

In the Shadow of Dictatorship: Creating the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art

Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University
Curated by Amanda W. Dotseth and Clarisse Fava-Piz
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Abstract Spanish art on loan from Cuenca, Spain, filled rooms that wrapped around the permanent collection of the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, like youthful arms around an old man. The Meadows Museum is home to the prized Spanish Renaissance and Baroque art collection of its founder, Algur H. Meadows, which he began to acquire (along with petroleum interests) in the mid-1950s. When the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español in Cuenca decided to renovate its galleries, it agreed to loan its artwork for traveling international exhibitions. Given the Meadows's Iberian genetics, providing temporary housing for this collection was like inviting a close relative to stay.

A catalogue accompanying the exhibition was developed and published by the Meadows Museum.¹

An essay by Manuel Fontán del Junco relates how abstract art was freely produced in Spain during the Franco dictatorship and strategically promoted abroad by the regime as evidence of its cultural erudition. However, this kind of avant-garde art was not actively championed in Spain itself. Ordinary Spaniards remained largely unaware of modernist trends in art.² So when the Filipino-born artist Fernando Zóbel moved to Spain in 1958 (after graduating from Harvard and completing a residency at the Rhode Island School of Design), he decided to establish a museum that could generate awareness of abstract art within the country. A fellow artist suggested he locate it in an unlikely group of fifteenth-century buildings in rural Cuenca, known as the Hanging Houses because of their seemingly precarious location on

cliffs, and the museum opened there in 1966.³ The juxtaposition of abstract paintings and Renaissance architecture has been described as a perfect blending, so it is not surprising that this same sense of seamless companionship of new and old was generated by this current exhibition and the Meadows permanent collection.

The exhibition included a wide sampling of Spanish abstract art placed in six rooms whose composite floor plan formed a large U shape, which enfolded the space housing the Meadows's notable permanent collection. In each room, ample wall space surrounded every object, allowing individual works in the exhibition to breathe visually. Often an entire wall was given over to a single work. The objects included paintings, mixed-media pieces, and sculpture, both in metal and wood, that date from roughly the mid-1950s until 1980, with most work created during the 1960s. Given when they were made, it is not surprising that the works reflected artistic movements akin to Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, Hard-Edge painting, and Op Art. Compared to American painting from that time, the works were mostly smaller in scale, in keeping with the size of traditional easels rather than the proportions of a mural. In this sense they possessed a

European air. What was perhaps most striking was the palette of the artworks: rich browns and deep blacks, reds, and golds dominated. Occasionally, bright colors like daisy yellow, pastel pink, or ocean blue popped out, but overall the works' palette was subdued, quietly luminous, with calculat- ingly textured surfaces. One dared to recognize in the work the lighting of a Velázquez or Zurbarán, something perceptibly Spanish, as well as a Hispanic love of capturing surface detail.

The first room offered an introduction to the origins of the museum in Cuenca and supplied a brief history of several artists' co-operatives, such as Dau al Set (Seventh Side of the Die), which included the Catalan artist Antoni Tàpies, as well as the groups El Paso and Equipo 57, all of which helped abstract art in Spain retain a presence under the dictatorship. Honorary placement in the exhibition was given to two works by Tàpies in recognition of his significant role in advocating modern art in Spain. The first, *Brown and Ocher* (1959), was hung immediately to the right as one entered the exhibition. *Large X* (1962), was placed in the adjacent room so it could be seen through a doorway as one stood in front of the first Tàpies. Both are richly textured mixed-media objects comprising

aluminum powders and gold pigments bonded with polyvinyl on canvas. Tàpies used his characteristic X symbol in both. While the mark forms the loose compositional structure of the second painting, in the first it is a minor element set at the top left alongside a colossal stretch of gold in the shape of an abstracted battle tank that dominates the composition.

The second gallery, slightly larger and more rectangular than the first, emphasized the abstract Spanish artists' use of concrete materials. Roughened scrap metal, burlap, and wood were collaged onto gleaming painted surfaces that avoided verism or symbolic associations. The palette in this gallery was decidedly gloomy, dominated by blacks and browns. The trend toward tortured materials was explained as a response to trauma brought on by the Spanish Civil War and World War II.⁴ Many of the pieces—without being literal—recall landscapes, potentially battlegrounds, in their compositional designs arranged along horizontal fields. This is the case with Gerardo Rueda's *Athos* (1960), a reference to the Greek monastery at Mount Athos. The work comprises gray cliff forms or short skyscrapers devoid of surface detail that appear as if through smoke. Lucio Muñoz's *Green and Black Structure* (1961), made from

charcoal-colored wood and black oil, suggests an embattled hilltop village, its recent burning evident. Other works had impasto that had been scraped or stabbed. In *Metamorphosis (November)* (1962), Manuel Rivera used wire and gauze to form flame-like plant shapes that disintegrate in front of a hot copper ground. Modest Cuixart's *Large Baroque* (1959), depicts a bulbous shape that seems to bleed beneath a scratched overlay of metallic paint suggestive of barbed wire. This room also contained a sculpture by Pablo Serrano, *Cave for Mankind* (1962), a cast bronze over a foot high, which expresses fragmentation and disfigurement. The piece bears irregular shapes like horizontal stalagmites. In each work in this room, the material eschewed symbolic signification and instead directly conveyed its intended emotion through its substance. While associations might be made, ultimately it was the materials themselves that generated pure expression.

Due to its brighter colors of yellow, red, and cerulean blue, the third and largest room offered relief from the second's horrors. The works recalled New York-based Abstract Expressionism. For example, José Guerrero's *Somber Red* (1964), and Luis Feito's *Number 460-A* (1963), contain jagged edges and a reddish palette like that

found in a Clyfford Still or the confusion of figure/ground of Robert Motherwell's broad strokes of black. Miguel Ángel Campano's *Unititled (The Bridge II)* (1979), shows traces of an arbitrary reshuffling of compositional elements, with an enticing yellow palette, like something found in the work of Willem de Kooning. Campano's composition was unusually large in scale in comparison to the rest of the works in the exhibition, more in keeping with its American counterparts. One artist in this room, José Guerrero, lived in New York in the 1950s, which, according to the exhibition catalogue, transformed his technique.⁵ His *Blue Intervals* (1971), with its repeated black ovals atop long blue rectangles, conjures the image of monks walking in procession to prayer. One work in this room by Antonio Saura continued the Spanish character of the two previous rooms. *Brigitte Bardot* (1959), contains mangled forms in black and white slashes of paint that are reminiscent of figures in Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*.

The next room was smaller and separated by a temporary wall, offering a bit of an interlude with walls painted black and only the objects illuminated. The intense spotlighting caused these color-rich paintings to glow. Works here included those by Antonio

Lorenzo, Manuel Rivera, and Gustavo Torner. According to the wall text, this room replicated a similar space, the Sala Negra, created by Zóbel in his Cuenca museum, to offer an area for contemplation.⁶ That idea, however, rang a little insincere and forced. The slightly baroque staging of these works seemed unnecessary, although it continued to make one think of Velázquez's dramatic use of light.

The last two rooms outlined the direction of later abstraction in Spain, which, influenced by Equipo 57, was characterized by strong geometry and mechanized designs. In some ways, this room possessed a more authentic spiritual quality than that of the Sala Negra. According to the didactics, a Madrid computer lab, the Centro de Cálculo, became a center for highly rational and objective art making long after Equipo 57 disbanded.⁷ But a sense of the spiritual was not absent in these works. The exhibition presented a tranquil and beautiful work by José Luis Alexanco, *Used Curves* (1977), a piece made with acrylic, graphite, and what must have been a very thin felt-tip pen. The composition was built on a beige grid formed using gentle straight double black lines. Irregular circular smudges within each grid square are surrounded by more loosely drawn squares at

angles to the base grid. Alexanco's touch is delicate, and although systematic, each mark retains individual character and possesses a contemplative quality. Also formed on a grid, Jordi Teixidor's *Yellow Bands I* (1978), recalls the soft work of Agnes Martin, as well as her faint pastel palette. Néstor Basterretxea's *Progression* (1959), is a bas-relief in slate. Its surface is like that of an extensively used and erased chalkboard, reminiscent of a Cy Twombly but on a smaller scale. Placed next to it was a 1975 untitled work by Elena Asins that possesses similar Twombly-like properties. In the center of this room at eye level, a welded and painted iron-rod sculpture by Eusebio Sempere (1966) was placed. Light flowed through its patterned forms as it interacted in visually dynamic ways with the Teixidor painting behind it. The play with light throughout this room was not unlike that of a modern chapel, evoking divinity despite any emphasis on rationality.

In the last gallery, the space appeared as a variation on the room where the exhibition began, with colors once again muted and compositions fluid and less geometric. One piece that stood out was by Sarah Grilo, who came to Spain from Argentina via New York City. Her painting *Announcement* (1971), recalls graffiti scrawled on

a worn subway wall, filled with random tagging and decayed printed letters and numbers, with an overall palette and sensibility that once again recalls the work of Cy Twombly. The exhibition finished much like it began, with an atmospheric painting by Eva Lootz, called *Black Painting* (1974). It hearkened back visually to the earlier work by Tàpies in the first gallery, its wide area of color forming a broad oval, this time at the bottom of the work, as if it were Tàpies's *Brown and Ocher* turned upside down.

By this final room, the complete range of abstract exploration in postwar Spain had been presented. At the end of the exhibition loop, one could enter the Meadows's Renaissance and Baroque galleries. Yet there was no jarring change of mood or aesthetic as one stepped into the collection of earlier art objects, largely because of a continued Spanish sensibility conveyed through color and texture throughout the Cuenca exhibition.

¹ *In the Shadow of Dictatorship: Creating the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art*, ed. Clarisse Fava-Piz and Amanda W. Dotseth, exh. cat. (Dallas: Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist University, 2023).

² Manuel Fontán del Junco, “It seems the same as ever, but it is the never before seen’: Creating a Museum in Franco’s Spain,” in Fava-Piz and Dotseth, *In the Shadow of Dictatorship*, 16.

³ Fontán del Junco, 17.

⁴ Wall text, *In the Shadow of Dictatorship: Creating the Museum of Spanish Abstract Art*, organized by and presented at Meadows Museum, Dallas, TX, February 26–July 30, 2023.

⁵ Clarisse Fava-Piz, Miranda Saylor, and Olivia Turner, “Catalogue,” in Fava-Piz and Dotseth, *In the Shadow of Dictatorship*, 114.

⁶ Wall text, *In the Shadow of Dictatorship*.

⁷ Wall text, *In the Shadow of Dictatorship*.