

## Introduction

In the mid 1970s, Carmen Laffón, who at the time was living in Madrid, received an offer of the kind that are impossible to refuse: a studio in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. A member of her family suggested she occupy a space on the rooftop terrace of a large house standing on Calle Bolsa. Originally used as a laundry room, it had gradually become the kind of space for storing items that are unwanted, but may one day come in handy: old but sturdy wooden doors, platform ladders used for painting high ceilings, wine cases...Carmen Laffón turned them all into furniture, creating a space for reading, writing and naturally drawing and painting. She spent long periods of time there, bathed in the city's light and but also exposed to the blustery gales that forced her to come up with ingenious ways of securing her canvases to the wall. She was also fortunate in that her kind and generous family never forgot her at afternoon coffee (or tea) time.

It was from this studio that she would paint views of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. In her younger days she had painted a succinct landscape from this vantage point. Yet now she created detailed views from Calzada de la Infanta to Bajo de Guía, always featuring an element of damp (a hint of what was to come in her landscapes of the Doñana Reserve) reminiscent of the lagoons that were brought to life in the Venetian paintings.

The year was 1975, although she would return in 1987 to sketch the outlines of the araucarias of Sanlúcar.

Some twenty years later, her family decided to sell the house, and as they imagined it would be demolished, they suggested to Carmen Laffón that perhaps she should take away the items that remained in her former studio. Everything was just as she had left it. There is no record of the artist removing any forgotten items, although she was determined to forge and preserve a lasting memory of this space. And she did so through a series of sculptures and large drawings characterised by the use of innovative techniques, evoking retreats for reading or drawing, stands and supports that would keep the canvases safe from the gusts of air; makeshift shelves for storing brushes, pigments and pencils. The result is the project entitled *El estudio de la calle Bolsa* ('The studio on Bolsa Street'), which is completed with an oil painting of the window from which the artists may well have painted the landscapes referred to above.

For any artist, the studio es essentially an extension of their clever and gifted bodies: a place of

refuge and concentration that little by little is filled with the paintings and drawings created within and the ideas that are forged there, which, in the manner of a delicate tapestry, cover walls, tables and corners, adding a previously absent vision of relief to the setting.

## Room I

Carmen Laffón's first, fleeting interpretation of Sanlúcar dates back to an early age from the rooftop of the house on Calle Bolsa. In 1975, and from that same room, now converted into a studio, she began work on a series of ambitious cityscapes. This was not her first incursion into this urban theme: whilst in Seville she had painted the views from the top of her home, portraying the nearby roofs and terraces, church domes and towers, observed from behind the rooftop walls or railings. Yet the views of Sanlúcar are different. Painted from a higher perspective, perhaps from the window which would be the subject of a later work, this rooftop is more a kind of proscenium that lends a sense of depth to the cityscape. Yet there is even more to them than that: the meticulously drawn geometrical lines are indicative of two essential elements that define paintings: perspective and the creation of parallel planes. Perspective, the lines that converge at the vanishing point, which initially boldly define the space, later give way to the construction of parallel planes highlighted through the use of colour. Unlike the views of Seville, in the case of the Sanlúcar series, Laffón clearly draws the eye to the huddle of houses, gradually building up an image at a pace that invites our gaze to move from one end to the other, rather than simply resting in one place. Works in which space is touched by time, and in all likelihood stirring the imagination and conjuring up images of Sanlúcar de Barrameda's long and intriguing history. This notion of space and time can also be sensed in a further aspect of these views: the sky takes up practically the entire upper half of the canvas, creating an immense sense of a damp light that reminds us of the proximity of the River Guadalquivir and hints at an ambitious future project: *Vistas del Coto Doñana* ('Views of the Doñana Reserve'), which were begun in 1979.

Carmen Laffón would again paint from her *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* ('The Studio on Bolsa Street') in the late 1980s. She began with sketches of the rooftop, marking a timid return to the early landscapes of Seville, although these works were lacking the protective nature of the walls that surrounded those rooftops. Indeed, those early works appear today as a kind of dress rehearsal in order to create a series of planes where the bold geometry is offset by the delicate profile of the araucarias. The houses appear to huddle for protection among the trees, pyramids interspersed with

light, whilst the rooftop walls or railings take on the air of a geometrical abstraction, skilfully built up by paint. Here as well, the upper half of the canvases are given over almost entirely to a light that glimmers with the ripples of the river water and tides. Light and araucarias that are essentially hallmarks of this city.

Laffón would return to the studio years later, just a short time before its demolition, in order to paint the window from which she may well have traced her first impression of Sanlúcar and its features.

## Room 2

One of the most notable features of the drawings included in *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* ('The Studio on Bolsa Street') is undoubtedly the technique employed. The charcoal drawings establish a dialogue with other similar motifs traced in pastels or a combination of charcoal, pastels and perhaps oils. Indeed, the shades of grey and colours appear to be engaged in a mutual play of questioning.

These works are striking for two further reasons: the format, which is far larger than that of most drawings, and the lack of visual depth. Their size is almost overwhelming: rather than conforming to an object for observation, they appear to surround observers, irresistibly drawing them into the space they occupy. In turn, the lack of depth, creates the sense that the drawings can leap of the paper, altering the space in the room. Both versions of *Repisa improvisada* ('Makeshift Shelf'), the long narrow board is so sturdy that it appears to jut out and alter the actual space.

A fourth characteristic is worthy of mention: on some occasions, the objects depicted in these still lifes are often diffused (*Mesa improvisada I y II* – 'Makeshift Table I and II'), whilst in others their geometrical structure makes them appear as mere brushstrokes in space. By applying this technique, Carmen Laffón shuns the meticulously detailed object (a jug, plate, fruit bowl or perfume spray, etc.) in favour of alternative, almost abstract items, intended above all to create a sense of space.

Four characteristics that determine the imminence of these drawings. The simplicity of the objects; the geometrical precision; the technique employed, attributable to painting as well as drawing; their large size and lack of depth come together in works where spatial relationships take precedence over the actual objects; connections that rather than creating a scene for observation are a means of

engaging and involving the observer.

The intention of these drawings is in line with that of the sculptures. *Regla sobre una mesa improvisada* ('Ruler on a makeshift table') is a long, narrow object: a section of wall with a drawer attached that supports a disused cupboard shelf on which a ruler and a plate stand. The simplicity of the shapes and the manner in which they interact with their surroundings and the perpendicular planes and volumes lead the observer to think more in the comings and goings, actions and movements of the artist that dwells there than the actual corner of a studio. The same is true of *Bodegón del poyete* ('Still life of a stone bench'): the precision of the prism and the objects left on top once again strike up a dialogue of inhabited spaces.

*Repisa improvisada* ('Makeshift shelf') is probably the most eye-catching sculpture: two ladder platforms placed next to a wall support a board which has had to be wedged into place. The items placed on the board conjure up the idea of a still life, whilst the bare wall and wire slung over a hook at the top, makes us think that a picture once hung there. Hence the idea that the sculpture resembles a painting whilst at the same time leading the observer to consider the painting that *may once have hung there*.

The drawings and sculptures featured in *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* (Studio on Bolsa Street) therefore open up a series of living spaces: rather than portraying a space, they evoke a manner of inhabiting it.

### Room 3

*Bodegón apoyado en una mesa* ('Still life standing on a table') is a work that traces an interior around it, evoking a room. As with the other sculptures, the painted bronze table is small and simple, reminding us of the kind that could be found in modest homes. A cup and saucer next to a sugar bowl stand on top. Underneath is a drawer like those used to store wine bottles and behind it, to the right, a window with closed shutters (is this the same window as the one depicted in Room 1?). Leaning against the table is a painting, a still life. A bronze sheet featuring a faint relief in a metaphor of painting. The figures in the still life recall the table and the items before us, but also include a cloth draped over the edge which contrasts with the austerity of the table in the sculpture.

The work could pass for a silent setting if it were not for the fact that it *can* and *should* be observed from end to end. Rather than an object for mere contemplation, it should be ‘sized up’ in order to evoke the spatial relationship with the room and the observer’s body. As with minimal art objects or installations, this sculpture has a capacity for myriad relationships that each individual spectator can unlock. Indeed, this is what sets it apart from traditional still lifes: its nakedness and geometrical balance could be claimed to share similarities with the still lifes of Sánchez Cotán, although the Carthusian monk’s works appealed to the eye, whilst this work, in addition to awakening our sense of touch (attributable to the use of materials and textures), also recalls the role of the body with its various volumes.

This work, together with the sculpture entitled *Cesta y carpeta negra* (‘Basket and black folder’), brings the *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* (‘The Studio on Bolsa Street’) in line with *Un ejercicio del lugar y de la memoria* (‘An exercise in place and memory’). A place is not just any space, but rather a habitat that grows and interacts with whoever dwells there. Such is the case of the studio: artists shape and change it through their work, yet at the same time the studio acts upon the artists from the silence of their retreat. The drawings and sculptures included in *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* (‘The Studio on Bolsa Street’) are not a collection of the works that were created there, but instead tell a retrospective tale, step by step, of the development and settlement of the place in which such work took place. A setting that witnessed the everyday movements of the artist in this former laundry room.

Yet perhaps there is more to it than this. This place held a deep significance for Carmen Laffón. It was from here that she rediscovered the landscapes of a city from her childhood, seen now through different eyes. The studio also represents a reencounter with the attic, a stimulus and source of endless childhood fantasies, yet which now also represents the adult experiences of silence and withdrawal. In this sense, *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* (‘The Studio on Bolsa Street’), is an exercise in memory that hints at the notion of its own time. A time that emerges from a succession of images which, as portrayed in the films of Mankiewicz or Visconti, connect the present with multiple and vastly different pasts. Pleasurable or not, they are generally safeguarded from all forms of falsehood.