

‘MY ART IS THE DAUGHTER OF BAROQUE AND PSYCHEDELIA’ – THE ART OF GUILLERMO PÉREZ-VILLALTA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PHENOMENON OF KITSCH

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‘Kitsch is a concept burdened with an exceptional load of normativity (as the most clear definition of an object demanding negative assessment) and situating itself in an aesthetic discourse in the position of the main adversary of high art’ – observes Jacek Rogucki (2004/2005: 38). In this article, however, I will attempt to prove that kitsch – or at least its elements – may become the material for works that are highly recognized and constitute a unique hallmark of a respected artist.

Guillermo Pérez-Villalta is almost completely unknown in art history in Poland¹. Therefore, it seems only reasonable to make his silhouette more familiar, as in his native country, Spain, he is highly valued and ranked among the most recognized contemporary painters. His work has been the subject of numerous studies and scholarly treatises (Kanelliadou 2004; Jurado 2014), articles in the press and even blog entries². He is described as

¹ His name appears only in the catalogue of the exhibition *Spanish Art of the 80's and 90's from the collection of the Queen Sophia National Art Centre*, presented in the Zachęta National Gallery of Art on 17 May – 1 July 2001; he is also one of the characters of the monograph by Weronika Bryl-Roman (2008), devoted to, as the title suggests, a broader artistic and cultural phenomenon.

² See: *¿Con la venia de mi ego?, La Metamorfosis de Pérez-Villalta expo CAC Málaga*, <http://jlmartinezhens.blogspot.com/2011/08/aunque-estoy-trabajando-todavia-estas.html> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

a defender of beauty³, an artist defying current trends in art⁴, giving art a new dimension (Palomo 2011); his passion for tradition and predisposition for ornamentation is emphasized⁵, his creative versatility is also stressed – after all, he is not only a painter, but also an architect, book illustrator⁶, sculptor and designer of theatrical scenery (Leahy 2008) – and his oeuvre is highly valued, to the extent that his works are sometimes compared to the paintings in the Sistine Chapel⁷.

Pérez-Villalta himself emphasizes his passion for all branches of art. In one of the interviews, he admits that he is more of an insatiable art lover than an artist. He declares: ‘I am an art devourer, I am interested in all artistic disciplines: painting as well as architecture, sculpture and craftsmanship’.

³ ‘[Pérez-Villalta is] the defender of beauty, understood as a bonus and profit, but also an element necessary for life’; *Las Metamorfosis y otras mitologías de Guillermo Pérez-Villalta*, <http://malakao.es/exposiciones/Las/Metamorfosis/y/otras/mitologias/de/Guillermo/Perez/Villalta/17062011/> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

⁴ ‘Guillermo Pérez-Villalta likes to defy current trends. And it is not just a pose, simply, the idea of presenting a world in which rocailles and arabesques are beautiful, is close to him’ (Molina 2011).

⁵ ‘He is an artist faithful to tradition, who also tends to use colourful, gaudy ornamentation and exuberance, which encourages optimism, although it may also arouse nostalgia for the ideal past’.

<http://malakao.es/exposiciones/Las/Metamorfosis/y/otras/mitologias/de/Guillermo/Perez/Villalta/17062011/> [accessed: 22.05.2019]. I will return to the issue of the artist’s fascination with ornamentation in the further part of the article.

⁶ He illustrated, inter alia, the *Odyssey* and *Gulliver’s Travels*. *Viajes de Gulliver* was published by Galaxia Gutenberg in 2006 in Barcelona. Illustrations for the *Odyssey* were created in 1989 and arranged in two series: the first includes thirty-six drawings made with graphite, paints, watercolour and tempera on paper, the second includes twenty-three etchings of 34.5 × 24.5 cm in size. For more information on this subject, see: V. Kanelliadou, op. cit.

⁷ The Andalusian Sistine (*La Sixtina Andaluza*) refers to the frescoes created by Villalta on the ceiling of the Andalusian Pavilion (Pabellón de Andalucía) built for Expo 1992 in Seville. *Guillermo Pérez Villalta y los trabajos de Hércules en el Pabellón de Andalucía*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqTAPbMnflY> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

He even says, half-jokingly, that when visiting museums, he often pays more attention to works of art other than paintings, such as furniture or porcelain, and claims that when visiting the Vatican, we may discover more charm and beauty in the grotesque decorations than in the large paintings (Leahy 2008).

Pérez-Villalta is also the author of numerous publications. He writes the texts for the catalogues of his monographic exhibitions, he is also engaged in essayistic work, in which he discusses the process of creating a work of art, iconoclasm and the interdependence between *sacrum* and *profanum* (see: Pérez-Villalta 2006, 2006a, 2011).

A question therefore arises: is it possible to use the concept of kitsch when talking about such a versatile and recognized artist⁸? Undoubtedly, one of the answers may be the fact that the painter himself declares his fascination with the phenomenon of kitsch, referring, among other things, to Walt Disney's work, from which he draws inspiration: 'I owe a huge debt to Walt Disney's films. Cartoons were a symbol of childhood for my generation. The aesthetics of the first animated drawings that we watched on television or saw reproduced in comic books has remained a part of our imagination' (Ángeles 2008).

Another argument in favor of analyzing the Spanish artist's work in terms of kitsch is the eclecticism of his works. Pérez-Villalta himself compares it to a salad with a new, alluring taste, more tempting than orthodoxy, which he considers as the opposite of imagination (see: *Arquitecturas Encontradas* 2009). Jaume Vidal Oliveras, on the other hand, while writing about Pérez-Villalta's paintings, states: 'His world is a collage combining various elements: antiquity and contemporaneity, great tradition and kitsch, decorativeness and creative thought' (Oliveras 2004).

In order to demonstrate the link between Pérez-Villalta's work and kitsch even more clearly, one should refer to the beginnings of the artist's activity, which are closely related to the socio-cultural movement which appeared in Spain after the death of general Franco, the so-called *Madrid movida* (*movida madrileña*).

⁸ Sometimes, in the context of his work, the term 'kamp' is also used, however, I believe that in the case of Pérez-Villalta, it would be worth to limit its use to paintings that can be interpreted as a visual sign of the artist's sexual orientation. Therefore, I do not refer to this aesthetic category in this article.

The *movida*, sometimes associated with the world of drugs⁹, has been analyzed in several very extensive publications in Spain (not to mention the shorter ones)¹⁰. The authors tried to define its timeframe and character from the perspective of approximately twenty years after it came to an end and analyze the achievements of this turbulent period, which is sometimes referred to as ‘the time of freedom’ (*tiempos de libertad*) or ‘the colorful years’ (*los años pintados*)¹¹.

Therefore, I would like to briefly introduce this socio-cultural movement, with a particular emphasis on the figure of Guillermo Pérez-Villalta.

It is generally accepted that the *movida* began around the mid-1970s and came to a gradual end at the end of the 1980s¹², although some artists and critics who discuss the movement claim it began in the late 1970s, referring, for example, to the changes taking place in poetry and music or the quasi-performative activity of Pedro Almodóvar¹³. Other researchers point out that the echoes of the *movida* were still visible in 1992 during the events which took place in connection with the World Exhibition in Seville, the celebration of the 500th anniversary of the discovery of America and the Olympic Games in Barcelona (*La Movida* 2007). Yet providing

⁹ See e.g. the opinions of the participants of the movement – Palomes Chamorro and Albert García Alixa (*La Movida* 2007: 20). Pérez-Villalta, who has probably tried various drugs himself, writes about the use of drugs by the *movida* artists, but he sees them as the reason of failure of some of his friends. See: Gallero 1991: 308-309.

¹⁰ In addition to the items cited in earlier footnotes, see, inter alia, R. Cervera 2002; Bryl-Roman 2008.

¹¹ The terms come from the titles of exhibitions that presented the art of that period, respectively: *Tiempos de libertad* (2005) and: *Los años pintados* (2001).

¹² For example, Pedro Almodóvar believes that the term ‘*movida*’ should only cover the years 1977-1982 (see: Bryl-Roman 2008: 17-18). On the other hand, Héctor Fouce Rodríguez, a researcher of subcultures, is of the opinion that the *movida* presented the features of a subculture only in the years 1977-1983, while 1983 marks a caesura when the movement transformed from an underground movement into an open one, thus beginning the era of its decadence. Since 1985, the activities of the *movida* artists have been clearly commercialised. What is more, left-wing politicians try to use the movement for their own purposes.

¹³ These are the dates proposed by e.g. Fernando Huici (*La Movida* 2007).

the accurate timeframe of this movement seems impossible, as individual artists initiated and completed their artistic ventures at different times¹⁴.

Apart from Pérez-Villalta, the *movida* was co-created by such artists as Pedro Almodóvar¹⁵, the guitarist and vocalist of a punk-dadaist group Kaka de Luxe, Olvido Gara (Alaska), photographers Barbara Allende (Ouka Leele), Albert García Alix, Miguel Trillo and Pablo Pérez Minguez, creator of comic books and painter Carlos Sánchez Pérez (Ceesepe), painter José Morera Ortiz (El Hortelano), Enrique Naya and Juan Carrero (Costus group), the TV journalist Paloma Chamorro¹⁶ and many others¹⁷.

The catalogue of the exhibition *Movida, 20 years later*, which, by the way, was opened with the presentation of one of the most famous paintings by Villalta – *Grupo de personas en un atrio o la alegoría del arte y la vida o del presente y el futuro*¹⁸ – includes the opinions of people directly involved in the cultural ferment in Madrid, as well as those who could observe it at that time. Analyzing these statements it is clear that the time of the *movida* was a period of spontaneous artistic creation of an inter- and multidisciplinary character, a time of spontaneous formation of bands that grouped various artists in order to carry out individual projects, a time when the political situation was conducive to unrestricted freedom of behavior, while at the same time freeing oneself from the need to support any specific ideology.

¹⁴ Blanca Sanchez states: ‘Fechar La Movida e casi imposible’ (*La Movida* 2007: 42).

¹⁵ Both artists often cooperated at that time. Almodóvar currently owns several Villalta’s paintings, e.g.: *Danae recibia la lluvia de oro*, *Dionisos encuentra a Ariadna en Naxos* and *Ninfa y Satiro*.

¹⁶ Considered a charismatic journalist, Chamorro ran a series of programmes entitled ‘La Edad de Oro’ (‘The Golden Age’) from 1983, to which she invited the leading representatives of the *movida*. Her frequent guest was also Guillermo Pérez-Villalta. For more information on Paloma Chamorro’s activities, see: *La Movida* 2007; Gallero 1991; Bryl-Roman 2008.

¹⁷ In the above mentioned monograph *Sólo se vive una vez*, the author conducted interviews with several dozen people who were, to a varying extent, connected with the movement. See: Gallero 1991.

¹⁸ I discuss this painting in more detail in the following part of the article.

Above all, however, it was a time of laughter and fun, treated as an absolute priority.

In this context, the statement by Blanca Sanchez seems to be particularly significant:

The main features of the *movida* were: spontaneity, a desire for artistic expression – regardless of whether it paid off or not, whether it had a future and whether it served anything – and freedom, which until then had not existed and had seemed impossible. Moreover, individualism, which manifested itself in a political situation that allowed us to experience previously unknown freedom. Above all, the *movida* was characterized by interdisciplinarity, the interpenetration of various fields of culture, which fascinated everyone. Some were interested in music, others in comics, fashion, exhibitions or jewellery. And not only did we have everything at our fingertips – we created it. We reached out to ugliness and kitsch, had fun on the Mediterranean Sea and went to London and New York, discovering a bigger and more interesting world. And we laughed, laughed, laughed (*La Movida* 2007: 19-20).

Pérez-Villalta himself recalls these years in the following way: ‘In Madrid, which at the beginning of the 1970s was a city of cultural misery, there appeared a small group of people who decided to create their own artistic environment and later consolidated themselves around the Amadís Gallery’ (Gallero 1991: 310). Mercedes Buades Lallemand recalls an anecdote about how Pérez-Villalta painted a three-by-four-meter swimming pool and invited thirty artists and their friends to pretend to be swimming in it. Lallemand describes this as a spontaneous and wonderful happening (*La Movida* 2007: 40).

There is no doubt that the event described above (as well as the films by Almodóvar¹⁹ or Ouka Leele’s colorful photographs of people in wigs

¹⁹ Ewelina Mędrala (2005) writes about Almodóvar’s fascination with kitsch: ‘We have no doubt that films such as *Robocop* or *Terminator* are examples of lowbrow, kitschy films, which do not convey any message at all, except for showing us a possible attack of cyborgs or other hybrids of technology on ordinary mortals. However, would we be inclined to attach the kitsch stereotype to e.g. films by the famous Almodóvar? Many of us associate his work with very good or even the best kind of cinematography... And yet. Almost every film by this director is based on the template of a melodrama, a melodrama with the main

made of lemons, syringes and gypsum turtles) can be interpreted as kitsch in the categories proposed by Abraham Moles (1978). In these works and activities one can easily notice the desire for fun, pastiche, eclecticism, lack of moderation or the use of various elements in a way incompatible with their intended purpose. At the same time, it is difficult not to feel a certain fascination when dealing with them – not only as forms of a game with the recipient, but also as testimonies of a specific psychological and cultural reaction that took place in Spain after the fall of the extreme right-wing dictatorship of Franco.

Although the *movida* was a musical movement at its source, the visual arts were also of great importance for the movement as a whole. Pérez-Villalta himself stresses the importance of music – especially pop music – for his work (Gallero 1991: 307), saying that it has made a major contribution to contemporary culture as a whole, which has not, however, been adequately reflected in fine arts (*Procesos* 2007: 17).

Pérez-Villalta's paintings from the 1970s were also influenced by music that was popular in Madrid at that time. As Marcin Lachowski (2005: 177) observes: 'The avant-garde is realized through participation in reality, and conditioned by a specific opening of the work of art to the present day'. It is therefore no surprise that Fernando Francés concluded that Pérez-Villalta achieved this openness by situating his art in the space between pop art and figuration, a space that tried to become a mirror for a generation of 'great artistic convulsions' (*Tiempos de libertad* 2005: 14).

The dependence of Pérez-Villalta's work on pop music and aesthetics is most clearly visible in two of his paintings, considered to be a kind of painting document: *A Group of People in an Atrium or an Allegory of Art and Life or Present and Future* (*Grupo de personas en un atrio o la alegoría del arte y la vida o del presente y el futuro*) from 1975²⁰ and *The Stage, Characters*

role of the mother. Almodóvar does not hide his fascination with this genre, he is well aware that this is a kind of kitsch. He also knows that in the majority of his best-known films he has used well-known tricks, which in combination with his undoubted genius brought him fame and money, which seems most important in the era of consumerism'.

²⁰ Acrylic on canvas, dimensions: 193 x 373 cm, Museo de Reina Sofia, Madryt.

Leaving a Rock Concert (Escena, personajes en la salida de un concierto rock) from 1979²¹.

The first painting is a group portrait of Pérez-Villalta's friends from Madrid, shaped in the form of a triptych, including a self-portrait of the artist. The painting presents, among others: Luis Gordillo, Carlos Alcolea, Juan Antonio Aguirre, Luis Pérez-Minguez, Mercedes Buades, Chema Cobo and Fernando Huici. Each of the characters is clearly defined by the position occupied, the studied gestures and the numerous symbolic references to the type of artistic activity practiced, captured on canvas²².

This is how Ignacio Gómez de Liaño described the painting:

The characters seem to be withdrawn or smiling politely, or they allow themselves to throw careless glances at their colleagues or valuable objects in their surroundings. They pose for posterity, but also in front of the others. All of them, united by the magic of art, found themselves under the cover of a simple, light, capricious and colorful building, wonderfully and charmingly opening up to the magnificent tropical gardens. Among them is also the artist himself. A subtle self-portrait depicts him sitting in a comfortable pose, with his chin reflexively resting on his hand, near a waterfall and a pot with magnificent flowers, stubbornly staring at the viewer or into some imaginary mirror in which the image of the people around him is reflected (I. Gómez de Liaño, *Guillermo Pérez-Villalta. Exposiciones*, cited after: Bryl-Roman 2008: 142).

The painting strikes the viewer with the static, almost hieratic posing of figures, each of whom, as it seems, 'had his own *movida*' by then, although the work was to be a testimony to the existence of a certain artistic community, captured in one, unique moment, which could turn into an important historical moment²³.

²¹ Acrylic on canvas, dimensions : 250 x 180 cm, Museo de Reina Sofia, Madryt, <http://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/escena-personajes-salida-concierto-rock> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

²² See: <http://museoreinasofia.es> [accessed: 14.05.2019].

²³ However, it should be noted that this sense of individuality of each of the persons depicted could already have accompanied Pérez-Villalta at that time, as in an interview with José Luis Gallero (1991: 56) he mentioned, with some

The second of the discussed paintings is different both in style and expression. It depicts the characters from the musical world of the *movida*, with whom the painter was closely related. These include, among others: Alaska, Bernardo Bonizzi, Manolo Campoamor, Carlos Berlanga and Herminio Molero. It is believed that this large-format work was inspired by a concert at the Ateneo Club in Madrid, which Perez-Villalta attended, during which Kaka de Luxe, the Zombies and Zumbettes performed (Gallero 1991: 376). According to Fernando Huici, this painting is the most vivid and best known testimony to Pérez-Villalta’s fascination with psychedelia and pop music, which the critic perceives as ‘generational factors’ shaping the perception of reality in that era (*La Movida* 2007: 40).

In contrast to the first of the discussed paintings, the *Stage...* strikes the viewer with vivid movements of the characters, who are bent in slightly unnatural positions. It also draws attention to the fact that – as opposed to the people depicted in the atrium – these characters enter into various interaction with each other, touching each other and directing their gaze towards one another.

Another element that distinguishes the two paintings is the way in which the architecture is presented. The atrium in the *Group of People...* is very clear in terms of the arrangement of horizontal and vertical lines, and is also saturated with light. The urban alley in the *Stage...* seems somewhat disconcerting due to the crossing of diagonal lines, a clearly disturbed perspective and the crowding of buildings pushing against each other, which trap the figures in a peculiar urban labyrinth. Instead of static, we have dynamism – both in the sphere of portrait and architectural background, which seems to force the characters to take twisted positions and make violent movements.

regret: ‘We were never a group that could be promoted outside. All efforts made to this end were done in vain, because everyone wanted to promote themselves. We were not a group, because the shadow of someone else could dim an individual’s glow. Never before was the sky so thirsty for stars, so the only thing we should have done was to paint, mature and support each other. It’s probably stupid, but I still think that with a little more friendship everything would have been better and much more joyful’.

The expression of this painting was compared with the impact of the paintings by Pontormo and Ross Fiorentino (see: Gallero 1991). The painter himself, while writing about his impressions from the concert, which inspired the creation of the above mentioned work, reminisced: 'The guitar reminded me of the figures painted by Fiorentino, while the group of girls passing by was like a *figura serpentinata* shown in a bold abstract. Bodies in tight costumes, as if they were taken out from the *Deposition* by Pontormo, were moving along a small stage' (*La Movida* 2007: 188).

This account of impressions should not come as a surprise, since – as Alonso Molina observes – Pérez-Villalta's work was characterized in the 1970s by a predisposition to use the attainment of Mannerism, treated as a way of expanding and enriching the formal means of expression. Of all the figurative painters in Madrid, Pérez-Villalta showed the greatest tendency to use quotations, paraphrases and elements taken from various traditions, creating a permanent amalgam with *capriccio* features and revealing the painter's passion for excess and weirdness. There is also humor, which leads to initiating games with the recipient, as well as a tendency to raise the rank of kitsch and to reach for various elements of popular culture (see: *Tiempos de libertad* 2005).

Also in recent years the aesthetics of kitsch has remained close to Pérez-Villalta. This is manifested, inter alia, in his love of ornamentation from various traditions. First of all, a fascination with Arabian culture in the form in which it is observed on the Iberian Peninsula – after all, Villalta was born in Tarifa, in Andalusia, and spent his childhood in La Linea de la Concepción in the province of Cadiz and in Malaga. The fact that during the first years of his life he was surrounded by objects of architecture and art being a testimony to the cultural encounter between East and West, strongly influenced his perception of ornamentation. In an interview, he once said that ornamentation attracted him since early childhood and added that the need for decorativeness, which he feels strongly about, is related to his childhood experience of playing on floors covered with geometrically patterned tiles and long hours of gazing at friezes arranged from *azulejos*²⁴.

²⁴ See: Guillermo Pérez-Villalta „Soy un pintor geométrico, lo único, es que todo revestido”, <http://myartdiary.com/guillermo-perez-villalta>

Pérez-Villalta is also fascinated by Italian grotesque – its hybrid characters, flaccid and winding lines and a wide range of colours. He also declares himself to be a follower and continuator of the Mannerist tradition with his passion for sophisticated aesthetics.

All the above elements, combined with a fascination with Disney style animated films, are present in his paintings created in 2006, described by the artist himself as ‘imaginary landscapes with stories’ (*paisajes imaginarios con historias*). I would like to focus on four of them: *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert*²⁵, *Escape to Egypt*, *Judith with the Head of Holofernes*²⁶ and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist*. They form pairs because two of them depict scenes that take place during the day, and two are nocturnes.

The painting *Hagar and Ishmael in the Desert* evokes associations with Cappadocia from tourist brochures, although the opalescent green-yellow balls placed on top of the rocks (or dunes) are undoubtedly fantastic. Above the sand-yellow landscape, the artist stretches a peach-red sky with sharp, thin lines reflecting slim and curved woody ferns. The huge disproportion in size between people and plants is noteworthy – Hagar is smaller than the leaf of a giant tree.

The Escape to Egypt includes signs which allow to associate the landscape presented in the painting with Egypt – in the background there are buildings resembling step pyramids, but they seem unfinished or ruined and abandoned. In the yellow-brown desert we see the carefully painted silhouettes of Joseph and Mary and Jesus riding on the donkey. The horizon line has been placed very low, about one-sixth of the height of the painting, counting from the lower edge. The rest of the space is occupied by the sky, playing with violets, roses, blues and mint greenery, against the background of which the artist drew a fantastic, grotesque-rocaille ornament. Its sophisticated, thin lines are crowned with flaccid palms, flowers reminiscent

-cac-malaga-pintor-arte-metamorfosis/ [accessed: 22.05.2019]. Pérez-Villalta also speaks extensively on the subject of in the article *Artifice* in the magazine „Arte y Parte” (2006, No. 63).

²⁵ <http://cacmalaga.eu/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/Agar-e-Ismael-en-el-desierto.jpg> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

²⁶ <https://www.superstock.com/stock-photography/guillermo%20perez-villalta#id=12450593> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

of brugmansias (commonly known as angel's trumpets) and shapes bent like late gothic flames, which may evoke associations with exotic lamps.

The other two paintings – *Judith with the Head of Holofernes* and *Salome with the Head of John the Baptist* – have a lot in common. First of all, they are nocturnes and depict topics iconographically related, though opposite in terms of content. Both depict a strong source of artificial light – in the first painting, the light falls from a pear-shaped and conically topped open tent. This tent brings to mind exotic fairy tales about fabulously rich and mysterious rulers, which in some simplification could refer to Holofernes. In the second painting, the almost monochromatic scene, rendered in various shades of navy and lighter tone of blue, is brightened up – and contrasted with – an intensely glowing golden lamp, which can be purchased in any Arabian marketplace.

With respect to the visual plane, the two landscapes are similar in the accuracy and great precision in rendering the silhouettes of the women and the heads of the men they are holding. This detail in presenting the image of a small (eight or ten centimeters high) human figure is contrasted with the decorative vegetation – definitely simplified and schematic. With some effort, it might be possible to identify some plants by having a closer look at their leaves as e.g. ferns, alocasia, codiaeum or lupins, but it seems that their picturesque shapes and the possibility to add a certain mysteriousness to the presented scene was most important for the artist.

What is most striking, however, is the feeling that these landscapes seem multi-layered – because some of their elements give the impression of being added to the painting onto already fully formed scenes. For example, in the painting presenting Judith, the palm trees and other plants look like a cut-out applied to the painting. The viewer of the painting with Salome, on the other hand, feels as if he were stuck in a cave, looking outside, or as if he had put an irregularly and fantastically shaped frame in a deep purple shade of violet onto the painting. In this arrangement, the lamp is closest to the viewer and looks like a bijou hanging from the edge of the painting.

The above measures resemble playing with contemporary digital photography, where you can insert a previously prepared frame, a decorative element or a comic bubble with an inscription onto the photo. Such an association would easily fit into the aesthetics of kitsch, the fascination with which Pérez-Villalta openly admits, contrasting it – or perhaps

juxtaposing it – with the elegance of drawing and passion for ancient literary classics²⁷.

In the light of the above analyses, it is worth considering whether Pérez-Villalta’s work is important and significant, or maybe just a postmodern effective collage, and the artist himself no-one else but an opportunist, taking advantage of pale and plebeian tastes? According to Hermann Broch: ‘The kitsch system can be deceptively reminiscent of art, especially if it is used by such masters as Wagner, French playwrights like Sardou, or to take an example from painting, like Dalí’ (Broch 1998: 115)²⁸. Developing Broch’s thought, Danuta Mikeska (2008: 33) adds: ‘Kitsch is produced by ‘radical esthetics’ seeking a beautiful effect, but not permanent, pure beauty, which appears only where the artist’s work is subordinated to the superior, ethical idea of good – in the Platonic sense. While kitsch requires its followers: ‘to work beautifully’ (in the sense: to achieve the effect), art prioritises the ethical slogan: ‘work for the sake of good’. Pérez-Villalta is often described as a ‘painter of beauty’ (*el pintor de la belleza*), and he himself points to this category as one of the most important in his work

At the same time, in one of the interviews, he mentions that he deeply regrets the fact that the contemporary painter is no longer a thinker and cannot be attributed the position of a priest – in the sense of a priest of art, but also someone who, if only by creating religious paintings, has contact with transcendence²⁹. Should this regret be seen as a calculated effect, or can it be interpreted as an attempt to look for a deeper artistic experience?

The art of Guillermo Pérez-Villalta is undoubtedly ‘the daughter of Baroque and psychedelicism’ (Garcia 2008), but also the effect of intellectual reflection, perfect composition and complex symbolism. Is it a kitsch-like

²⁷ ‘For Pérez-Villalta, the use of kitsch ‘bears the traces of provocation’, but it is in this type of aesthetics that the two planes of his artistic inspirations meet – the world of Walt Disney’s films and the work of Salvador Dalí’ (Oliveras 2004).

²⁸ The reference to Salvador Dalí’s work at this point is very symptomatic, as Pérez-Villalta admits that the language of his work is deeply connected with surrealism and speaks of Dalí as a great artist, one of those whose paintings give him the most aesthetic joy (see: Ángeles 2008).

²⁹ *Entrevista a Guillermo Pérez-Villalta, Pinturas 2008-2010*, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=6O89q3tZNsw> [accessed: 22.05.2019].

radical aestheticism or a surrealist phantasm of cold Mannerism, or maybe it is simply aimed at confronting the achievements of the great masters, going beyond the boundaries of the category of popular art – a deeply personal creativity? I do not undertake to resolve this issue.

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to present the silhouette of Guillermo Pérez-Villalta, one of the most important contemporary artists in Spain, in the context of the idea of kitsch. The key question for one who would like to study Pérez-Villalta's paintings is the problem of the coexistence of the negatively regarded component of kitsch and the real respect for the painter who is one of the most important figures of art in his country. What may seem even more peculiar is the fact that Pérez-Villalta himself declares a really positive attitude to kitsch – he even talks about his fascination with the phenomenon. This fascination may have its origins in the ideas represented by the socio-cultural movement from the 1970s-1980s – *la movida madrileña*. Pérez-Villalta was one of the co-founders of this movement. The *movida* was all about fun, laughter, colours and kitsch. Villalta painted two very important pictures at that time – *Grupo de personas en un atrio o la alegoría del arte y la vida o del presente y el futuro* (1975) and *Escena, personajes en la salida de un concierto rock* (1979), trying to depict the relationships between the members of the *movida* movement. Even now it is easy to find elements of kitsch in Pérez-Villalta's paintings which does not in any way deny his originality and high position among contemporary Spanish most venerated artists.

Keywords: kitsch, Guillermo Pérez-Villalta, contemporary art, Spanish art, *movida madrileña*, landscape