutated as those of Nigel Cooke; but like them he grapples with an unstable world. Like them and other leading painters of today he deals with serious issues, faith, death, power, corruption, and at the same time makes haunting works in which horror, beauty and questions co-exist.

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[i] Conversation with author January 2016

[ii] It is thought that some prints he did not include in the series were excluded because they could be seen as representing specific people: the Queen, the Duchess of Alba.

[iii] Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos, to whom Goya was close, had been recalled from internal exile in November 1797 to become minister of Grace and Justice but was sent back into exile in August 1798 perhaps because of his attempt to reform the inquisition. Other reform minded ministers had equally short moments of power.

[iv] Diario de Madrid Feb 6. 1799. Quoted in Tomás Harris, *Goya Engravings and Lithographs,* Oxford, 1964, Vol I, p. 99

[v] Quoted by Xavier Bray in Ex. Cat. *The portraits: Goya*, National gallery, London, 2015, p. 103

[vi] Harris, *op. cit.* 1964, Vol I, p. 95

[vii] Harris, *op.cit.* Vol. I, p. 98

[viii] Harris, *op.cit.* Volume II, p. 137

[ix] "The watchman falls "into" the "trap" of looking. The "spy" is a different person. "Looking" is and is not "eating" and "being eaten". (Cezanne? -each object reflecting the other.) That is, there is continuity of some sort among the watchman, the space, the objects. The spy must be ready to "move", must be aware of his entrances and exits. The watchman leaves his job and takes no information. The spy must remember himself and his remembering. The spy designs himself to be overlooked. The watchman "serves" as a warning. Will the spy and the watchman ever meet? In a painting named SPY, will he be present? The spy stations himself to observe the watchman. If the spy is a foreign object, why is the eye not irritated? Is he invisible? When the spy irritates, we try to remove him. "Not spying, just looking." – exhibition note by Johns on *Watchman*, 1965

[x] 42 such drawings, collectively entitled *Dengue,* were shown in his 2011 Arario exhibition.

[xi] His earlier drawings were from memory.

[xii] "Cliché and a lack of feeling" by Richard Shiff, *Art Newspaper*. 5 June 2015

[xiii] Technically he uses schlag – imitation gold. Gold of course has long been a key component of art. Gilding was long seen as a great skill. Goya's father was a gilder.

[xiv] His parents are catechists in the Catholic church. Though not priests, catechists teach the principles of the Catholic faith.

[xv] Guston quoted in *Philip Guston Paintings 1969-1980*, exhibition catalogue, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1982, p. 54

[xvi] Quoted from an edited transcript of a lecture given by Philip Guston at the University of Minnesota in March 1978, published for the first time in the exhibition catalogue *Philip Guston: The Late Works*, Sydney: International Cultural Corporation of Australia, 1984, p.55. The quote in full goes, 'As a young boy I was an activist in radical politics, and although I am no longer an activist, I keep track of everything. In 1967-68 I became very disturbed by the war [Vietnam] and the demonstrations. They became my subject matter and I was flooded by a memory. When I was about 17 or 18, I had done a whole series of paintings about the Ku Klux Klan, which was very powerful in Los Angeles at that time … In the new series of 'hoods' my attempt was really not to illustrate, to do pictures of the KKK, as I had done earlier. The idea of evil fascinated me, and rather like Isaac Babel who had joined the Cossacks, lived with them and written stories about them, I almost tried to imagine that I was living with the Klan. What would it be like to be evil? To plan and plot. Then I started conceiving an imaginary city being overtaken by the Klan. I was like a movie director. I couldn't wait, I had hundreds of pictures in mind and when I left the studio I would make notes to myself, memos, 'Put them all around the table, eating, drinking beer'. Ideas and feelings kept coming so fast; I couldn't stop, I was sitting on the crest of a wave.'