

Over the course of the last year Felix de la Concha, a Spanish artist resident in Pittsburgh, has undertaken the most ambitious cycle of paintings made in the region for many years. Each day he has gone out from his studio into the city, properly equipped with his portable painting kit, and prepared for extreme weather conditions, from sub-zero temperatures to tropical summer heat. His constant point of orientation has been the Cathedral of Learning, a building which appears in various guises in every one of the 365 canvases which will be completed by the end of his exhibition. Each day he makes one painting, from a different vantage point of the city, and has thereby built up, over time, an epic portrait of the city of Pittsburgh. His project is a traditional form of landscape painting, subjected to certain structural and symbolic schemas which connect de la Concha's work to the most advanced contemporary painting.

This is the first time de la Concha has made such a large project over such a period of time. Previously, while living in Columbus, Ohio, he made a panoramic analysis of his neighborhood by painting views from a single crossroads toward all points of the compass. And, earlier in his career as an artist, while studying in Madrid and Rome, he painted 360-degree panoramas of his kitchen, and of the courtyard of the housing project in which he was living. He also painted multiple views of a single tree in the Circus Maximus.

The rigorous parameters that de la Concha sets himself as a working procedure can be related to the work of the contemporary German painter Gerhard Richter, who makes a point of the daily practice of painting, whether abstract or figurative, and of On Kawara, the peripatetic Japanese artist who has lived in New York since the mid-1960s. His small monochrome canvases record the date of their making as their ostensible subject, and are shown together with a clipping from the daily newspaper wherever the artist was resident on that date, so they become a form of diary, elevated to the status of history painting.

For Felix de la Concha, the choice of the Cathedral of Learning as the focal point of his paintings of Pittsburgh was a conscious reference to Andy Warhol's epic film *Empire* (1964), which consists of an eight-hour portrait of the Empire State Building in New York, filmed in real time over the course of a single night, and projected at silent speed, so that the passage of time and the changing light conditions are slightly slowed down.

The skyscraper form of the Empire State Building and the Cathedral of Learning is a characteristic American building type which necessarily gives the paintings de la Concha has made in Pittsburgh a particular vernacular quality, in contrast to the lush Mediterranean light and dense urban patina of his earlier work of Spanish and Italian subjects. He takes conditions as he finds them, just as Monet could paint not only grand subjects such as a Venetian palazzo or the façade of Rouen cathedral, but also a humble haystack or the nondescript Waterloo Bridge.

A tradition of Spanish realism has continued to the present from its roots in the seventeenth century still-life paintings of Zurbarán and the spatial complexities of Velázquez. Felix de la Concha studied at the home of this tradition, the Fine Arts Academy in Madrid. The kind of precise and intense realism that de la Concha's painting demonstrates is not, however, confined to Spanish painters.

The two great exemplars of the genre in the early nineteenth century were the Welsh Thomas Jones and French Pierre Henri Valenciennes, both of whom worked in Rome and Naples, before the onset of photography rendered their work

unfashionable. It is Felix de la Concha's exceptional achievement to have reinvigorated this ancient tradition with a contemporary understanding of the possibilities of painting.

Mark Francis
© 1999

Mark Francis is the director of the Gagosian Gallery in London. He was curator of contemporary art at The Carnegie Museum of Art (1989-92) and, most recently, chief curator of The Andy Warhol Museum.

Text for the exhibition "One a Day" celebrated at the Carnegie Museum of Art in 1999.