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Continuing with its exploration of the paths of painting in this *fin de siècle*, the IVAM now presents the first museum exhibition of one of the most outstanding names on the current figurative scene in Spain, Ángel Mateo Charris, from Cartagena, who studied in the Faculty of Fine Arts in Valencia and whose chief launching-pad has been My Name's Lolita Art, a gallery in this city. Although the exhibition includes earlier works, it is not presented as a retrospective but rather focuses on the output of the last two years, in which we find various very large canvases, others that are smaller, and a series of boxes.

Charris has been present in generational group exhibitions such as *El retorno del hijo pródigo* and *Muelle de Levante*, where he has coincided with Dis Berlin (exhibited by us earlier in the same space that now receives his friend and colleague), Manuel Sáez, Pelayo Ortega, Joël Mestre, Paco de la Torre, Marcelo Fuentes and—also from Cartagena—Gonzalo Sicre, among others. In his case, as in that of various Valencian artists of his generation, he has drawn considerably on the legacy of Pop, and it is possible to establish connections between his work and that of the American artist James Rosenquist (who has also exhibited in the IVAM) or the French artist Jacques Monory. With time, however, his pictorial and cultural interests, evident in his numerous intelligent texts and in his mini-magazine *La Naval*, have led him to focus on other more secret painters: the Metaphysicals and the painters of the Italian Novecento, the rare Léon Spilliaert, and above all Edward Hopper, towards whose landscapes—especially the coastline of Cape Cod—he has travelled in the company of Gonzalo Sicre.

Charris paints pictures that speak to us of his cultural voracity, his ability to learn from the most diverse ways of creating. Pictures in which enigma sits cheek by jowl with humour, and all the more disturbing the more “normal” they seem to be. Pictures among which some correspond to the

idea of an imaginary journey, along the lines of Jules Verne or Hergé—once again the “clear line” is important here, and it is also possible to find parallels with cinema—while others have originated from looking at what is nearest at hand, the city of Cartagena, with its port and railway and naval installations, which seems to us the most metaphysical city in the Iberian peninsula. Thanks to Edward Hopper it was possible for Charris to meet one of the great names of modern art historiography in America, Gail Levin, the number one specialist on that painter. She herself tells how Sicre and Charris spontaneously approached her and presented themselves as devotees of the artist to whom she has dedicated such zeal. She appeared in the book in which the twosome told the story of their experiences in Cape Cod, and she enthusiastically accepted our proposal to be the curator of the present exhibition of an artist who fascinates her. The exhibition catalogue is enriched with texts by Francisco Jarauta and Fernando Huici, the latter of whom has spent years closely following the evolution of Charris's work and of that of other “prodigal sons”.

Delving into his very special world, Charris here presents some of the most important pictures to have emerged from his hands during the decade that is drawing to a close, many of them now being exhibited for the very first time. And it is as a glorious culmination of his way of revisiting the *Rareza del siglo* (Rarity of the Century)—the title of a particularly fortunate picture of his which belongs to the collection of the IVAM and also features in the exhibition—that we must consider one of these firsts, the monumental, spectacular polyptych *Parade*, with its title drawn from Satie, whose protagonists are some of the heroes of a modernity that now, in the twilight of the century, he contemplates with admiration mingled with irony.

THE WORLD OF ÁNGEL MATEO CHARRIS

Gail Levin

Happening upon the works of Ángel Mateo Charris, it takes little time to become aware that one has come to an original and really magical universe, just as curious in its own way as any of the diverse worlds created by Miró, Dali, Chagall, De Chirico or Hopper. Like these modern masters, Charris captures human idiosyncrasies with a penetrating and unsparing gaze and he entices his unsuspecting viewers to enter and share his singular vision of the world.

Unsuspecting we can be called, because at first glance we might sometimes suppose that we are looking at realist paintings. But then we begin to notice the eccentricities, inconsistencies and contradictions at the literal level. Amidst much that is recognizable, certain details cry out for explanation. Jarred, we are forced to look again and again, reconsider, ponder and excogitate.

What we realize little by little is that none of the elements in Charris's paintings is accidental. The most surprising juxtapositions prove to be carefully planned, often prepared by means of sketches produced on a computer (acquired in 1993), where the artist freely commingles, hybridizes one would say today, images drawn from high and low culture. Yet Charris is content if we initially deceive ourselves that these images are real. Exuberantly he plays with the ambiguity between reality and fantasy. He provokes and teases his viewers to look and look again. He is not painting observed reality, but his own truth—a universe imagined through a personal poetics. Born in 1962 in Cartagena towards the southeastern extremity of Spain, where geographical exposure and one of the world's great harbors created a crossroads and melting pot of cultures (most famously among them the eastern, Semitic Carthaginians who named the city and from whom the Romans took it), Charris was nurtured by the new flow of cultural crosscurrents that washed over Spain as it gradually reopened during the last years of the fascist regime of Franco. Although in school Charris received no

art instruction, he did begin to paint during his childhood. Suffering from asthma and allergies, he spent much of his time at home, confined to rest in bed. His father would bring comic books each week for this youngest and most fragile of his children. After seeing him drawing with pencils, his mother bought him a little bag of oil paints. Constantly entertained and inspired by characters such as Mickey Mouse, Dumbo and Tintin, his imagination began to grow. Completely unaware of contemporaneous Pop Art, the young Charris, too, painted figures from the comics, much as Warhol, Lichtenstein and others had been doing on the other side of the Atlantic. He painted little landscapes as gifts for family members, copied reproductions on postcards and made little constructions. His sister Paula still treasures one of these little paintings, a highly colored landscape. By the age of fourteen, Charris imagined himself becoming an architect.

His family thought he had a hobby, but for Charris the idea of becoming a painter was encouraged by Hollywood movies he saw about Michelangelo and Van Gogh.¹ At the age of fourteen, he went on a school trip to Madrid, where he visited the Prado. At seventeen, a school trip to Genoa, Florence and Rome gave him the opportunity to see still more paintings. His heroes were Leonardo, Van Gogh and Velázquez.

Only in 1980, when Charris arrived in Valencia to pursue his study of art at the Fine Arts Academy of San Carlos, did he discover Pop Art in books. The IVAM did not yet exist and little contemporary art was available to be seen locally. A trip to Madrid and the ARCO art fair was a great shock for Charris. The bounds of what constituted art expanded for him as he saw the work of contemporary artists. (In 1998, he painted *Feria Bienal de la Acrobacia* [Biennial Fair of Acrobatics] about the sensation of feeling “very small and insignificant” at such a fair. He depicted artists launching toy airplanes as a metaphor for the competition of their careers.)

At the same time, Charris admired Spanish painting of the nineteenth century, especially the work of Joaquín Sorolla and history painters such

as Muñoz Degraín. He recalls that he experimented with so many styles that he drove his teachers crazy. He remembers this period as “effervescent”. The return to democracy in Spain inspired a cultural abundance, stimulating talented artists in many fields, such as the film director Pedro Almodóvar, the graphic designer Javier Mariscal and the painter Miquel Barceló. Upon graduation from art school, Charris returned to Cartagena. The decisive moment came when he had to choose whether to teach art in a local school or devote himself to painting. His family was supportive of his choice to pursue the artist's life. Determined to succeed, he taught himself graphic design as a means to generate enough income to sustain himself while he found his way as a painter.

His first solo exhibition took place in 1986 in Cartagena at the Real Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País. After completing his military service in 1988, he decided to travel to New York to pursue his interest in Pop Art and American culture. By chance, just a week before his November departure, he met a young artist in Cartagena, Gonzalo Sicre, who elected to accompany him on the trip. The two stayed for three months, painting in small rooms rented at YMCAs.

The cold winter of New York did not dampen his spirit. Instead, Charris embraced the city which he found both “shocking and fascinating”. He saw Edward Hopper's work for the first time, admired the Stuart Davis show at the Metropolitan Museum and discovered both African art and the Hudson River School painting of nineteenth-century America, including John Kensett, Frederick Church and Martin Johnson Heade. Connections closer to home brought Charris into contact with the art historian Ramón García Alcaraz, also a native of Cartagena, whose sister Moni was a friend and sang in the same chorus as the artist. Surprised and impressed by what he discovered in the shabby Cartagena studio, García Alcaraz invited Charris to join My Name's Lolita Art, the gallery he had founded in Valencia just two years earlier. By the time a solo show took

place there in 1990, García Alcaraz had become an important early supporter of “new figuration”, when others in Spain were interested in conceptual art, post-Tàpies informalism, and non-objective art.

Not long after this show, Charris began to resolve his mature style. He continues to paint in oil in a representational style because he wants his viewers to recognize familiar images and cultural references. Charris believes that such symbols help to trigger the creative impulse, compelling him to invent his pictures and attracting viewers to engage. He boldly proclaims himself to be “the son of the avant-garde of the twentieth century”, a legacy which he believes gives him “the freedom to try many things: images from the movies, artists of the past, different combinations of colors, etc.”² By 1991, when Charris first showed in Madrid at the Columela gallery, his work had become less monochromatic and more realistic. To him, “the appearance of reality was good for the meeting between high and low cultures”. He was fascinated with strange images that could be perceived as though they were real. It was the reality of his childhood, inhabited now as then by Mickey Mouse and others. He insists that he “wanted to give the appearance of reality—my own reality”, that which he sometimes calls “Charrilandia”. It was at the Columela gallery that Spanish critics first began to pay attention to Charris, especially Juan Manuel Bonet and Fernando Huici. Through the gallery Charris also came to know the artist Dis Berlin, who encouraged him and included his work in a group show, *El regreso del hijo pródigo II*, which he organized for the Columela gallery in 1992. The title of this exhibition paid homage to De Chirico, taking its name from several of his paintings.

It was in early 1992 that Charris made a second trip to New York, staying four months. This time he traveled alone. He lived in a tiny apartment in Greenwich Village at 11 Waverly Place, not far from where Hopper (for whom he has since named his cat) had lived on Washington Square. He got to see more of American art and

discovered the work of the contemporary painter Mark Tansey, whose visual puns were in perfect keeping with his own sensibility. Working feverishly in the frigid weather, Charris produced about one hundred small oil sketches—imaginary landscapes inspired by images he saw both in the city and in books. These small paintings range from rooftops and chimney pots in the fog to the Grand Canyon adorned with his own graffiti, announcing in English: “Buy Charris.” He did not have the funds to travel widely, but such flights were unnecessary, for he traveled through the force of his imagination. Back home in Cartagena, Charris set about painting large pictures based on the New York sketches and exhibited them in a one-person show in January 1993 at the Club Diario Levante in Valencia. The little fantasy of the Grand Canyon metamorphosized into *Vuelo en Origami* (Flight in Origami, 1992), a realistic scene in which a prehistoric bird, made of the Japanese folded paper art of origami, appears to take flight. (Charris had discovered origami in New York and purchased several books on this craft.) In *El pintor de presentimientos* (The Painter of Premonitions, 1992), he paints an artist at work in an orange-toned landscape inhabited by a chorus line of little girls in silhouette, holding umbrellas and kicking up one foot. It comes as a shock of amused recognition that the source of these dancers is the solitary girl on the round blue and white box of Morton Salt, familiar to any American, but exotic to his Spanish eye. Although this reference to an ordinary consumer product calls to mind earlier appropriations of commercial icons by Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol and other Pop artists, Charris wittily transformed the borrowed image, placing it in a new context, while Pop artists presented such products much more directly. Still other paintings in that show made reference to Casper David Friedrich, Sorolla and Josef Beuys. The following October, Charris staged a one-person show in his home town with a clever catalogue that parodied *National Geographic Magazine* and proclaimed the *REPÚBLICA DE CARTAGENA*. A map of the imaginary republic

featured the Mediterranean Sea next to the Caribbean with Cartagena located not far from *lugares* such as “El Corte Inglés” (the Spanish department store), “Gotham”, “My Name’s Lolita Art” and “Oz”, as well as the coasts of Flamenco and Tex Mex. The island of Never-neverland (out of Peter Pan) boasts a silhouette like the head of Mickey Mouse, with one ear sporting the name “Península de Hopper”. Charris wrote a “Guía ilustrada de la República de Cartagena” under the nom de plume of Jorge Witt, a character in *Mr. Witt en el Cantón*, which is a novel about Cartagena.³ He sang the praises of “the enigmas of a land that raises contradictory sensations among those who visit it, but which also captivates painters such as Kensett, Chirico, Magritte, Hopper, Tansey, David Roberts ...”⁴ For the illustrations of his Cartagena guide book, Charris made paintings inspired by his native landscape, recording and transforming the sea and the port of Cartagena with its distinctive lighthouse, fortress, port and historic submarine. He turned his town into fantastic vistas, complete with pirates, origami animals and strange monochromatic palettes. He called one enigmatic aerial view of a boat tied to a dock *Hopper en la Algameca* (Hopper at La Algameca, 1993), referring to a strange beach near Cartagena, known for its small wooden houses, constructed by people for themselves in home-made styles. This painting revisited his earlier enthusiasm for Hopper, first expressed in 1991 in *Hopper in Los Alcázares* (Hopper at Los Alcázares), a reference to another beach near Cartagena. Charris was selected in 1994 for *Muelle de Levante*, an important group show of artists engaged in new figurative work organized by Juan Manuel Bonet and Nicolás Sánchez Durá. The exhibition, which also included artists such as Berlin, Sicre and seventeen others, opened in Valencia and subsequently traveled to Madrid and three other cities. It firmly linked Charris to the emergence of the new figurative painting, which moved in a different direction than abstraction, conceptual art and other more recent fashions. (In the current exhibition, Charris has paid homage to his

important show by titling a nocturnal view of Cartagena’s harbor painted in 1998 *Muelle de Levante* [Levante Wharf].) In his solo shows in 1995 in Valencia and in Murcia, Charris once again picked up on some of his familiar themes: the bizarre seaside landscape of Cartagena with its docks, lighthouses, shores, swimmers and fishermen. But he also ventured quite far afield from his sunny Mediterranean home, describing a vision of a land of ice and snow inspired, as he playfully claimed in a catalogue essay, by the advertisement on a bag of cough drops.⁵ *Esperando a Malevich* (Waiting for Malevich, 1994) makes a metaphoric connection between Malevich’s Suprematist *White on White* series of 1917–18, with its reductivist form and elimination of color, and the white expanse of snow. *Antártico* (Antarctic, 1994) and *Ártico* (Arctic, 1994) both make a pun on “art”, while works such as *El hombre relámpago en el mundo de los hielos* (The Lightning Man in the World of Ice), *La cueva de hielo* (The Ice Cave), or *La gran travesía* (The Great Crossing) (all dated 1995) continue to explore the theme of the icy paradise. Such heroic visions call to mind Charris’s experience of the bitter cold of New York’s winter, of which we are reminded by two canvases: his *El joven Edward* (The Young Edward, 1995), in which we see the young Edward Hopper standing in the midst of a dormitory bedroom reminiscent of the YMCA, where Charris and Sicre had once stayed, and *Flatiron Motel* (1994), a scene of an empty room with a desk, a chair and a 1905 photograph by Edward Steichen of New York’s famous Flatiron Building hanging on the wall. New York had been much on his mind while painting *Flatiron Motel*, for he was anticipating his next trip there, which was to be a joint venture with Sicre. Accompanied by Paqui Marín Cano (now Sicre’s wife), the two painters had as their goal seeing the retrospective of Hopper’s work at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Sharing an enthusiasm for this painter of New York and New England, they arrived in October 1995, in time to catch the end of the exhibition. They also found and purchased my biography of Hopper that had

just been published and carried it with them on their journey to explore Hopper's beloved Cape Cod (for more than thirty years, Hopper lived there during the summer months, often staying on through October, when he produced many of his best paintings set on the Cape).⁶ Charris's painting *Excursión a la filosofía (la casa de Hopper)* (Excursion to Philosophy [Hopper's House]) of 1996, which borrows the first part of its title from Hopper, reflects his own experience of Hopper's favorite season on the Cape.

Charris and Sicre had seized upon their mutual admiration for Hopper as a potential theme for a joint show. They observed that Hopper's Cape Cod resembled Cabo de Palos, located not far from their homes in Cartagena. They carried out their project with a traveling show of their paintings and a book, *Cape Cod/Cabo de Palos: Tras las huellas de Hopper*, designed by Charris. The prospect of the book project prompted Charris to contact me by email, introducing me to these "two Spanish artists who admired Hopper". I was eventually invited to contribute an essay for this book, which accompanied a show that traveled during late 1997 through early 1998.⁷ Thus, I first came to know Charris and his work, visiting this show in Valencia and his studio in Cartagena. The current exhibition emphasizes work that Charris has completed since the beginning of 1998. As he had earlier resolved the question of his style and solved the most obvious technical problems to his own satisfaction, he was able to concentrate on the specific ideas that he wanted each work to communicate. Of course life is never so simple. During the fall of 1998, Charris successfully underwent surgery to remove a benign tumor on his facial nerve that had already damaged his hearing in one ear. As if anticipation and recuperation from major surgery were not enough, he has also suffered the severe illness and recent death of his mother, to whom he was very close. Perhaps one of the most telling pictures Charris has painted in this period is his *Retrato del artista adolescente* (Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man), inspired by James Joyce's novel. Charris took the blue octopus, symbolizing "the young artist who

needs many hands", from a sign for a car wash that he found in an American book about signs in popular culture.⁸ Since he took the initiative to teach himself graphic design, he enjoys appropriating advertising images for their graphic power. His choice of artists reflects some of his preferences, but the disposition of their names is meant to suggest that some artists (especially Morandi, Vallotton and Cornell) are "more lonely than others". The artist's paint case rests at the base of the sign post which marks the divergent paths of his predecessors. The multiple paintbrushes held by the Octopus suggest the many different sources that inspire a developing artist. Charris reflected: "It's very difficult to make your own work because you have many precedents. Wherever you go there is someone who has been there before you. But really, it's not important, because you can do your own work and create your own world too, using many references." Charris enthusiastically acknowledges his many sources in earlier art. In fact, he paints homages to some of the artists who have been particularly important for his own development. In one recent series, Charris features construction workers as a metaphor for the artist's creation of his personal "poetics". He has made such homages to Joaquín Torres-García (*La torre del señor García* [Mr García's Tower], 1997), Paul Klee (*Andamiaje para una cabeza monumental* [Scaffolding for a Monumental Head]), 1998, and Stuart Davis (*El constructor [a Stuart Davis]*) (The Constructor [For Stuart Davis]), 1998, each canvas incorporating fragments from the work of the artist being celebrated. What Charris has referred to as the "personal interpretation of Cubism" by Stuart Davis, the early twentieth-century American painter whose work he discovered at the Metropolitan Museum in 1989, probably caught his attention because it supported his own interest in appropriating and recasting the work of earlier artists. While visiting Madrid, Charris acquired a book on Davis at the Reina Sofía Museum, which testifies to the increasing international audience for the early twentieth-century American art that not long ago was considered merely provincial to the School of

Paris. To pay homage to Davis's personal vision, Charris borrowed forms from several of Davis's compositions, most notably *Premiere* of 1957. Charris has long admired the work of Paul Klee, who he feels was an important influence on his work. His homage includes a quotation from Klee's *Gerüst für den Kopf einer Monumentalplastik* (Scaffolding for the Head of a Monumental Sculpture) of 1923, which Charris had just seen in an exhibition of Klee's work at the IVAM.⁹ Klee's combinations of colors and the meticulousness of his details appeal to Charris, but above all he responds to how Klee "paints with much love—when painting he is playful, like a child, like Miró". Charris paid homage to Miró in his *Mironiana* of 1994, in which a woman swims through a white hoop alongside a dark Miróesque shape floating just above her, and more recently in *La iglesia de San Miró de los santos de las últimas noches* (The Church of Saint Miró of the Saints of the Last Nights) of 1999. His fondness for Surrealism has also resulted in a homage to Dalí, entitled *Gran murmullo en Port Lligat* (Great Murmur at Port Lligat, 1994), named for the small beach town near Cadaqués which inspired Dalí's landscapes. Charris's interest in Dalí was bolstered by the fact that his mother spent most of her childhood in Cadaqués, not far from where Dalí lived. Charris has also painted an homage to Josep Renau, the Communist photographer and photomontagist from Valencia, who had gone into exile during the Franco era.¹⁰ When Charris was in art school, Renau returned to Valencia and lectured, making a lasting impression on the young artist. His homage, which is titled *El hombre de las tijeras en el país de los Renaus* (The Man with the Scissors in the Land of the Renaus), depicts a man in profile intended to represent Renau (but who is actually Miró). The montagist's scissors, which are shown large, in a dramatic shift of scale that recalls Renau's own work, also serve as "an aggressive symbol about the enemy". In the background are Russian generals, while the small cartoon figure in the foreground is Tintin in uniform from the album *Las Aventuras de Tintín Reportero del "Petit Vingtième" en el País de los Soviets*.¹¹ Beneath the

silhouette of the artist appear figures from the 1935 American movie, *Folies Bergère*, about luxury and capitalist consumerism. As in other “homage” pictures, Charris included construction workers who are seen here destroying sculpture. For him this was “a symbol of extreme ideas, of the simplicity of absolutist ideas, the theory that it’s either all black or all white, and of the demonizing of the enemy”. In the end, Charris admires Renau, but believes his politics were too simple and naive.

Charris is also critical of art theories that limit the freedom of the artist. *Jaulas rotas* (Broken Jails), a series of three paintings made in 1999 addresses this issue. The setting is an abandoned disco that no longer functions. He has inscribed the names of [Piet] Mondrian, [Filippo] Marinetti, [André] Breton and [Clement] Greenberg as proponents of narrow thinking who exclude the ideas of others. He places academic *pompier* painting in the same camp. In the last painting of this series, Charris has portrayed a young artist, ready for adventure, his knapsack on his back. As the artist looks out across an open expanse of landscape, another “disco-jail” of narrow and confining ideas looms in the distance. Charris believes that the artist must maintain a constant vigilance against such limits on creative thought.

Charris often plays the role of the trenchant observer of art history. In *Rareza del siglo* (Rarity of the Century, 1994), he used the emblem of the Ferris wheel, once celebrated by early modernists such as Robert Delaunay, to comment on the fickleness of taste in the art world. As the large wheel turns, different art movements come up on top, including “Pop ART”, “CONCEPTUAL”, “SUPREMATISMO”, “REALISMO”, “DADA” and “MINIMAL”, among others. More recently, he has painted a large series of canvases that refer to various moments in the history of twentieth-century art, including *Realismo mágico* (Magic Realism), *Action painting*, *Conceptual*, *Color field*, *Minimal*, and *En una playa dada* (On a Dada Beach). While he represented a sculpture made of repeated letters of “DADA” on fire, he notes that “dada” will survive because he has placed it in the

sea. Fire again figures in *El sentido del gusto* (The Fickleness of Taste, 1999), which features a group of burning female-shaped candles set in front of an image of Japan’s Mt. Fuji. The candles are designed to resemble the prehistoric Venus of Willendorf, a classical Roman nude, a figure from Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger*, an “anorexic” woman by Giacometti, and an abstract “dehumanized figure” by Julio González. The candles burn and disappear, “fugitive”, while Mt. Fuji is eternal.

Charris’s ironic attitude toward changing tastes in twentieth-century art also informs the monumental *Parade* created especially for this show. It suggests an altarpiece, with huge twin panels below and two more panels suspended at an angle above. Emphasizing the metaphor of the altarpiece, Charris has imagined the long main exhibition hall of the Centre del Carme as a basilica. Along its sides hang his series of moments in the history of twentieth-century art, which like the traditional stations of the cross form a *via crucis*, leading to the climatic vision of the polyptych. Each of its two lower panels represents a triumphal parade: one, on the left, proceeding along Fifth Avenue in New York, the other making its way down the Champs-Élysées in Paris. Above both processions and across the upper panels float giant inflatables, reminiscent of those Charris saw in Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, an American “fiesta”, which he witnessed and photographed on his first trip to New York in November 1988.

Wondering what the parades are meant to celebrate, when we take a closer look at the figures heading the processions, we are astonished to find not kings, presidents, astronauts, or soccer champions but countenances familiar above all to lovers of art. We recognize the unmistakable faces of Picasso and Matisse, who dominated the first half of this century, riding in an automobile of early classic style before the Arc de Triomphe, while before the Empire State Building in a classic American car of the sixties we see the late twentieth-century masters Jackson Pollock, Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys. Lest we question our

identifications, the names are displayed on banners carried by spectators in the crowds.

Upon closer inspection, we see that the figures in the triumphal cars are not the famous artists themselves but ordinary beings donning outsized masks that represent the artists’ features, like the large masks worn in Spanish fiestas. Charris has adapted popular custom to make yet another comment on the world of art. By substituting exaggerated artifacts for the real amidst the trappings of hero-worship he pokes fun at the art world and its rituals, particularly the way it adulates certain figures and ignores others. Also, by locating his celebrations in an earlier Paris and a later New York, he implies how each of these centers in turn defined and dominated the art market in the century. The twin parades also suggest how little the rituals have changed from the century’s beginning to its end.

The commentary on twentieth century art fashions continues in the portrayal of large balloons floating over the parade. Over Paris, along with airplanes in military formation, we see the cubist *Guitarist* of Lipchitz, the infamous *Fountain* fashioned by Duchamp in 1917 from an ordinary urinal, Dali’s melting watch, the streamlined *Maiastira* of Brancusi, and an elongated Giacometti man, which floats in dramatic silhouette within the curve of the Arc de Triomphe. Over New York rise abstract, organic shapes from Kandinsky, a metaphysical mannequin from De Chirico, Munch’s agonized embryonic figure from *The Scream*, a Calder stabile, and a metal sculpture appropriated by Jeff Koons from a child’s inflatable vinyl toy. Ironically, Charris has returned Koons’s sculpture back to its inflatable antecedent, while at the same time reminding us of Koons’s love of gigantic scale, as in the American artist’s floral *Puppy*, which Charris saw at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao.

Underlining his review and parody of the century’s preoccupations and styles, Charris turned to the 50th-anniversary edition of the popular and establishment magazine *¡HOLA!* for images of two emblematic parades: the 1969 triumph of the astronauts in New York, adumbrating the future,

and the 1975 state visit to Spain of Gerald Ford, then president of the United States, standing woodenly next to a stiff and diminutive Franco. In his appropriation of the latter scene for Paris, Charris places the troop of Spanish ceremonial cavalry before the Arc de Triomphe and in the foreground adds spectators wearing nineteenth-century boater hats straight out of Impressionist paintings.

True to its title, *Parade* passes in review the art and taste of the century. With powerful metaphoric imagination, Charris has reinterpreted art history as historical and public spectacle, identifying and celebrating twentieth-century masters even as he puts them in perspective and ironizes their dominance. Putting New York and Paris in their place, underlining their power and their pretense, Charris has wittily created a role for himself by asserting a masterful and overarching vision.

Anyone who has seen *Parade* and been surprised, tickled, bemused, exalted by its paradoxical synthesis will reflect upon the twentieth century in a new way. This is the achievement of Charris, to have painted a powerful closing statement that opens a new chapter in the history of art.

Charris has remained strongly committed to painting despite the pressures of the postmodern vogue for conceptual art and installations. He also comments on the nature of taste in art in *Rezagado en retaguardia* (Left Behind in the Rearguard, 1998), representing an archer, dressed in the camouflage of a military uniform, who takes aim at a white palette placed in the parched landscape. Here he admits to addressing the mentality that declared "painting is dead", claiming "people want to kill painting, but the painter resurrects it, for painting is still a powerful weapon".

In addition to painting, Charris periodically makes sculptural forms. In 1989, his series of three photographs of his three-dimensional constructions won a national competition. Most recently, he has created a series of small boxes in 1999, in which he explores his ideas in three-dimensional space. The most obvious influence on these works is the American sculptor Joseph Cornell, whose work he

admires, but another equally significant stimulus is the Neapolitan tradition of nativity scenes. The persistence of this baroque tradition, which has remained vital in Murcia since its arrival in the early eighteenth century, is especially evident in the period just before Christmas, when shops in Cartagena sell a rich assortment of materials intended for constructing nativities at home. Charris has taken advantage of such offerings in making some of his boxes.

These little boxes continue several of the themes that occur in his paintings. Charris has commented that for him they are like *haiku*—the brief and pithy verse form practiced in Japan. While *Ceci n'est pas une fiesta* is one of many references that he has made to the work of Magritte, which he admires, its toy soldiers also suggest that war is no fun, no "fiesta".

Multicolonialismo (Multicolonialism) comments on turning the local cultures of tropical islands into beach paradises for moneyed tourists. *Destino* (Destiny) comments about the uncertainties and surprises of travel. *Ecológico* (Eco-illogical) juxtaposes a grazing sheep with fires burning in the near distance, creating a strange sensation in what should be a pleasant pastoral scene.

References to the contemporary art world and art history also abound, for example, *Documenta XXI*, where soldiers guard the fortress of the "art world", keeping out unwanted art and artists, and in *Países bajos, grandes artistas* (Low Lands, Great Artists), which salutes the talents of Rembrandt and other Dutch painters.

Charris not only works in three dimensions, but his paintings also include homages to a variety of sculpture, some of which appear in *El almacén* (The Warehouse). He defines this fantasy as "the place where you can save all your things", a kind of ironically homogenized museum of material culture. He includes not only modern art, represented by Brancusi's *The Cock* of 1924, but also Egyptian sculpture, a Native American totem, and a large head from Easter Island, as well as a sculpture of the television cartoon character Bart Simpson. For Charris, such images of man possess universal features. This picture is intended to

underline the "weight of cultural images" and "how time and the media make a parcel of all these images". Charris, who freely mixes and manipulates such images in his own computer-generated drawings, comments here on the media, which, in the course of time, empty all meanings from such icons by placing them in the same category (as Charris has represented these disparately sized objects in the same scale), transforming them all into superficial images of fleeting significance.

Charris is well aware, however, that symbols can acquire political meaning and he looks beyond the politics of the art world to larger issues. *Atracciones Franco* (Franco Entertainments, 1998) comments on adversity under Franco, which he experienced from his own perspective as a child and through accounts of suffering experienced by his older siblings and his parents. His mother was a philosophical anarchist and his father fought on the Republican side in the Civil War. As a metaphor for Spain under Franco's regime, Charris chose a closed amusement park; "Spain had no fiestas", he remarked. The images that appear on the ticket booth come from political cartoons in newspapers of the post-war years: one represents a chicken in a pot, while the other shows a hungry child, recalling hard times under Franco. The latter cartoon originally bore a caption, in which the hungry child asked its mother how to pronounce the word for meat. She replied, "Ask your father, he's older", implying how long they had suffered meager rations under the fascist regime.¹²

Charris intended *La política del juego* (The Politics of the Game, 1998) to be an allegory about all politics, commenting about the three masked golfers: "they all want to play with the same ball". The African masks, which Charris adapted from a book, allow the men to be anonymous and the situation more universal, but they also hide man's brutality.¹³ One of the players appears less likely to hit the ball than another of the players. Another kind of mask, this time Japanese, appears in *Susana y los hombres* (Susana and the Men, 1998), a painting Charris intended as a comment on the struggle for women's rights and the

changing role of women in this century. Typically he constructed this composition on his computer, scanning the images of the anonymous men from a sports magazine of the first half of the century. He downloaded from the internet (which he has used since 1997) the mask and the model for the giant eyes, changing their context and their meanings in the process. Here, the eyes symbolize how men see the woman despite her mask, and, as Charris has commented, the dog is friendly, even protective. Yet, in setting this enigmatic painting on a ski slope, Charris inevitably, albeit unintentionally, calls to mind a ski scene in Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 film *Spellbound*, for which Dalí designed a dream sequence with giant eyes. The political content of *Pinocho y Pinochet* (Pinocchio and Pinochet, 1999) is much more straightforward. Charris has painted a Pinocchio toy in pieces, smashed by the gargantuan hat of the Chilean military dictator Pinochet. The setting is a field of snow on the grassy banks of a mountain lake. In *The Price of Paradise* (1999), Charris shows a negotiation for the purchase of an exotic bird taking place on a tropical island. The purchaser, looking for all the world like a tourist in souvenir garb, wears a native-style feathered head-dress and pays with a Visa credit card. In *Remiendos azules* (Blue Patches) of 1999, Charris depicts a view of Egypt, where three blue-helmeted soldiers, belonging to the United Nations' peace-keeping forces, stroll along the desert while the pyramids burn in the distance. The drama he depicts, where the soldiers do not care to put out the fires, is meant to comment on the opposition between cultural colonialism and the Third World. In his choice of color Charris has drawn upon the work of David Roberts, a British documentary painter of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Though Charris himself has not traveled either to Egypt or to Mexico, he has traveled to both countries in his imagination, assisted by illustrations and works of art. In *¡Viva México!* (Long Live Mexico!, 1998), a large head of Mickey Mouse, transformed by the expressionism of Mexican painters such as Orozco and Siqueiros, still suggests Yankee economic imperialism south

of the border, a locale identified by a large Mexican sombrero on top of a tower. Ominously, the sun is setting.

Charris's penchant for adapting popular images, either from observation, anthologies of past signs, or from the internet, can take on unintended associations. He might be drawn to a sign by its appearance, unaware of its precise meaning or of all the names that identify it. For example, *Jungle Gym* features the toy he observed on a playground near the harbor in Hyannis, Massachusetts, on Cape Cod. He transformed the setting to the seashore and placed a group of nine monkeys (taken from a book illustration) on the deserted beach, remarking to me: "It's strange that the monkeys don't go near it." And yet Charris had never heard the American slang for a jungle gym: "monkey bars".

In *El mejillón cerrado* (The Closed Mussel), Charris features Humpty Dumpty, the character from one of the classic English nursery rhymes of Mother Goose, standing before a silhouette of a man divining for water in a dry nocturnal landscape populated by enigmatic blue dwellings. In the rhyme from *Mother Goose*:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again."

While Charris was not familiar with this rhyme, his depiction of Humpty Dumpty with his characteristic shape of a breakable egg inevitably suggests the fragility of man and the transience of life: "here today, gone tomorrow". Interestingly, he was inspired to paint this particular picture, in the venerable tradition of the *vanitas* theme, as he faced the uncertainty of major surgery. *El último barco* (The Last Boat, 1998) the last picture he painted before his operation, represents a dark, foreboding image of a dock with only the waning light of the last rays of the day reflected upon the still water.

Whether inspired by the uncertainties of his own health, or the rage of discussion of the approaching millennium, Charris has in the past

year (an amazingly prolific one despite its adversities) painted several other works which deal with last things, the apocalypse, prophesy and oracles: *Apocalypso*, *Nochevieja. Fin de siglo* (New Year's Eve. End of the Century), XX, XXI..., *Documenta XXI*, and *La cuestión social* (The Social Problem), all completed in 1998. Charris describes *Apocalypso* as "a painting about the end of the century". A ship's tiller suggests "time travel" and the figure facing the viewer holds a paper that reads "THE END". XX, XXI... depicts a boat passing very quietly through an imaginary landscape from the twentieth to the twenty-first century. In *Nochevieja. Fin de siglo*, Charris presented an outdoor bar, such as that set in the snowy environs of a ski resort, populated with people whom he described as being at a gathering on New Year's eve, 1999, marking the end of the century and, indeed, of the millennium. Rather than celebrating, they appear isolated and alienated. In *La cuestión social* (1998), a group of four people on a dock put a question to the Sphinx, which appears as a giant head, a *ninot*, from the fiesta held every March in Valencia. *El buscador de enigmas* (The Enigma Seeker, 1998) depicts a man holding an umbrella who stands in a rowboat and looks as if he has just stepped out of a painting by Magritte. The man questions a sphinx-like oracle represented as a giant African head adapted from a Ngumba figure from the Cameroons. The setting could even be the magical harbor of Cartagena. *C'est la vie Motel* (1998) features the image of boxers taken from Spanish advertisements of the 1940s. The combination of the French commonplace with the old-fashioned cliché figures gives an ironic twist to the theme of life's struggles. A self-portrait, *El instante decisivo* (The Decisive Moment, 1998), shows Charris standing alone in a glistening underwater passage. His inspiration for this image was a visit to the aquarium in Barcelona, where he was about to undergo surgery. He shows himself taking a photograph, blocking off the glaring light with his left hand. Given the gravity of the reason for his visit to Barcelona, the other-worldly tunnel takes on metaphorical significance. When queried, Charris

admits only to liking the mystery of the place, adding how much he admires the writing of Edgar Allan Poe and H.P. Lovecraft. “Never More”, from Poe’s *The Raven*, appeared on the airplane in Charris’s painting *El cuervo* (The Raven) of 1997.

Another reference to American literature appears in *Confines of New York* (1998), inspired by two views Charris found while visiting New York. One was an installation by sculptor Dan Graham on the roof of the DIA Center for the Arts in the neighborhood of Manhattan known as Chelsea. The other, the words of the poet Walt Whitman, was observed while looking towards New Jersey from a boardwalk further downtown, near the World Trade Center. In combining such seemingly disparate images, Charris again and again makes up his own world view.

His particular vision may be stimulated by almost anything. The light he observed in the waterfront city of Santander, where he had exhibitions in both 1993 and 1995, resulted in two paintings, *Sola es* (She Is Alone) and *Amarillo misterio* (Yellow Mystery), both in 1998. In the former, he dropped the “R” to make a pun on the name of the mineral water, “Solares”, which appears on a truck parked on an empty lot. With the letters now reading “she is alone”, Charris commented that he had wanted to paint “a clichéd landscape of loneliness”. In *Amarillo misterio*, he found irresistible the bright yellow bumps installed to prevent cars and trucks from entering. So much so, that he added matching yellow paint dripping from the nearby building’s dark windows. But both paintings suggest the loneliness of empty places, a theme Charris has admired and identified with in the works of De Chirico and Hopper. In *Los mensajeros* (The Messengers) of 1998, which Charris claims depicts “another kind of mail”, he has painted a view from the rooftop of a friend’s house in Sta. Lucia, the fishermen’s quarter of Cartagena. The rooftop in question features a collection of carrier pigeons housed in bright red boxes. Charris remarks on this pastime, entering competitions with pigeons, which, after all, are now an outmoded means of communication. At

the same time, he also comments on his own activity. The largest of the red boxes is emblazoned with the “@” sign, so much a part of email addresses. That is how, you will remember, Charris first made contact with me, Cabo de Palos calling Cape Cod.

From the enigmatic vistas of the “República de Cartagena”, which Juan Manuel Bonet has aptly called “Spain’s most metaphysical city”, Charris has reached out to embrace the world.¹⁵ Thoroughly postmodern, yet respectful of tradition, he is a multi-talented artist, determined and destined to create his own universe. Through his wit, invention and ingenuity, he is doing just that.

¹ Sir Carol Reed’s *The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1965) starring Charlton Heston as Michelangelo and Sir Rex Harrison as Pope Julius II and Vincent Minnelli’s *Lust for Life* (1956), starring Kirk Douglas as Van Gogh and Anthony Quinn as Gauguin.

² Author’s interviews with the artist, December 5, 1998, and May 28–29, 1999, Cartagena, Spain and March 23, 1999, in New York; the quotations from the artist that follow are from these taped interviews.

³ SENDER, RAMÓN J.: *Mr. Witt en el Cantón*, Espasa Calpe, Madrid 1936).

⁴ Charris’s Jorge Witt wrote about Cartagena: “los enigmas de un país que levanta sensaciones contradictorias entre los que lo visitan, pero que supo cautivar a pintores como Kensett, Chirico, Magritte, Hopper, Tansey, David Roberts...”

⁵ CHARRIS, ÁNGEL MATEO: “Una historia blanca”, in his *Supercalifragimetafisico*, Galería My Name’s Lolita Art, Cartagena 1995, p. 8.

⁶ See LEVIN, GAIL: *Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1995.

⁷ CHARRIS, ÁNGEL MATEO & SICRE, GONZALO: *Cape Cod/Cabo de Palos*, Blanco Editores, Cartagena and Valencia 1997.

⁸ MARGOLIES, JOHN & GWATHMY, EMILY: *Signs of Our Time*, Abbeville, New York 1993.

⁹ Paul Klee, IVAM Centre Julio González, Valencia 1998. This work is in the Beldi Collection in Italy.

¹⁰ See RENAU, JOSEP: *Fata Morgana USA. The American Way of Life*, IVAM Centre Julio González—Fundació Josep Renau, Valencia 1991, p. 93.

¹¹ *Las Aventuras de Tintín Reportero del “Petit Vingtième” en el País de los Soviets*, Editorial Juventud, Barcelona 1983.

¹² *Semana*. The child asks: “Oye, mamá, ¿cómo se dice: carne o corne?” To which his mother replies: “Pregúntaselo a tu padre, que es más viejo.”

¹³ See RUBIN, WILLIAM (ed.): *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York 1984. The central figure’s *Kifwebe* mask is from Zaire, vol. I, p. 17. The *Fang* mask on the

right is from Gabon, vol. I, p. 290. The *Dan* mask on the left is from the Ivory Coast or Liberia, vol. I, p. 4.

¹⁴ See CLAYTON, PETER A.: *Redescubrimiento de Antiguo Egipto. Artistas y Viajeros del Siglo XIX*, Ediciones del Serbal, Barcelona 1985, p. 40, plate VII, David Roberts: *Las pirámides de Giza vistas desde el Nilo*, from *Égypte et Nubia 1846–1850*.

¹⁵ BONET, JUAN MANUEL: “Cartagena, Rome, Cape Cod, Odessa”, in Ángel Mateo Charris & Gonzalo Sicre, *Cape Cod/Cabo de Palos*, op. cit., p. 93.

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO MUCH

Fernando Huici

“I know too much,” he said. “That’s what’s the matter with me. That’s what’s the matter with all of us, and the whole show; we know too much. Too much about one another; too much about ourselves. That’s why I’m really interested, just now, about one thing that I don’t know.”

GILBERT K. CHESTERTON: “The Face in the Target”

The white resort

Opening onto a circle of snowy peaks, we see a terrace bathed by the ghostly rays of the morning sun. A group of spectators wearing casual clothes of a certain vintage elegance surrounds a young woman with blond hair who loads a double-barrelled shotgun with cartridges and prepares to fire in a clay pigeon shooting competition. The scene described might, in principle, correspond to a typical composition in one of Ángel Mateo Charris’s canvases. But that is not the case. It actually comes from the opening sequence of a film made by Alfred Hitchcock in 1934, an unforgettable classic of the cinema of intrigue which began the masterly culmination of the director’s British output. I am referring, of course, to the first version in black and white of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, starring Leslie Banks and Edna Best. The story of the tourist couple who accidentally come into possession of a terrible secret was refilmed by the British director in Hollywood two decades later, this time in Technicolor, with James Stewart and the incomparable Doris Day in the leading roles. The main difference between the two versions is to be found precisely in the locations used in the two

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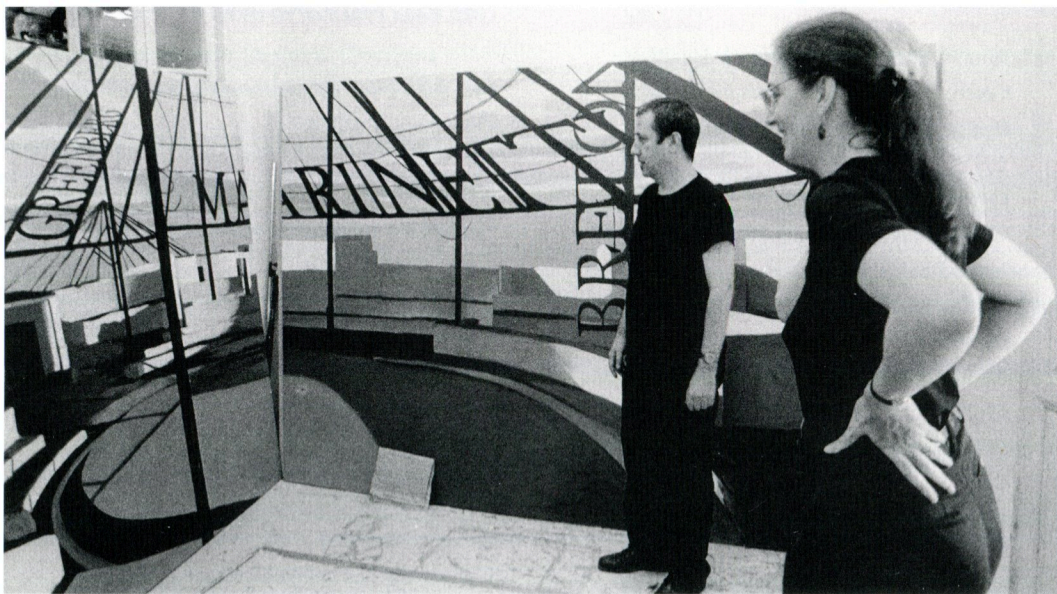
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Ángel Mateo Charris con Gail Levin en el estudio del artista