

Aesthetics of the Unseen

On Seeing in an Age of Images: A Conversation with Borja Pérez Mielgo

Interview by Magnus Green for the Istituto Fiorentino di Critica Culturale

In this conversation for the IFCC's *Aesthetics of the Unseen* series, Spanish painter Borja Pérez Mielgo reflects on the fate of art in a world of endless reproduction — from the commodification of the image to the algorithmic collapse of meaning. Based in Florence, Pérez Mielgo's work reclaims the slow gesture — the brushstroke, the shadow, the sacred weight of seeing — reopening a dialogue between the Baroque and the digital to ask what remains of the human when creation itself becomes automated.

Speaking with Magnus Green, he traces the lineage of artistic resistance from the Baroque to the present, exploring how figuration, time, and craft might restore depth and contemplation to a culture defined by speed. What emerges is not nostalgia, but a call to recover the act of seeing itself as a form of moral and political renewal.

MAGNUS GREEN: In today's visual world, images are instant, infinite, and disposable. Yet historically, art carried a sacred presence — a way of mediating between worlds. Can art still resist, or has it become inseparable from the systems that sustain it?

BORJA MIELGO: Art today is something completely different from what it used to be — and from what it was meant to be. It was once mystical, bound up with religion, with shamanism — a way of connecting worlds. We lived surrounded by fewer images, so each one carried weight. Each image could speak, and you could feel its silence.

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Now we live in a world that is flooded, where images no longer carry depth but noise. It's no wonder art means less.

For me, the change began long ago — with the Greeks and the Romans, through the Middle Ages, and especially in the Renaissance and the Baroque. The real break came later, with the rise of the Anglosphere — the British Empire, the Industrial Revolution — when the work of art became a thing to sell. A product. From that moment, art became empty, superficial, something mostly for an intellectual elite who understand its codes.

By the 1940s, the United States wanted to move away from the European avant-garde — from representation toward abstraction. They took that and pushed it further. Painting and sculpture turned conceptual, almost Hegelian: the idea comes before the object. You have an idea — you throw a hammer to the floor — and it means whatever you decide it means. The concept becomes the value, and then you sell it. Not the painting, but the *idea* of the painting.

That is where the danger lies. The concept becomes detached from the hand, from experience. The artist is no longer paid for the work, but for the immaterial idea, the myth that surrounds it. We live in a world where people don't really know how to look at art, or how to feel it without someone explaining it first. Art becomes commentary about itself. You can even make art with ChatGPT now — just write what you want, and the machine produces it.

Walter Benjamin once said that mechanical reproduction would destroy the *aura* of art — its unique presence in time and space. In the algorithmic age, where every image can be endlessly remade, has that prophecy already come true?

What we need now is an artistic revolution. We have to detach creation from the market completely. Larry Shiner wrote that there would come a third art — something we couldn't yet imagine. That's what we're living through now: the age of the algorithm.

Our art has become a product that we must promote ourselves, because no one else will. You're competing not only with other artists but with the algorithm itself — with what it decides deserves attention. It's not only a competition of images, but of visibility. The machine decides what is seen, and what is not. Everything becomes a market.

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We need to break that logic, or at least to say: *it doesn't have to be this way*. History hasn't ended. There are still other ways to look, other ways to create.

Maybe we should look backward — to the Renaissance — when art created a space for contemplation. When seeing was an act of patience, a discipline. We need to reopen that space today, to learn again how to see — and through that, how to think.

That feels almost like a moral gesture — to learn how to see again.

Exactly. We've lost that natural sense of vision. Seeing has become something mechanical, almost passive. But true seeing is active; it transforms you. To look slowly is to resist.

Your recent exhibition is marked by a tenebrous quality — it recalls Caravaggio, but also something more modern, more restless. The Baroque has always had this ability to make chaos sublime. Is your return to that visual language nostalgic, or a way to think through the excess of the algorithmic age?

I don't want to paint for Instagram — though many artists do. I use it, yes, but I try not to let it dictate what I make. My choice of the Baroque connects to the Hellenistic world — history repeats in waves. This doesn't mean we can predict the future, but mankind is mankind. Certain relations never change.

The forms of power evolve — the desire to build empires remains. From the Hellenistic, to the Roman, to the Spanish Empire, and now the Anglosphere — each creates its own kind of struggle, its own kind of visibility. Seeing that pattern, I could choose to be a Greek painter, or a Baroque painter, but either way it becomes a language of resistance — working within the form to question what dominates it.

Would you describe that as an archaeology of empire — tracing the same structures of domination — or a rehearsal for the world to come?

Both. My process begins with intuition. It's an emotional reaction I try to support later with theory. You have to be both an archaeologist and an explorer: to look backward and forward at once. Technically, I aim to master the craft, but once you do that, the question

becomes how to use it — how to respond to the present with a language that everyone can understand. That language, for me, is figuration, not abstraction.

Why figuration? What gives it that reach?

Because it doesn't need to be explained. If you build a narrative inside the painting, the viewer can enter it. They can project themselves into the story through the archetypes that already shape who we are. Abstraction can become elitist — difficult to read. You see a white canvas with a black dot and you need the artist to explain it. The meaning lives in their words, not in the work. That puts the artist in a strange position — as gatekeeper of meaning.

In your work, the figure is often framed by shadow. Light and darkness — revelation and concealment — feel inseparable. Where does truth live, for you: in the light, or in the shadow?

In the tension between them. Always in the tension. Caravaggio understood this. He was immersed in the language of Catholicism — for him, light was God in a world falling into darkness. It was conceptual, but it was also pedagogical. Most people couldn't read, but they could sit in mass and *see* a Caravaggio — and understand the divine.

I see something similar today, only inverted. People can read now, but how much do we really read? We skim headlines, scroll through tweets, glance at images, and then move on. We no longer *see*. And now we can generate an image instantly — without ever truly looking.

Painting, poetry, sculpture— they all take time. They insist on duration. In a world addicted to acceleration, do you see the act of slowing down as a kind of resistance?

Completely. That's what makes us human: working with our hands, over time. Machines were meant to free us from labour, but they've colonised our free time instead. We've delegated the creative act to them.

That's the paradox. We thought the machine would give us time to live, to think, to dream. Instead, it consumes the time we have left. Resisting means reclaiming that time — sitting down, working with your hands, making again. It's a political act disguised as patience.

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other ways to create.*

Florence is a city of artisans, but also of consumption. It sells beauty even as it preserves it. Was that tension part of what drew you here?

Absolutely. I studied at the Florence Academy, where training is deeply tied to craft. It's a city of workshops, of artisans creating beauty — but it's also become a boutique city. People come here to *consume* culture, to buy a piece of the Renaissance. Few come to learn a trade, to write, to study Machiavelli. The engagement is surface-level — “I've been to Florence.” The city becomes a postcard, and the artisans produce mainly for tourists. It's a cycle — beautiful, but hollow.

Florence lives off its ghosts — humanism, the Renaissance, the birth of political thought. Do you see the city as haunted by its past, or sustained by it?

Both, but the haunting can be fertile. Florence needs to reclaim its past, not as nostalgia but as renewal — to reopen that space where artists and philosophers once met to shape perspective. The question is what Florence's richness can bring to the *future*. That's the challenge: not to repeat history, but to awaken it.

You've spoken about *personal utopia* — a phrase that feels both intimate and radical. When collective utopias collapse, can the personal still be transformative, or does it retreat into private meaning?

You have to start with yourself — with a vision of who you could be. The Platonic idea of the philosopher-warrior: someone who strives toward an ideal. Otherwise, you fall into nihilism. The meaninglessness of our condition gives us freedom — the freedom to create meaning. Value has to return to the self, not to what you post online.

The Greeks understood this. If you take humanity for what it could be, you'll meet it halfway. Take it for what it is, and you fall short. That's true in life, and in art.

In your work, does figuration become a way to revalue the individual — to make the human visible again?

Exactly. Composition is about shaping nature into something of your own, projecting spirit into matter. It's the self made visible.

When Picasso and Braque faced photography and cinema, they broke the image apart — colour, line, fragment — to show thought itself. But that also pushed meaning outside the work. Figuration brings it back to the physical, to what is human. It's a way of cutting through the complexity around us by returning to the real — to what can still be touched.

To look slowly is to resist.

Closing Reflection

In an age saturated with images yet starved of vision, Borja Pérez Mielgo reminds us that resistance might begin not in theory or protest, but in the act of attention itself. To slow down, to touch, to see — these are not nostalgic gestures, but radical ones. Through the language of figuration and the patience of craft, his work invites us to pause, to look again, and to rediscover in art the fragile dignity of the human.

Author Notes

Borja Pérez Mielgo (Málaga, 1988) is a Spanish painter and academic based in Florence. Trained in the United Kingdom, where he completed a BA (Hons) and MFA at the University of Wales Institute, Cardiff, he later studied at the Academy of Realist Art in Scotland and graduated from the Florence Academy of Art, which he now regards as his artistic home. His experience as an official copyist at the Museo del Prado and his sustained engagement with the Italian and Spanish Baroque—particularly Caravaggio and Jusepe de Ribera—have defined the trajectory of his practice. Pérez Mielgo describes himself as a Baroque painter working in a contemporary key, drawing upon Hellenistic and Classical influences while articulating a distinctly Mediterranean sensibility.

Magnus Green is a political philosopher and founder of the Istituto Fiorentino di Critica Culturale (IFCC). His research explores how violence, technology, and representation shape moral and political life, leading the institute's research axes on *Aesthetics and Resistance* and *Critical Technologies & Digital Subjectivity*.