

Cristina BANBAN

*Juxtapoz,
Cristina BanBan*

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The Nuance of Memory

Interview by Evan Pricco // Portrait by Bryan Derballa

Think about the last time you cried. Oh, there are myriad reasons. Life can be upsetting, life makes us feel nostalgic. We cry out of sadness and happiness, sometimes at the same time. We cry when something is so beautiful it is incomprehensible and, admittedly, we cry at the heinous moments, as well. I bring up this most human act in the dichotomy of Spanish-born painter Cristina BanBan's newest body of work, a bold and beautiful series of oil paintings, titled *Del Llanto*, which translates to "from crying." BanBan's pieces evoke those complex states of mind when we feel like crying, and how being transported through time can elicit emotions of profound grief and joy. I spoke with BanBan just as she was finishing *Del Llanto*, in what will most certainly be a watershed moment for her rising career. These paintings tell universal stories in the most personal way.

Evan Pricco: Can we talk about hands? When we spoke the other day, I didn't even bring it up. And they are so prominent! One of your paintings I really love, EL PRAT DE LLOBREGAT, 2PM, has such incredibly rendered hands. What's your feeling about hands?

Cristian BanBan: They're my favorite part of the human body, after the teeth; but painting an open mouth is one of the most difficult things to do, in my opinion. Playing with hands brings movement into the painting. It doesn't matter if the subjects are in relaxed positions, hands always create a dynamic composition. I paint huge hands, and recently they've become more bony and masculine. When I think about hands in paintings, the first thing that comes to mind are Philip Guston's—so sophisticated and iconic.

I took a bit of a step back this morning, looked at your work, your characters and some of the moments you capture, and there is such an intimacy. I could be wrong, but I see so much of Spain. Though you were born in Barcelona, you lived in London for nearly a decade, and now Brooklyn, but I love how those Spanish scenes evoke such nostalgia.

My last show, Tigre y Paloma, was centered around nostalgia from missing home. I brought in the familiar spaces: beach scenes, siesta time and family dinner. I began my latest oil paintings last year and there's a lot of intimacy in them—they're a reflection of time spent with myself and close friends. I wouldn't say that my work is always "literally" autobiographical, but for sure, they explain mood and current situations. Alice Neel once said in an interview that "when painting or writing are good, it's taken right out of life itself, to my mind, and put into the work. Now that doesn't mean that the work has to tell about real life. I mean, it can be abstract or anything, but the vitality is taken out of real living." I think that explains it well.



This is an unfair question, but I like unfair questions: What did you take from Barcelona, London, and now, NYC? Those are art capitals with so much history, and your work lends a refreshing take on figurative painting. What did you absorb from those cities, and what does each place mean to you?

You know things in life change, and you change all the time, so your paintings do too. Every move was driven by intuition, perhaps moving away from feeling comfortable. I tend to move when I feel I have done all that place offered me during that time. Spain will always be home, always where I come back to reunite with my loved ones and family. I learned everything I know from drawing and painting in Barcelona, but it was London where I put the time into it. London was the place where my career kicked off and I am very grateful for that and all the moments, the joy and suffering, along the way. I've been in New York for about a year and a half now and am excited for what the summer will bring.

I want to talk about time. Two works of yours that I love, LA COSTA DAURADA and again, EL PRAT DE LLOBREGAT, 2PM, vibrate with such depth. But when I saw TINTO EN EL TALLER, and saved it on my phone, there was this different kind of depth, one of loneliness, which I felt related to our relationship with time in the last 12 months. Your pivot was so interesting. Did you see the change as clearly, or are you so head-down in the studio that you hardly noticed?

I've spent the last year dedicated to developing a series of new paintings, which are part of the Del Llanto show. As you and I were talking the other day, this was an insane year. I felt time was elastic, days passed slowly and months seemed to go by very fast. I spent a lot of time alone or with a smaller group of friends, and the spaces I visited were reduced to the studio or my apartment for the majority of time. You can see that context in these pieces. The feeling of one longing in absence, loneliness and my everyday settings. The whole show has a feeling of melancholy as a result of these times.

What is your routine? I know you spend a lot of time in the studio, but do you have a daily schedule that you adhere to?

I don't have a routine. But I like the idea of having one, only to feel free by breaking it. Things that are consistent are coffee breaks and making some time for the studio. I try to go to the studio every day, even if it's just for a bit. When I take a day off, it's usually during the week because I like working on the weekends, especially on Sundays. Nobody is around and I like that quietness. In summer, I like working until midday. Then I hop on the L train to the beach, eat a few tacos, and come back. I like to sketch at home in the mornings, but in the studio, I mostly just paint.



I remember you mentioned wanting to be an artist starting at age five. Or maybe that is when you remember starting to make art? There is such romanticism attached to being an artist, what that life will be like. You seem like someone who is just always working and making, and making some more. As you gain attention, anticipate a big solo show coming up... are you able to articulate what your younger self would say to you now as a working artist? I say this because you and I talked about that leap, how being catapulted into the art world is so hard to explain.

I would tell my younger self: Enjoy the process, you will be fine. But I would do exactly the same to get out there, which has always been by working a lot. I have always been proud of my self-discipline when it comes to work. I get that from my parents and brother, such hardworking people. When you're five, you, of course, think naively about something you might like to be, but my passion today is the same as when I was a child. I think a painter must be completely obsessed with painting; otherwise how could you justify all of the time spent doing it?

You knew this was coming: And I don't want to hear just about painters, but who are your favorite artists? You make these very cinematic scenes, so I hear music, see things moving... talk about film, music, painters. What is in the Cristina BanBan sphere?

Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, Carmen Amaya (flamenco singer/dancer), EllenAllien (DJ), Sandy Kim, Delia Derbyshire (pioneer of British electronic music), Maruja Mallo (surrealist painter from the "Generation of 1927") and Antonio Machado (poet) inspire me directly or indirectly for different reasons. I also like the work of Robert Colescott, Paula Rego, Francis Bacon, Frank Auerbach, Joaquin Sorolla, and Tal R. I like watching Clara Rockmore play — without touching—the theremin, and listening to David Lynch's Weather Report, "Fatty Folders" by Roman Flügel, "Blowout Comb" by Digable Planets and "La Leyenda del Tiempo" from Camaron de la Isla.



What is it about oil paint that perhaps changed the trajectory of this show? It's the first time you've worked this way, right?

Last year I became bored with my own painting as though I exhausted something within it. I felt the need to step back and make changes in my approach to painting—I needed to get excited by it again. So I turned to a different technique. I like feeling uncomfortable because that's when I learn. It's the same as when I meet people who make me feel uneasy in a conversation, and I always end up learning something from it. By using a medium that I haven't tried before I could put my hands on trial again and take advantage of the mistakes. I had the need to feel I wasn't in control so that accidents could happen. That is so beautiful. And that's how it is with oil paint; you never know how it will react.

Could you see a shift right away in the way your works looked, in the way you were feeling as a painter?

Yes, I felt motivated again. I think we artists shouldn't get stuck doing the same thing over and over. You have to accept when it's time to move on and don't let the fear stop you. Taking the time for change and saying no to other commitments is important in order to refocus on your work. It's difficult to feel freer with painting but it's the path I want to follow.



Could you see that content shift, too? I kind of hate to say it, but these works make me sadder. Sure, I know it's pretty banal to say that someone's work is sadder in a time of cultural and social tumult, but I'm more asking about, as an artist, how you begin to notice the shift?

How you feel when you look at a painting is entirely up to you, I think. From my side, I can only say that my work reflects what is happening in my life, because it's something I do every day. So I grab whatever is in or around me—memories, feelings, a dream, a sentence from a book I'm reading, a conversation with a friend or a situation with a lover. Everything becomes content for a painting. Not to say it's always 100 percent autobiographical, but it is always personal.

By the time this interview is out, you will have had your solo show at 1969 Gallery and Albertz Benda. You gave me a tour of the works and I think they're your strongest to date, so impressive in terms of scale and detail. The vulnerability is just so palpable. You reference honesty a lot, so what do you think this body of work says about you right now? The title itself, *Del Llanto*, makes quite a statement.

Thank you! Vulnerability and honesty are indeed aspects I enjoy exploring. This work is a reflection of a lot of time and energy invested in the studio for a year without traveling, and the feeling of being trapped in a seemingly never ending situation with many restrictions. *Del Llanto* can be understood as an act to relieve a big feeling, whether it's pain, joy, desperation or sadness... the emotions that we went through since the burst of covid. But I also like to think about all those feelings that came after that big burst, like boredom, fatigue and feeling lost.



To me, the scale of the woman is very important. They are life-size, often bigger than life-size! It was quite impressive seeing them in your studio, just so bold. I assume this is very intentional?

Yes, I choose human size or bigger for scale. I guess it's a personal preference to feel invaded by the painting. I'm into big brushstrokes and experimenting with different thicknesses. But I also did work on smaller canvases for this upcoming show, some portraits.

There are few bookends at play here: You open a solo show that marks a very fascinating period of time, coming at what has been a remarkable time in NYC in particular. There is a bit of an intimate shift in the works; you got the vaccine the day we did this interview, and now you are going to be going back to Spain after the openings... we both sort of laughed at the idea that an artist needs to somehow dictate time to themselves; this idea that images can appear and reappear over time, and that if you are just dedicated and make work every day, characteristics will emerge sometimes that you haven't touched in a while. Even with another solo show on the horizon, how do you feel right now, Cristina, about the process?

I want to keep experimenting and trying different things. After finishing a solo, I like to take a bit of time for drawing or reading. I could see in the process of making the series that I was more focused on the lighting and the contrast of the colors to represent volume, rather than using line work as I used to in the past. This shift made me want to start working with sculpture, which I hope to do in the near future.

Cristina BanBan: Del Llanto will be on view at 1969 Gallery and Albertz Benda in NYC through June 12, 2021.