

PÉREZ SIQUIER

LA CHANCA

1956–1962

La Chanca, a series defined by Pérez Siquier as “pure photo-reportage”, is the result of various years of work in the barrio of that name in the capital of Almería. La Chanca unfolds in the form of caves dug into the rock and cube-like houses with a dramatic history of under-development, bombing and hunger. The photographer chose not to focus on its most shocking aspect and rather set out to find a way for the barrio to represent itself with the aim of creating a framework for presenting an optimistic vision of everyday life based on survival.

Separated from both the middle-class centre of Almería and the tourist locations that were a priority for the Francoist regime at this period, La Chanca allowed Pérez Siquier to undertake a direct, spontaneous photographic project. This is a photography inspired by the Neo-realist preference for “natural actors” and by an interest in articulating figures in the particular type of semi-urban slum areas that were left behind in Spain’s progress towards modernity.

Without renouncing the “moral indignation” that Juan Goytisolo perceived in him, Pérez Siquier was able to project a pure image inspired by humanist photography and one in which the barrio has been able to recognise itself over time.*

**Juan Goytisolo, 1931-2017, Spanish author and journalist*

LA CHANCA IN COLOUR

1962–1969

In the 1960s Pérez Siquier modified his own discourse with La Chanca in colour in which he appeared to reverse the Neo-realist sense of the series in 35 mm and black and white through the use of colour and a larger format allowed by a Rolleiflex medium format camera with 6 x 6 cm film. He offered a more abstract gaze based on the chromatic sensuality of the barrio created by the warmth of the diluted aniline dyes which the local people used to paint their houses every year.

Colour added a new level of information and a greater transparency to Pérez Siquier’s photography, in addition to a more abstract and formal emphasis. While the walls were already painted in the black and white photo-reportage, the change to colour produces an immediate visual association with the era of development and the fabricated optimism that the Francoist regime aimed to impose during these years of the country’s opening up. However, it also emphasises Pérez Siquier’s intention of not imposing a fatalistic gaze on La Chanca and its inhabitants.

PÉREZ SIQUIER

INFORMELISMS

1965

The photographs of the peeling walls of houses and caves that Pérez Siquier took in 1965 constitute the chapter that concludes the series La Chanca. The City Council of Almería had decided to take action in the barrio as its under-development was at odds with the modern image that the city aspired to present in the context of tourism. This clean-up operation involved knocking down some of the slums of the barrio with the result that some of their interior walls were left exposed. In Pérez Siquier's words: "I realised that the walls, which had been painted by their previous owners in different colours, had very interesting textures if they were peeled. [...] They were photographs of concepts and were extremely important. Apart from their aesthetic aspect they had a social one. It was a kind of reading of the passing of time."

These isolated, fragmented walls with their sediments of colour recall Informalism in painting as well as the quest for pure abstraction. These are also prodigious collages which bring to mind Aaron Siskind's monochrome photographs, Brassai's scratched walls, Willem de Kooning's Expressionist gesture, and Antoni Tàpies's concept of the wall as communicatory space: abstraction, but within the context of a barrio at risk of collapse.

THE BEACH

1972–1980

The degree of provocation and rupture that exists in the series of photographs entitled The Beach is more difficult to appreciate in the present day than at the time of its creation in the 1970s when artistic colour photography was in its nascence. In 2013 the photographer Martin Parr wrote: "Some images within the history of photography are so radical people just don't know where to place them. The beach images of Carlos Pérez Siquier look as fresh now as the day they were taken and we must bear in mind the context of contemporary photography in both Spain and Europe at the time."

The avalanche of tourism that swept over the beaches of Almería and the rest of the Mediterranean shoreline finally brought work to a historically depressed area. Pérez Siquier experienced this phenomenon with a mixture of rejection and curiosity, aware that in a short time this invasion would redefine "his" paradise.

The series contains a sub-text of critique, albeit approached with irony and humour. These canonical and uncanonical bodies led the photographer to the point of disturbing their tranquility, as he never used a zoom lens, flash or a light meter, but worked intuitively. While the images initially show the setting and complete human figures in strange scenes, this documentary account gives way to abstraction, geometrical forms, the body and its creases, and fabrics and prints, which gradually occupy the entire space of the composition.

PÉREZ SIQUIER

TRAPS FOR THE UNWARY

1980–2001

In the final decades of the century Pérez Siquier continued to explore the evolution of consumer society through the landscape and objects that it generated. People disappear and are replaced by their creations or vestiges. These everyday, commonplace spaces have become standard motifs in contemporary photography but this was not the case when the photographer started to depict them in the 1980s as spectral presences.

*The process of investigation, announced in *The Beach*, with its games of fragmentation and ambiguities, becomes the protagonist in this group of images which Pérez Siquier termed *Traps for the Unwary* in reference to the visual confusion that they provoke. These photographs suggest a fascination with the absurdity, humour and appeal of certain human constructs that duplicate reality. This is comparable to Luigi Ghirri's interest in these phenomena, understood as a type of surrogate reality.*

Pérez Siquier made inventive use of this landscape filled with kitsch elements, located between the pop, the playful and the vulgar and between crude advertising and fairground attraction. These objects pass unnoticed as elements of spontaneous or chance creativity, becoming trapped forever in photography with an ambiguity that prevents us from discerning if we are in the presence of things, memories or phantoms.

LA BRISEÑA

2015–2017

"More than forty years ago I made the right decision to buy a shepherds' house separate from the neighbouring estate of the Viscounts of Almansa from my doctor, who was from a titled family. The house is known as La Briseña as it's across from the city of Pechina, the ancient Bayyana, a flourishing Mediterranean port according to 10th century Arab historians and geographers. The sea breeze reached the door of my house, hence its name in the village of Benahadux (to which it belongs according to the property registry), and El Ruiní, where it's actually located, was the meeting place for the most important Sufism of the day, where they would philosophise on the human nature of this world and the divine nature of the beyond.

It's inevitable that later on I was somewhat influenced by Sufism, or at least its tradition, and I reflected not just on the transience of life but also devoted my leisure time to keeping up the house, restoring its walls and respecting the passing of time on the objects inside it, as around it the light drew cabalistic signs on its whitewashed walls, sometimes producing original visions that I try to capture for eternity with my little camera.[...]

And it's among this peace that I sometimes recall the wise reflection of a poet from Al-Andalus: 'The basil plant in my house is more precious to me than paradise itself.'"

Carlos Pérez Siquier

PÉREZ SIQUIER

ENCOUNTERS

1991–2020

Pérez Siquier's vision is a notably contemporary one that focuses on the spaces around him; harsh, everyday, anodyne places of tiles, plastic, gilt metal fly curtains, over-stuffed or abandoned cars and party walls. He depicts them without any concessions in a direct, judicious and brilliant manner and from an original viewpoint that transforms them into long-lasting images. They become fixed in the mind like the remains of a speech of which only the echo persists or the backdrops of a darkened theatre.

In Encounters only the space remains, perceived as a broad substance vibrating with colour and light, a gradation towards muted tones which Pérez Siquier reached through a gradual accumulation and refinement of experience over the course of his photographic activities, an intentional silencing from the maximum stridency of The Beach. That constant equilibrium between documentation and creation here focused on the landscape of Almería in some of his most eloquent images, which are characterised by greater aesthetic resonance and in which it could be said that we are witnessing a type of all-embracing and curiously pleasant dystopia.

PÉREZ SIQUIER. Intro-Text by the exhibition curators

The photographs of Carlos Pérez Siquier (Almería, 1930–2021) arise from a fertile space between spontaneity, irony and the consciousness of the power of his gaze. He exercised an increasingly complex practice based upon surprise in the everyday. Over six decades of activity made Pérez Siquier a key figure in the development of modern international photography. His works reflect the transformation of an entire country, from the peripheral location of Almería where he lived all his life.

From Almería Pérez Siquier made radical breaks that went against prevailing artistic ideas and he became a driving force behind the most influential photography collective of his day, the AFAL group. He opted for Neo-realism in his photo-reportage La Chanca, to express the identity of a working-class barrio. Subsequent projects, including Informalisms and particularly The Beach, made Pérez Siquier use colour photography for artistic investigation, a rare choice of the time. His move to glowing, contrasting hues can be associated with his interest in the new and kitsch consumer society that emerged with mass tourism on the Mediterranean coastline and the perplexity it aroused in him.

Figures and objects speak out in Pérez Siquier's work: the architecture of La Chanca, the uncanonical bodies in The Beach, the strange paraphernalia and advertising of the urbanscape, they all reflect the contradictions of welfare society. Positioned between tenderness and irony, his images reveal the visual paradoxes of a moment in history. His later work acquired a more intimate gaze suggesting a peaceful alienation and a retreat by an artist who had said "now all that's left is my view".

Carlos Gollonet and Carlos Martín