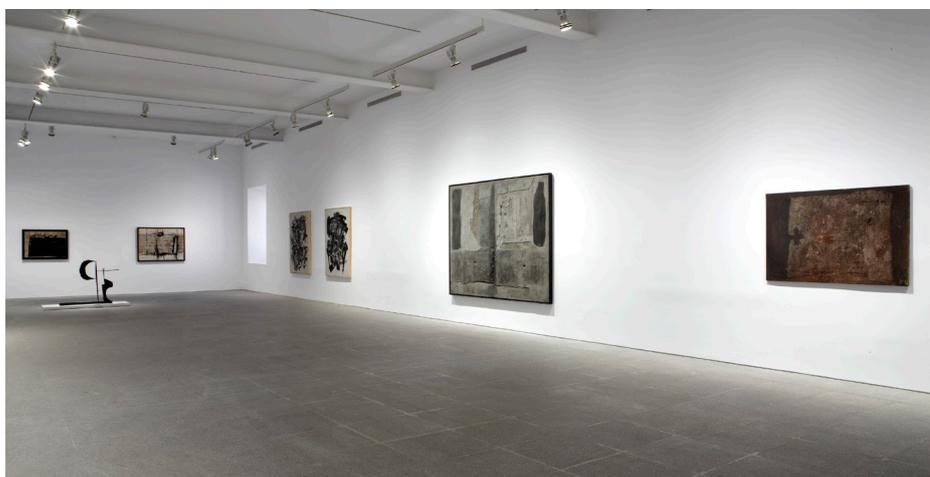


Spanish Art of the 1950s and Its International Projection

Between the years 1957 and 1960 Spain joined the international circuit of modern art thanks to an idiosyncratic contribution to Art Informel that appealed to both European and American abstract trends (the tradition of the new) and to the great tradition of Spanish art as exemplified by Velázquez and Goya. The context in which this autochthonous trend appeared was that of the end of autocracy and the diplomatic and economic openness promoted by the Franco regime.



In 1958 Juan Eduardo Cirlot wrote in *La Estafeta Literaria* that Art Informel was 'a genuine mutation compared to abstraction,' an idea on a par with Clement Greenberg's account of the vitality, ambition and inventiveness of Abstract Expressionism in his 1955 essay 'American-Type Painting,' which the influential critic attributed to a new, pragmatic and American reading of the European classical avant-garde.

In Spain, 'all-powerful' Art Informel (as defined by Vicente Aguilera Cerni) would be the most visible trend between 1957 and 1960, precisely the years in which the El Paso group was founded and then broke up. They were also triumphant years for Spanish art (especially for Art Informel) in São Paulo, Venice and New York. The group of artists who were selected by Luis González Robles ('on account of their unique concerns with clearly Iberian tendencies') for the 1958 edition of the Venice Biennale stood out as a genuine reference point for the success of Spanish art and, above all, for its parity with international trends, particularly with the new abstract painting that thanks to the political presence of the United States in Europe was becoming a true lingua franca.

This hall reflects what could have been a typical exhibition of Spanish art in Venice, Paris or New York until well into the sixties—different strains of abstraction, as in the case of American painting practiced by distinctive individual artists, that recognised itself in the Spanish pictorial tradition (Velázquez, Goya, Zurbarán) and in American trends (Pollock, Rothko, De Kooning, Motherwell) well known in Spain since 1955. From that moment on, Surrealist and/or Primitivist attitudes began to give way to a much more determined form of abstraction, increasingly described by critics as *informalismo* or *aformalismo*.

Between 1950 and 1955, following a trip to Paris once the Dau al Set group had split up, Antoni Tàpies (1923–2012) moved away from Surrealist imagery and gradually

(perhaps as a result of the influence of Dubuffet and Fautrier, the formulators of Art Brut) introduced a new element in his painting, the wall, which replaced the dominant feature of his self-portraits, i.e. the face. Matter and texture established themselves over colour, line and contrasts, transforming painting into a continuum in which references either disappear or are concealed and the beholder faces the challenge of carrying out alternative visual paths. Matter is also the central motif in the oeuvre of Modest Cuixart (1925), another member of Dau al Set who paid his debt to Surrealism in Lyon, where he settled in 1951. *Omorka* (1957) illustrates the refinement to which Cuixart submitted his painting in the late fifties, turning to dark shades of colour and placing a clear emphasis on textures.

Rafael Canogar (1935), a versatile painter who moves easily from the realm of abstraction to that of critical realism, is a fine example of the step that separates classical abstraction from Art Informel. Canogar, the youngest member of the El Paso group, had not been inspired by Surrealism but by the painting of Daniel Vázquez Díaz (in other words, the epigones of Cubism) in whose atelier he had been working sin-

New acquisitions

Manolo Millares.
Cuadro, 1957

ce 1948. After meeting Manuel Conde in 1952 Canogar turned to abstraction. Pintura nº 27 painted in 1959 proves that action (in this case, the incision in the wall) is the most important element of his work. Antonio Saura (1930–1998) has related how after travelling to Paris in 1953 he met Benjamin Péret, who brought him into contact with the Surrealists, who by then had become rather decadent.

Dubuffet and his reading of Michel Tapié's *Un art autre* would prove decisive for the Aragonese painter, as would his more or less direct knowledge of the work of American Abstract Expressionists, particularly Pollock ('a liquid and expansive geometry that extends the picture in all directions,' wrote Saura in 1958). Pollock became a reference in his personal and determined option for Expressionism. Beneath Saura's distinctively intricate, often black and white painting lie figurative outlines, female silhouettes, crucifixions and crowds; working as an action painter, Saura followed in the footsteps of Velázquez and Goya.

Alongside Saura, Manolo Millares (1926–1972) was one of the architects of the El Paso group and the author of a number of highly relevant and revealing theoretical texts. Despite his aesthetic affinities with De Kooning and Burri, Millares had a formal repertoire all his own, and in 1955 abandoned his pictographs and turned to burlap (the most visible element in his work) which should be related to the wrapping of the mummies of the aboriginal inhabitants of the Canary Islands conserved in El Museo Canario. These torn and sewn burlaps are presented as an allegory of the confrontation between destruction and creation (an issue that worried the artist tremendously, as we discover in his writings), as symbols of the transformation of burlap into artistic material and as a reflection on the return to origins. Occasionally we come across suggestions of vaguely human forms that refer back to the homunculus, another important theoretical element in Millares' oeuvre. In the fifties these black and white paintings became charged with a sense of drama; revisiting the notion of 'Black Spain' embodied by the Generation of '98 writers they were designed to be provocative. 'Art—today—

fulfils a social function because it is able to bring out a rash previously concealed behind hypocrisy.'

From the point of view of its interpretation, Art Informel stood halfway between the notion of autonomy and the specific content to which Millares appealed, and perhaps the two gazes are not mutually excluding.

In spite of the usual mixture of sand and oil in the painting of Luis Feito (1929), the artist denied that matter were the essence of his painting and adopted a radically independent artistic stance, 'Painting has its own plain values that enable it to produce emotions and feelings without representing or symbolising anything; each individual spectator can have a different impression to that of the actual painter.' Art critics suggested a similar openness in the case of the metallic canvases by Manuel Rivera (1928–1995), his chief motif and yet at the same time an element that transcended the artist's intentions and evoked the problems of Op Art.

The scale of abstraction was marked by the contrasting sculpture produced by Martín Chirino (1925) in the tradition of the iron sculptors Julio González and David Smith, sculpture which 'with a *minimum* of matter, aspires to a *maximum* of space.'

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