

# FLOWERS FOR FRANCO

21.05–29.08.2021



# TONI AMIENGUAL

Technical details of the works of art:  
Toni Amengual, "Flowers for Franco" series, 2011-2015.  
Digital print on Canson Infinity Baryta Prestige paper,  
50 × 50 cm.

Cover:  
Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma Collection

## INTERVIEW WITH TONI AMENGUAL

by Imma Prieto

<sup>IP</sup> Looking at your early body of work, we find two very different, almost opposing, approaches to creating images. On the one hand, a sharp attention to detail; on the other, general overviews that draw us into a scene. You're clearly interested in chance and people's faces. And in observing aspects of the natural world. How did you start out in photography? What was it that appealed to you?

<sup>TA</sup> I'd love to be able to tell you a riveting story. Such as how my grandmother taught me how to develop negatives in her darkroom when I was a boy. Or how my life changed overnight when I was given a camera for my first communion. But sadly my grandmother knew next to nothing about photography, and my most state-of-the-art communion present was a watch. So my story is somewhat more prosaic. When I was in sixth form (since when the Spanish education system has been overhauled no fewer than three times), we had to decide what we wanted to do with our life. This was in the late 1990s, before anyone had ever heard of liquid modernity. So at the time it felt like we were mapping out the rest of our life for good. And whatever path I picked, I was determined that every day was going to be different: I was going to travel, meet people, go places. Above all, there was no way I was going to work in an office or answer to a boss. By the age of 18, I'd already had quite enough routine and authority in my life. I'd always been interested in other ways of doing things.

The logical answer to all these ideas swirling around inside my head was photography. This was the way to explore new places, meet people and get a deeper understanding of

the world around me, while working for myself and avoiding being shut inside.

My relatives on my mother's side were country folk, or *pagesos* in Catalan, which explains why my grandmother didn't know much about photography. My father came from a working-class family that had moved to Mallorca from the Spanish mainland and now lived on the outskirts of Palma. Although both my parents were well educated, they weren't that keen on my idea of embarking on a creative career. Particularly since I'd got good grades at school, even though I'd hardly been a model pupil. So, in keeping with the universal belief at the time that a university degree would secure my future, I decided to study biology at the University of Barcelona.

My plan was to enrol at university simply as a way of living in the city. I'd then proceed to fail all my first-year exams, before jumping ship to photography school. There was no option of doing a degree in photography.

The plan soon fell apart, because I suddenly found I loved doing biology. And because the atmosphere and friendships I made at university were eye-opening experiences. I passed my first two years of biology with flying colours. I love it when a plan doesn't come together!

At the start of my third year, I told myself that I hadn't come to Barcelona just to study biology. So while I stayed on for the third year of my biology degree at university, I also enrolled at photography school (even today, you still can't study photography at university in Spain). In five short years, I got a bachelor's degree in biology, studied photography for two years at the Institut d'Estudis Fotogràfics de Catalunya and did a master's degree in photojournalism at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. I'd spend my mornings at photography school and my afternoons in the Biology Department; then in the evening I'd set up the red light, developing trays and enlarger under the desk in my room.

Shortly after finishing my biology degree and photography course, I bumped into an old school friend on the street in Palma who asked me what I was up to. When I told him I was a photographer, he joked: "Seriously, a photographer? With your grades you could have done anything!"

<sup>1P</sup> By getting into photography in the late 1990s, you've had the opportunity to work with both analogue and digital technology. We've all seen how the digital whirlwind has driven change over the last twenty years. How does that affect your work? Do you approach things differently depending on which technique you're using to capture that glimmer of reality?

<sup>TA</sup> Going back to the etymology of the word, photography means writing or drawing (from the Greek *γραφη*) with light (from the Greek *φωτός*). Photography requires technology, but for me the key bit is writing with light. And to capture light we need the digital sensors we all have in our digital cameras and mobile phones. However, if we then go on to talk about computer-generated 3D objects or the world of motion graphics, where no light photons are involved in creating an image, I think we're now talking about different visual fields than photography.

Sticking to cameras, everyone with a smartphone is now walking around with a camera in their pocket. This has been dubbed the "democratisation of photography". But does the fact that anyone can take photos make everyone a photographer? Teaching people to read and write—in itself a huge social achievement—hasn't made everyone a writer.

For me the difference lies in the notion of work. Taking photographs is always a form of work because it involves the use of a tool, knowledge and effort. Now more than ever, it's important to bear in mind that working and being paid for work are two different things.

So whenever you take a photo, even if it's just for your Instagram feed, you're working (without being paid). The key point is this: Who are you working for? And once you've taken the picture: Who are your photos working for? Who is profiting from all your effort?

For me, that's the crucial difference when it comes to identifying people like me who work professionally with images. We're able to create images and craft visual discourses that work in the direction we want them to because we're responsible for our work, aware of what we're doing and focus on every last detail. And we devote part of our effort to profiting from our work. It's about aligning your effort with your intentions, and making money from your published pictures.

Perhaps you'll get a better idea of what I mean by thinking about the debate on how major tech firms use and profit from our online data, as exposed in the docudrama *The Social Dilemma*,<sup>1</sup> released last year on Netflix (itself a major online platform).

I mean, seriously? Did anyone really think they were getting a free lunch?

Platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Tinder and TikTok obviously make money off the back of people who have gone to the effort of producing images by squeezing information out of every last pixel in our photos and videos, as well as from all the metadata we provide in the form of our location and hashtags.

I don't mean to demonise social media, which I use every day—in the same way that I fly on planes, even though I know they pollute the air we breathe. I'm well aware that these tools are double-edged swords. And in case anyone was still wondering, all those likes, multicoloured hearts and other online interactions all leave their own little carbon footprint.

1. <https://youtu.be/uaaC57tccio>

<sup>1P</sup> In what you've just said, I'm struck by your deep appreciation of the notion of work. Work understood as a clear example of class consciousness, perhaps. And also by how you link this awareness with the production of images and the chain of responsibilities behind it. Would you defend the maxim that aesthetics and ethics are one and the same? Why?

<sup>TA</sup> I'd defend it to the hilt, although I'm fully aware that I may look like I'm tilting at windmills.

That's the theory: you can't have aesthetics without ethics. For me personally, aesthetics flows from ethics. I'm more interested in ethics than aesthetics in my work. But this isn't the only valid approach to photography. You can create great aesthetic triumphs without the slightest interest in ethics. Photography is full of such examples, since by its very nature it has to pick its way through the many minefields laid by ethics and aesthetics.

One such minefield is the advertising photography industry. We've all seen countless campaigns featuring Photoshopped models with physically impossible bodies and, what's worse, who clearly have eating disorders. Brands sign up models even when they know (almost precisely because they do know) that they have an eating disorder. Has anyone stopped to think about the ethical repercussions these images have on the general public? No doubt someone has, but the people who design and launch these campaigns have chosen to ignore this tiny ethical detail, because by discarding ethics you can get an awful lot of aesthetics. Has anyone considered the effects these images might have on young people anxious about their changing body and appearance? For some time now I've been following the work of Spanish activist, visual artist and photographer Yolanda Domínguez, who explores ideas of feminist consciousness and social critique linked to gender, consumption and art as a social tool.<sup>2</sup>

2. <https://yolandadominguez.com/>

I can talk about my personal experience of my own brief attempt to get into advertising photography. When I was younger, I worked as an assistant at a photoshoot for Brazilian thong bikinis. At the production stage, I got chatting to the models and I realised they were all underage. I felt very uncomfortable. Where do you draw the line? They'd been made up and styled to look older, but their bodies had barely begun to develop. All this was happening with their parents' consent, approval and glowing pride. You might say that this is just market forces at work, but I'd say it's thoughtlessness. When I create my photographs, I feel I have a responsibility for the messages they convey. Anyway, that was my last experience in the world of commercial photography. Even though I know they're also pure fiction, I'd rather take wedding pictures than fashion photos.

But this isn't the only minefield where concern for ethics is in short supply and aesthetics is everything. Another example is conflict photography and photojournalism focused on the misfortunes of the most disadvantaged.

I first discovered Eugene Smith's and Sebastião Salgado's work in my history of photography classes. I was fascinated by such visually powerful images by such socially committed photographers. I still think that Smith and Salgado are exceptional photographers. And I still envy their hard work and tremendous visual talent, but with the experience and perspective I've gained over time I process their work very differently now.

This kind of photography has a very strong ethical streak. In the late 20th century and early 21st century this kind of work sought to give a voice to the voiceless. The idea was to use these images to raise the awareness of those of us lucky enough to have been born in the rich part of the planet. And for a while, that's what they did, but then there came a point when people became numb to these kinds of pictures. They'd had enough of seeing nothing ever change while photojournalism kept bombarding them with the same old images. These sorts of photographs now

have the opposite effect on more visually savvy audiences: the disaster aesthetics cultivated by classic photojournalism no longer serves to help the people it depicts, but ends up stigmatising them.

I'll tell you an anecdote from my first trip to Palestine, with my friend Javier Izquierdo. When we got off the bus, Javier turned to me with a wry smile and said: "This isn't it. We're at the wrong place. Everything here's in colour. Where's Larry Towell's black and white? Where are the stone-throwing lads in Palestinian scarfs?" We were in the middle of Nablus and life was going on around us in pretty much the same way as in any city in the Middle East.

I made that trip to the Middle East at a time when I was involved with projects with NGOs in the global south to develop what you could call humanitarian photography. Over a period of five or six years, I realised that this kind of photography meant nothing to me. I felt this style of photography had had its day and was only being kept alive by the World Press Photo industry and alike, who were seeking out more and more gruesome and shocking images and stories. These people were exploiting the most disadvantaged people on the planet by taking stark pictures of their poverty in order to win plaudits, applause and awards at cocktail parties for the ruling classes in the global north. Something we now call visual colonisation, captured brilliantly by Susan Jacobson in her 2006 short film *One Hundredth of a Second*.<sup>3</sup>

Another eye-opening work on how journalistic accounts can go astray when they try to talk about present-day geopolitical conflicts is Adam Curtis's short film *Oh Dearism*.<sup>4</sup> Pictures of BBC found footage are accompanied by an inimitable Curtis voiceover explaining how Western society has lost faith in the media because our current geopolitical context cannot be reduced to the kind of story of goodies and

3. <https://youtu.be/EnbcMK9zi6o>

4. <https://youtu.be/8moePxHpvoK>

baddies that we've been fed by Hollywood and the entertainment industry.

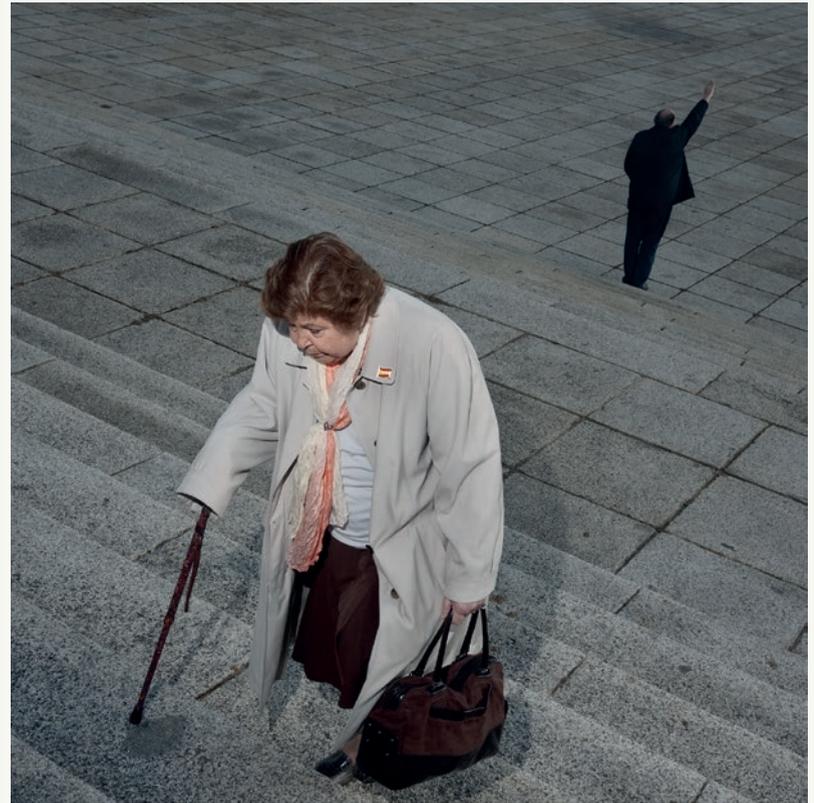
All this led me to the conclusion that the only consciousness that can change photography is your own. Along the way, I rediscovered the work of Diane Arbus, Lisette Model, Bruce Gilden and Martin Parr—all of whom I'd been taught to see as weirdos or second-rate photographers. For example, my lighting teacher said that the only point in looking at Arbus's work was to see how not to light a portrait. Fortunately, he went into underwater photography and spared anyone else from his opinions on how to take portraits.

These photographers felt free to take photos in whatever way they liked and focused their lens on conflicts in the rich part of the world, thus avoiding the concept of otherness created by photojournalism. Because no matter how much classical photojournalism strives to raise people's awareness, it always does so by creating the image of the other.

Another landmark critique of classical photojournalism is the exhibition *Antifotoperiodisme* [Anti-photojournalism], curated by Carles Guerra and Thomas Keenan<sup>5</sup> which I first saw at the Palau de la Virreina, in Barcelona, in 2010. It's one of the shows that have had the greatest impact on me. It displays classical photojournalism pictures alongside more contemporary works, arranged in such a way so as to question their use, ethics and relationship with the subject of the photograph. I was amazed by the curators' ability to get visitors thinking about the medium of photography and considering alternative accounts. If I had to pick one of the many highlights, I'd recommend the 2008 video art documentary *Enjoy Poverty*,<sup>6</sup> by Belgian artist Renzo Martens. It offers a stark portrait of visual colonialism and white reporters' abuse of the people of the Congo, brilliantly told with an almost unbearably cynical edge.

5. <http://antiphotojournalism.blogspot.com/>

6. <https://youtu.be/NeEiPnDGEkw>



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A similar idea in a more contemporary format can be found in the tumblr blog *Humanitarians of Tinder*,<sup>7</sup> which features screenshots of profile photos of white Tinder users surrounded by nonwhite people. This collection of pictures speaks volumes about people's lack of self-awareness as they promote themselves in today's world.

The last word on this subject really has to go to Susan Sontag and her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

<sup>IP</sup> Several of the photographers you mention have a clear sociopolitical objective in mind, in that they use their projects to defend vulnerable people, groups and communities. A number of your projects—such as *PAIN* or the one we're presenting here, *FLOWERS FOR FRANCO*—are driven by a need to rethink historical memory, as well as exposing the inequalities enshrined in written history. There's a subtle dividing line running through your work which from an ideological perspective can be used to categorise left and right. I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

<sup>TA</sup> Memory ends up shaping our identity. Who we are, what we do, how we behave, etc., are all structures set in place by the lived experiences stored in our memory. And memory isn't something static: human memory doesn't work like computer memory. Our memories are constantly recreated and altered every time we recall something.

On an individual level, my actions today shape who I am tomorrow. But this also happens at the level of society as well. My identity is made up of the events in society that have gone before me. When I say I'm Spanish, for example, that adjective is bound up with an entire historical construction. In my work I'm also keen to discover more about myself, so I use me as an individual as the basis for

7. <https://humanitariansoftinder.com/>

exploring the social constructions around me: politics, religion, land, love...

*FLOWERS FOR FRANCO*, for example, which interlinks politics, religion and land, all started with a gut feeling. The highest cross in the world (120 m) and the largest mass grave in Europe (more than 33,000 victims from both sides in the Spanish Civil War buried beneath the cross): I had to go and see that, to photograph it. There's a hostel there where I could stay for days at a time. I went one, twice, three times... I lost count. I couldn't explain what kept drawing me back. I was captivated by the idea of taking photos there, the silence, the loneliness... Between trips, I started to find out more about it, read around the subject, the place, Franco's dictatorship, Spain at the time... But when I began asking my family about it, I realised this was something that had never been spoken about at home.

My maternal grandmother had a twin brother. At the age of 17 he signed up to fight for the Falange. I learnt that his father (my great-grandfather) gave him a beating when he found out. I'd like to think he did that because he didn't believe any political ideology was ever worth fighting for. I've always thought that at 17 I'd have signed up to fight for whichever side happened to be the nearest. Like I said before, I was a bit of a tearaway at that age.

My grandmother's brother was sent to the Levante front, in Valencia. She used to tell us how, after spending a whole night in the river during the Battle of the Ebro, he caught a case of pneumonia that almost killed him. He was sent back home, but his lungs were never the same again. I imagine it wasn't just the physical damage: he must have been an emotional and mental wreck, someone we'd now recognise as suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Back home, in both health and outlook, he was a different person. He later died from tuberculosis.

My grandmother laid the blame for his death firmly and squarely at the feet of the Republicans. Seen in perspective, I'd say that tuberculosis was what killed him, but that

the war finished off her brother as she'd known him. The result was that my adorable grandmother developed a visceral hatred of anyone who spoke a word against Franco.

My paternal grandfather didn't fight in the war. When he was called up for his medical test, the doctors detected an irregular heartbeat. What they didn't know was that he hadn't slept for the previous three nights after drinking endless cups of coffee and exhausting himself through physical exercise.

My father told me he used to get angry with my grandfather and would call him a coward for not fighting in the glorious national uprising and epic crusade they were constantly taught about at school. Years later, at university, he changed his opinion. By then he was one of the protesters being chased by Franco's police. I've heard him tell stories of university friends coming back battered and bruised after being caught and detained by the police. One lad from the halls of residence had a psychotic episode after being tortured by the police for three days.

These stories are all interwoven in my memory and make up part of my identity. The stories themselves have a conscious presence, but the tension there's always been at home between my mother and father regarding this subject has always remained unspoken.

I can't photograph any of this. All the people involved are now dead. And if they were still alive, they'd probably be unwilling to talk openly about it because of the fear and loathing they'd feel. That's why I use the social construct and the largest mark Franco left on the landscape to explore all these stories inside me and channel them into a project.

<sup>1P</sup> If we analyse your work, it becomes clear that it's all interlinked. There's a subtle, and even poetic, thread running through it that guides us along the path you've set out on. You said before that you see photography as closely related to

the exercise of writing. In fact, I don't think it's a coincidence that all your projects also exist as publications. And your images speak for themselves: there's a narrative woven entirely by the photographs. Would you call your last three books a trilogy?

<sup>TA</sup> In recent years, I've self-published three books: *PAIN* (2014), *DEVOTOS* (2015), and *FLOWERS FOR FRANCO* (2019), which is now on show at Es Baluard. For me, these three books make up a trilogy because I see them as talking about the current political situation in Spain, but I can't talk about the world today without bearing in mind the past.

I worked on these three photography series simultaneously between 2010 and 2015. *PAIN* looked at ordinary people's feelings about the economic crisis through 120 portraits I took with a mobile phone while walking down the street. I took pictures of people I could see were in emotional pain. The project culminated in a publication designed by Astrid Stavro, who suggested putting the colours of the Spanish flag on the pages.

*DEVOTOS* [Party Faithful] consists of portraits of voters for the two main political parties at the same in Spain, the PP and the PSOE. I was interested in pointing the camera at the people being represented instead of focusing on their representatives (which inspired a play on words in the title in Spanish, which can be read as containing the phrase "All about Votes"). By using a leporello binding, with photos of voters for the two parties on opposite sides, I aimed to convey the idea of a two-party system. How the PP and the PSOE had ended up as two sides of the same coin.

The idea linking *PAIN* and *DEVOTOS* is that the people responsible for the 2008 economic crisis and people's pain and suffering were the politicians from these two parties. Or as you might say: "I hope you're happy now: you voted for them!" While it's clear that the events of 2008 were part

of a world economic crisis, in Spain they also revealed the extent of the corruption that had become endemic under this system.

On the bright side, at least since 1978 we can vote for our elected representatives, even if they are corrupt scoundrels with only their own career in mind. Because before that all the corruption, social climbing and other horrors were in the hands of a single party. This is what links *DEVOTOS* and *FLOWERS FOR FRANCO*. The idea that democratic Spain has inherited its corruption from the longest fascist dictatorship in Europe. All well and truly stitched up, just as Franco promised.

<sup>IP</sup> In recent years, as a result of the great technological leap forwards (or backwards), we're now in an age that has been described as an iconosphere. Without a shadow of doubt, we live at a time when the proliferation of images means that some of them can easily be deactivated or even trivialised. Thinking about photographs compared with documents, we all delete most of the photographs we take, something that would have been unthinkable for our grandparents' generation. At the same time, again as a result of technological breakthroughs, we question the truth behind many of the images we consume. In an age of post-truth and post-photography, what remains of truth and memory in your work?

<sup>TA</sup> I said before that memory is a slippery concept: it's not set in stone, but remade every time we use it. Personally I see what we call "truth" in much the same way. What is TRUTH? Here's another rudimentary but illuminating example. If I'm arguing with a colour-blind person about what colour to call the leaves on a tree, who is telling the truth? We might both agree that the leaves are green, but does "green" mean the same thing to both of us? What if we

come back to look at the leaves on this deciduous tree again in autumn? What colour will we both see them as?

I see post-truth in much the same way. There's never one single truth. There are different ways of giving accounts and presenting the facts in one way or another. That's why journalists focus on veracity rather than truth. To get the most comprehensive account, you need to know where the information is coming from and who is shaping it.

The amazing thing about photography is its capacity for ambiguity. I don't claim there's any truth in my photographs. I certainly contend that all my work is based on fact, but it's not reality, it's not the truth. *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*.

As for post-photography and post-truth, I just see them as post-contemporary names for things that have always been around.

Post-truth means putting a particular slant on a series of facts to make someone believe what you want them to. I don't think there's anything particularly new in that; it's just that nowadays far more people are aware of what's going on because we have far greater access to information and various means of expressing our opinion and voicing our disagreement. This has led to a greater degree of polarisation in society. These are exactly the tools politicians use to get people's attention and gain access to power.

I think that by acting in this way, political parties, and ultimately the media, have reduced everything and everyone to the level of the playground. Nowadays a biting put-down on social media or a clever headline have far more weight than the policies and work behind them.

But if anyone thinks that post-truth was born with the internet, a cursory look at Franco's No-Do newsreels, the Soviet propaganda machine or the Roman Empire's practice of *dammatio memoriae* will soon set them straight. People in power have always turned the wheels of communication in their favour.

And you could argue that post-photography is basically nothing more than applying good old collage to digital

photography. It's about using pieces of smaller works, or work with no artistic pretensions, to create a work of art. I know what I'm talking about here because it's something I've applied in my own work to the project *Androids in the Woods*.

Having said that, I should acknowledge Joan Fontcuberta as the father of post-photography. His genius lies in the way he recycles photographs and concepts. Slightly tongue in cheek, I'd say that Fontcuberta is an advertising and marketing genius who uses photography to create art. Which is something I find much more interesting than work by people who set out to do art for art's sake. If you ask me, I see myself as a photographer who uses his life to make art. Hopefully, with that I can redeem myself for poking a bit of fun at Fontcuberta.

<sup>IP</sup> Your work also explores the nature of images themselves and their role in society today. Whether consciously or unconsciously, you appear to be thinking about perception. In fact, I'm interested in the way you weave a narrative out of all the images that make up a project, with the focus not so much on each and every individual photograph, but rather on the collection as a whole. In this sense, your work leads naturally to talking about layers of meaning being created from a permeable and continuous context.

<sup>TA</sup> I see photography as a tool for social consciousness. So on the one hand I'm clearly interested in creating my own photographs, but on the other I'm also keen to see how photographs circulate, get interpreted and affect us as members of society.

My way of working, once I've sparked into action, follows the scientific method. Let me explain: no-one in their right mind would try to create a vaccine (to give a timely example) without first having a pretty good idea of what a virus

or a bacteria is: how they reproduce, what an RNA or DNA chain is, what vaccines already exist and how they were developed. Or without the right equipment and research team. The notion that someone would be inspired to create a vaccine without any prior experience or expertise, without investigating each and every part to be developed, without any equipment, without taking account of existing developments in immunology and vaccination, is frankly ridiculous. So how is it that people who see themselves as budding artists believe that they can create meaningful work without any prior knowledge? What right does someone who paints sunsets in their spare time have to call themselves an artist or a creator? Can you imagine someone who tells you to take an aspirin for a headache calling themselves a scientist, a doctor or a pharmacist? It sounds ridiculous, right? Well, it's exactly the same thing when someone says they're an artist simply because they paint, sculpt, take photographs or do origami in their spare time.

That's why I said I wasn't interested in art for art's sake, by which I mean people who think that art is something that occurs spontaneously to someone touched by divine grace or inspired by a muse (a very male chauvinist idea) in their free time. Nothing like that has ever happened to me. I've never created a project spontaneously out of thin air. My creative process involves a lot of ongoing hard work. And part of that work, like a biologist doing research into a new vaccine, involves finding out what work has already been done in the field I'm working in and, above all, what work is being done right now. I see photography as a science. Something that evolves and takes shape through hard work by the many people working on it. And I want to be one of the people from my generation who help photography evolve.

I see my professional profile as being like the biology teachers I had at university. People who did cutting-edge research in their labs and then shared their findings and what they were working on with their students in class. That's



Courtesy of the artist



Courtesy of the artist

what I call first-rate research and teaching—created and taught by people who are learning something new every day.

<sup>IP</sup> Going back to *FLOWERS FOR FRANCO*, you could say that it creates a series of contradictions and ambiguities. In one sense, it focuses on a memory that has clearly not been omitted by history. But interestingly in the same sequence of photographs we can also find exactly the opposite: an allusion to that part of history that has been silenced. I'm interested in the subtlety involved in creating both realities based on a metaphor we find in photography itself. Stories that are present but invisible.

<sup>TA</sup> Right from the start, I was clear that the most interesting part of the Valle de los Caídos was the whole section that was off limits. The underground part. The mass grave of 33,000 Civil War victims.

I feel like a photographer has to work like an antenna. It's about being alert and paying attention to everything around you: the light, the composition, but also the energy of the place or person you're photographing. You have to find a way to tune your energy into whatever you're photographing before you can turn it into an image. That's why my intention at the Valle de los Caídos was to capture that pervasive aura of pain, terror, silenced violence, fear, taboos...

In the final visual account, there are several layers that seek to reveal these tensions. On the one hand, there are photos of people going there to worship. These people are well aware of what this place means, its history and what it symbolises. On the other hand, there are tourists. People taking photos or wandering around completely unaware of what this place is about. They've come to see a monumental sight and they relate to it without connecting with its history in any way. And then there are photos of

the architecture and nature, where I draw on their symbolic power to express the part buried underground. Roots and foundations.

All these tensions exist between those who are aware of history and those who aren't. Between those who have been able to tell their story and those who haven't. Between the living and the dead. Between the victors and the vanquished. Between what can be seen and what can be perceived. All this goes into making up the account.

<sup>IP</sup> There's also a dialogue between everyday matters and political issues, more through tension than omission...

<sup>TA</sup> Despite appearances, everyday matters are some of the hottest political issues. I've had documentary makers accuse me of producing work where nothing ever happens: just normal people walking around some place. But that's exactly what interests me: normal people going about their everyday business, which is rich in symbols and ideology. The way they dress, their hairstyle, the wrinkles on their face... When I take a photograph I focus on all these details. Behind every decision there's a whole series of personal, social and political constructions. Every decision has political implications.

At the same time, I scour their everyday behaviour for ways of showing that there's something hidden, something to be revealed. I always read my reality in this way. And I like to think that photography serves to reveal, in every sense, things that go unnoticed at first glance. Here I could bring up Julio Cortázar's short story *Las babas del diablo*, based on a true story he heard from photographer Sergio Larrain in Paris and which inspired Michelangelo Antonioni's film *Blow-Up*. Nothing is ever as you see it, as you believe it. You can always dig deeper to see more, understand more, find out something else.

<sup>IP</sup> Given that these are almost documentary photographs, it's surprising to come across some images with an almost dreamlike quality. What exactly were you looking to achieve?

<sup>TA</sup> In the same way that I'm not very sure what TRUTH is, I don't really understand what is meant by REALITY either. I'm interested in getting hold of images where, as I like to say, reality gets bent. I like to make off with images when reality drops its guard and lets me peek at what lies beneath the surface. I'm not sure how to explain this; it's another of the contradictions that come to light in my work. Controlling the camera to push it to get images that go beyond visual perception. That's photography for me: when it's not the camera deciding and performing its purely mechanical function, but rather you in control of the camera, making it abandon its pre-established mechanisms. Andrea Soto explains this marvellously in her book *La performatividad de las imágenes* [The Performativity of Images]:

More than a reproduction or projection, an image is a map of connections that opens and acts, hence the importance of exploring the community of practices where we can exercise ways of non-adaptation to the dominant system, where the unexpected, the previously unseen, can be created... Raising up improbable images... Making images is about building scaffolding, a system for organising and structuring what reveals itself.

In another paragraph, she talks about the dreamlike relationship between spectators and images:

The image is torn from the schema; in other words, it resists all attempts to imbue it with the sense of an organised whole. Its nature is rather that of fragments placed together, THE PRESENTATION OF DREAMS WITH ALL THEIR LACUNAE.

This idea of the presentation of dreams with all their *lucinae* essentially defines the dreamlike quality you mentioned. But at the same time it also fits with the way in which I understand memory and truth. At the end of the day, the idea of dreaming, of perceptions I can cast doubt on, is what interests me. Photography lets me question whether what I perceive is real or is just exactly as I see it, experience it and memorise it.

<sup>1P</sup> For this project, the way the exhibition is laid out is fundamental. It materialises what we were talking about before, the idea of visibility, but stressing the friction created by the weight of history. Let's talk about the metaphor between visibility and history.

<sup>TA</sup> As I see it, photography goes beyond a two-dimensional image. It's like photographs as jigsaw pieces. The format in which you present them—a book, exhibition, video, etc.—is what lets you structure them and give the puzzle some overall meaning.

After more than ten week-long trips (I lost count in the end) to the Valle de los Caídos, I realised that right from the start my real interest lay in accessing what was beneath the surface of the site. I wanted to see the 33,000 bodies buried there with my own eyes. I think that gaining access to that space would help me understand and piece together many things from our recent history, both social and personal. But at the moment that still remains completely impossible because all that history remains taboo. At least the idea of an official account. An account agreed on by both sides.

That urge to pull back the veil on taboo issues is at the heart of all the photos I took aboveground at that huge mass grave, which is what the Valle de los Caídos still is. It's about trying to capture that depth. In addition, that idea is a perfect metaphor of how all that part of Spanish history

has been hidden. We've buried the past, as if nothing ever happened, in order to move on. And then we're back to the concept of leaving everything well and truly stitched up. So when I was thinking about creating a photobook, I was sure that the backbone would be the idea of concealing hidden things. For this publication, together with Alberto Salván, designer at Tres Tipos Gráficos, we came up with the idea of using translucent paper and placing all the photographs on the verso pages, so that the following photograph already makes a ghostly appearance from behind on the recto pages. I also liked the way the idea of placing the photographs on the opposite side to normal fitted in with my approach to my work in general.

When it came to thinking about the exhibition, I knew I didn't want to hang framed photos on the wall. Together with *Antifotoperiodisme*, another show that had a great impact on me was Alfredo Jaar's *The Politics of Images*, which I saw at the 2013 Rencontres d'Arles photography festival. A synopsis of the show is still available on the festival website: "As an architect, he masters space and leads visitors into brief performances in which they become actors. Jaar often catches us in the act of perceiving images far too superficially."

I'm fascinated by how Jaar's work mastered space. He shattered the idea of the white box exhibition space. His work makes its presence felt in the gallery. This presentation always has the ability to make you understand images in another way. The exhibition layout is just as important as the photographs on show: it creates an image itself. It's a further twist, the accumulation of images creates a new image that closes the circle. This materialisation of photography in the gallery turns spectators into actors playing an active role alongside the work. This is something I always try for in my work: activating spectators in all senses.

To create this exhibition, I worked with artist and industrial and exhibition designer Lucía Peluffo, who came up with a way of representing the idea of a hidden account

and revealing what was literally and metaphorically buried. She suggested hanging the photos at right angles to the wall and facing away from the entrance, thus forcing visitors to position themselves differently to how they usually would. Spectators have to take action.

Something as subtle as the way pictures are hung leads to a different way of relating to photographs. I find that very interesting. I like to change the way we relate and at the same time bring out the work's conceptual side.

<sup>IP</sup> Why did you choose to print such large photographs on the 2 m × 2 m panel?

<sup>TA</sup> At the far end of the gallery, there's a large panel with a 2 m square photograph on either side. The photo facing the entrance shows the base of a column at the Valle de los Caídos—a highly symbolic architectural detail. The first impression is the prevailing sense of grey from the stone used all across the site. And how those majestic straight lines literally block your view of what lies beyond. Metaphorically, that's exactly the idea that underpins the whole story of the historical memory of 20th-century Spain. Once again, we're back to hiding things away behind utterly impenetrable imposing grandeur.

The photo on the other side of the panel is the only one in the series showing the cross on the hill. At 120 m, it's the highest cross in the world. But here the cross is reflected in a pond at the hostel end of the site. Reflected in the water, the cross appears upside down. This is a good example of what we've been talking about, where you manage to make off with an image from reality that doesn't look real. Where you manage to override both your own automatic perceptive responses and the camera's as well. I have a crystal clear memory of taking that photograph. Seeing the cross upside down was like a revelation. The cross, symbol of suffering in our Christian culture, no longer rose up to heaven but plunged down into the depths of the earth. That's the image

that captures the buried suffering of so many people from both sides.

The supporting structure for these two large-format photographs, also designed by Lucía Peluffo, was inspired by the underframes for set pieces in the theatre. It's supported by a wooden skeleton and the sides are left open to reveal its hollow interior. The idea I wanted to convey is that the entire monument at the Valle de los Caídos is one giant set piece. At the end of the day, the design for the whole place is inspired by the Book of Revelation to strike fear and terror into the hearts of visitors. This is the way authoritarian regimes express themselves. Fear as a tool for controlling the population. Fear and hatred of the other.

<sup>IP</sup> *FLOWERS FOR FRANCO* brings a certain chapter in your work to a close (I'm referring to the trilogy, as I know these ideas have a bearing on your work). Can you give us a few clues about what you're working on at the moment? Are you sticking to the same concepts or have you set off in a new direction?

<sup>TA</sup> It's odd, but the pandemic has shifted up my pace of work a notch. I've spent almost two years focused on the land and landscape of Mallorca. Something that once again started out as an impulse—driving and photographing, taking in the island, seeing aspects of myself in the island—has grown in meaning during the pandemic. The global shutdown caused by the Covid crisis and its impact on mass tourism has revealed the flaws in the survival model we had created on Mallorca. I'm working on this project with a group of people I know from different creative fields. Hopefully I'll be able to share more details in the near future... At the moment, we're throwing around ideas and forms of representation you might describe as experimental documentary stagecraft.

In addition, I recently won a grant from the Academia de España in Rome to spend nine months in the city working on a project on the production of images. I'll be exploring the relationship between images produced historically by the church and those in power and those produced today by visitors to the city. The Covid crisis has affected a whole series of iconographic and commercial relationships, hence the project's title: *i-cona. La crisis del imperio* [i-con: The Empire in Crisis].

I think that all these projects—from *FLOWERS FOR FRANCO* to crisscrossing the landscape of Mallorca and exploring the city of Rome's iconographic relationship with tourism and its population—have a lot in common. They're all ways of addressing the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. As ever, it's about teasing out the connections between the production of images, power and the effect on us.

## FRANKLY

Llucia Ramis

Franco, Franc, Free, Frank... In Spanish it's all Franco.  
Franco's face was to be seen on five-peseta coins, even after twenty-five years of democracy.  
Franco is Spanish for frank—or free.  
Franc: a monetary unit in different European and African countries.  
Franc: a monetary unit in different European countries before the euro came in.  
Franc: a mediaeval coin.  
Free: without paying.  
And we're still paying the price.  
Frank: one who expresses their thoughts openly.  
*Let Me Be Frank With You*, by Richard Ford. Or even *Loving Frank*, by Nancy Horan.

Franco was always right at the end of the textbooks, the part we never got to.  
Franco is the movie baddie, now that we've lost our fear.  
He's also a caricature.  
In the book *Una, grande y zombi*, Hernán Migoya infiltrated a zombie into a Franco-era slogan, so that the blood of Franco turns everybody it infects into a fascist.  
Maybe we shouldn't have got over our fear.

*The Last Circus*, by Álex de la Iglesia, is a category-defying black comedy partly set in the Valle de los Caídos, or Valley of the Fallen.  
The Valle de los Caídos was a mausoleum Franco had built by republican prisoners—forced labour—between 1940 and 1958.  
In the Valle de los Caídos, some people would take *selfies* with their arm raised in a fascist salute, mocking a gesture that's still a symbol, at the biggest mass grave in Spain.  
Others raised their arm in all seriousness.  
Nobody would say anything to them.  
Nobody would pay them any attention, either.  
Flowers for Franco were no joke.

Out of the 33,833 bodies in the Valle de los Caídos, 12,410 are still unidentified.  
The enormous 150-metre cross in the Valle de los Caídos is built of limestone, and it's falling to pieces. Ironies of time, rather than history.  
Keeping up the Valle de los Caídos used to cost the public purse 1.8 million euros a year.

A night at the Santa Cruz (Holy Cross) hostel cost twenty-three euros.  
The Santa Cruz hostel has a rating of 8.0 on Booking.  
Four out of five on TripAdvisor. And over a hundred opinions.  
The comments declare that there is nowhere more extraordinary in the world, that the views are spectacular and packed with history, that the air is pure and the peace and quiet absolute, that the rooms are spartan and the facilities and features original.  
On the plates are the two-headed fascist eagle, the cross of the Valle de los Caídos and the Benedictine crest.  
The food is pretty bad. Or at least it was eight years ago.  
Stewed ham hock and beans.

The Valle de los Caídos is in a natural setting, among the trees.  
The roots spread beneath the ground. Flowers bloom, bright and colourful.  
Somebody cuts them. They put them on the grave.  
They won't have time to wither—they'll be changed. There will be new ones.  
In silence, among the dead and the horses, the thistles grow.

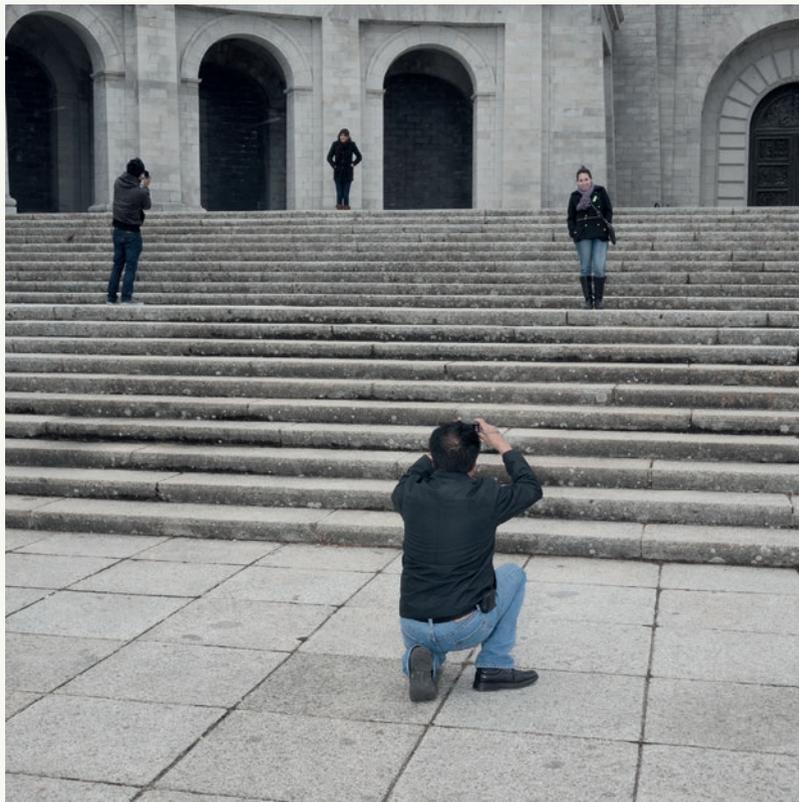
We weren't so badly off with Franco, some declare.  
We were better off against Franco, said Manuel Vázquez Montalbán.  
"Franco, Franco, had a white bum; he went to Paris and then his bum was grey." We used to sing as kids—in Spanish it rhymes.  
And when we were older, there was a certain laundering of Francoism.  
Now they call it something else.  
Or not. The National Francisco Franco Foundation still exists.  
Franchises, too (OK, the play on words works better in Spanish).

Exalting Francoism isn't a crime because it's protected by freedom of expression.

"Spaniards, Franco is dead," national TV solemnly announced in 1975.  
You turn the page and there's still a stain on the other side.  
And you turn the page again, but the stain is always there.

Franco lay for 16,041 days in the Valle de los Caídos.  
One month short of forty-four years.  
After a dictatorship that lasted thirty-six years.  
And a war that began in 1936.

They exhumed Franco on 24th October 2019. It was supposed to be in private, but everybody saw it live on state television.  
A party carried his coffin on their shoulders.  
There were flowers on top. Flowers for Franco.  
Some kind of red velvet cloth, and another in brown.  
They made the coffin look like a Tigretón, a chocolate sponge sweet from back when Franco's face still adorned the five-peseta coin.  
And the twenty-five peseta one, too.  
And on the other side, the imperial eagle and crest.



Courtesy of the artist

*Flowers For Franco*

Toni Amengual

From 21st May  
to 29th August 2021

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Es Baluard Museu d'Art  
Contemporani de Palma

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Imma Prieto

*Curatorship*

Imma Prieto

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