

Reach for the stars

José Fiol

What are we doing here? We are reaching the stars Christa McAuliffe."

"Reach for the stars" is an enthusiastic, passionate statement. Reach for the stars, achieve a challenge. The biggest challenge you can imagine. However, the same phrase hides and synthesizes in turn the story of a great failure: the tragic accident of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986. On January 28 of that year, and 73 seconds after its launch, the Challenger disintegrated over the Atlantic Ocean causing the death of the seven members of its crew. There were six experienced astronauts - Francis Scobee, Michael J. Smith, Ronald McNair, Ellison S. Onizuka, Gregory B. Jarvis and Judith A. Resnik - and a specially prepared secondary school teacher, Christa McAuliffe. The incursion of a teacher into the team was part of the "Teacher in Space" program, a populist strategy by President Ronald Reagan that proposed revitalizing the deteriorated educational landscape of the country by sending a civilian professor to space. According to a later report, the accident was caused by a mistake by NASA. The thing ended in the worst of ways.

Despite its sober staging - basically paintings on the wall and some records of documentation - José Fiol's work derives from an exhaustive research process. A previous study that leads to the analysis of historical episodes of sociological or political relevance, usually defined by controversy and polemic. Sometimes it focuses on famous events, as in this case, but other times he fixes his attention on more peripheral or marginal events. In this sense, Audubon Ballroom, proposal in which Fiol speculates on the photography of the theater in which Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, or L'Assassin de l'Assassin, where the artist tries to establish a portrait of the anonymous murderer of Raoul Villain, French nationalist who killed the socialist leader Jean Jaurès in 1914, could be two good examples of his way of understanding artistic practice. In his first solo exhibition at the Fran Reus gallery in Palma de Mallorca, José Fiol takes as his starting point the dramatic case of the Challenger with the aim of opening a series of reflections on the fact of painting. In the first place, the title of the exhibition - Reach for the Stars - refers to one of the most significant details of the expedition: the presence of Christa McAuliffe¹, the teacher, the seventh astronaut.

Starting from the official portraits of the crew and the euphoric merchandising generated by NASA - photographs in postcard format, with the seven protagonists in smiling and victorious attitudes - the artist reproduces in black and white, and in a rigorous hyper-realistic style, each one of them these images. In this way, the exhibition gives rise to seven individual portraits and a large group composition, perhaps the central axis of the project. Curiously, the eight paintings are not on a frame, but are made directly on dibond, a material more typical of photography than painting. Then, that first exercise of appropriation - the hyperrealistic copy of each astronaut, with its models of the legendary ferry, its US flag ... - becomes a game of opposites where multiple layers of meaning are mixed. Starting from the astral chart of each portrayed, and superimposing it in turn to the basic color wheel invented by Moses Harris in the eighteenth century (supposedly the first in history, although it is not entirely clear either) Fiol grants each of the pieces a strange and ghostly chromatic presence. For this, it uses eight astral cards: the seven that correspond to the date of birth of the crew members and an especially disastrous octave, the one corresponding to the day of the accident. As a testimony of the process, the artist also incorporates the eight overlays in a corner of the gallery; a discrete documentary detail that helps us to better understand his work system. And it is precisely that subtle application of color that connects her paintings with a certain premonitory, mortuary sensation; a funeral effect reminiscent of post-mortem images of the Victorian era but in reverse. While these images tried to transmit life from death, here, the manifested vitality of the portraits seems to advance already to an impending tragedy.

But aside from the event, José Fiol's *Reach for the Stars* is an invitation to rethink the current possibilities of the pictorial event through the analysis of its ingredients: a support, a theme, some techniques, a message ... A crisis in their condition as a painter who, after all, questions the supremacy of form through the conceptual incursion. In short, an exercise in self-criticism where the simple act of painting gives us a host of antagonistic relationships. Some of them denote an existential preoccupation (success and failure, life and death, the individual and the collective ...) - and others are more confined to the structures of artistic representation (painting and photography, color and its absence ...). And there, in all that accumulation of contradictions, tensions and objections at different levels is where José Fiol's painting situates.

1 In 2006 a documentary was presented focusing on the story of Christa McAuliffe and directed by Mary Jo Godges and Renee Sotile. The chosen title was *Christa McAuliffe. Reach for the stars*. It seems that this metaphor - that of reaching the stars - was one of its main pedagogical premises.

Text by David Armengol