Obra maestra
Author:
Juan Tallón

Juan Tallón (Vilardevós, Ourense, 1975) is a prolific journalist, writer and translator from Galicia, Spain, who has published several books in both Spanish and Galician. His latest book, Obra maestra (Masterpiece) is a nonfiction novel about the 2006 disappearance of a 38-ton carten steel sculpture by renowned American sculptor Richard Serra.

The sculpture, Equal-Parallel/Guernica-Bengasi , had been commissioned by the Reina Sofía Museum in 1987, later acquired by them and, due to its massive size, stored since 1990 at the main depot of Macarrón S.A., a prestigious firm specialized in art storage as well as shipping, packing and installation. Unfortunately –and inexplicably—the Reina Sofía Museum was unaware of the fact that Macarrón S.A had gone bankrupt several years before, and that Equal-Parallel/Guernica-Bengasi had basically evaporated in the process. It is missing to this day.

How does a 40-ton steel sculpture vanish into thin air, without anyone being the wiser, much less its owners? Obra maestra explores this mystery from every possible angle, and delves into every possible theory, even the most far-fetched. It also examines the story of the piece itself from its inception in Serra's mind, Serra's arduous but successful career, his ideas about art, and his decades-long relationship with Spain and Spanish art (particularly with Basque sculptor Jorge Oteiza).

But Tallón does not stop there, and for good measure throws in the personal stories of many people whose lives, in some way or another, have been entangled in the story of the vanished masterpiece, from reporters to art historians, detectives, museum administrators, Roma petty thieves, assorted bureaucrats, taxi drivers, Basque separatists, even the editor of the book and Tallón himself –a multitude of stories all told in the first person.

This results in a mammoth polyphony of 73 voices that come and go in no apparent order, jumping in time from the 1980s to the 2020s and in space from New York City to Germany, Madrid, or Bilbao. It is a difficult juggling act, which Tallón anchors in a New Spanish Books Reader's Report 2022 Edition journalist's thorough investigation of his sources as well as in a novelist's careful attention to the individual quirks and idiosyncrasies of each and every one of his characters.

Obra maestra begins with a text received by an ABC journalist while in the theater, triggering an ABC exposé about the vanished sculpture and the ineptitude of the museum administrators, and ends in 2019 with two employees of the Reina Sofía taking a trip to a small-town artist's shop, following a tip that ends up being as hopeless as all the previous ones. These two occurrences serve less as beginning and end than as bookends. The constant jumps in space, time, and voice can be disorienting at times; they make the book as frustrating as it is fascinating. It is, however, hard to put down.

In my opinion, American readers will be interested in this book by its literary qualities, the real-life mystery it investigates, as well as the fact that it explores a whole era in the American arts (even Philip Glass has a cameo). I therefore recommend Obra Maestra for translation without reservations.