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# 1939-1992: Context of César Manrique's work

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To speak of the historical context of César Manrique's *oeuvre* is to invoke Spanish art of the second half of the twentieth century, to review events between two clearly symbolic dates in the history of Spanish culture. On one extreme, 1939, the year of the bitter end of the civil war and the beginning of autarchy, also marks the starting point of César Manrique's artistic career. The other, 1992, the year of the World Exhibition in Seville and the Barcelona Olympic Games, hailed as the culmination of the internationalisation of Spanish cultural and social reality, coincided with he artist's sudden death. But the context of César Manrique's *oeuvre* is somewhat more complicated because in his work, as in his life, there are three parallel, inseparable and overlapping references: the Canary Island, Spanish and international domains, with one or another playing the preponderant role depending on the year, the circumstances and the artist's plastic needs.

## Post-war years

César Manrique decided to be a painter at one of the most difficult moments in contemporary Spanish history: the year 1939. The end of the civil war, with the victory of the Franco band, was also

a point of no return in many other ways. In the local environment in the Canary Islands, after the blossoming of the avant-garde in the thirties around *Gaceta de Arte* initiatives and the presence of a group of surrealist artists, the advent of the forties brought the "surrender of artistic modernity"[1]. One example of such *surrender* in Manrique's immediate circle was Pancho Lasso, a sculptor born in Lanzarote who had been close to Alberto Sánchez in pre-war Madrid and played an active role in the experiences of the so-called Vallecas School. In the years after the war, although Lasso conveyed his passion for formal experimentation to the young César, he lacked the audacity to follow through on his own avant-garde tendencies. Many artists and writers who, having taken part in what has been called the *Silver Age*[2] of Spanish culture, died or were exiled as a result of the civil war or, when they did stay in the country - such as in the case of Lasso and many others -, they changed the course of their activity to adapt to the new situation and needs. Despite this, recent historiographic proposals have studied this transition from one age to another in an attempt to discover not only where breaks were made with the past, but the existence of surprising continuities[3] as well. And while the immediate post-war period must unquestionably be construed, generally speaking, as a return to conservatism, it should also be recalled that, in the official domain, and in particular in the world of artistic education and national exhibitions, academic discourse at its most antiquated had never ceased to reign, for all the numerous exceptions that may be cited, even at the height of avant-garde optimism, in the ten years from 1925 to 1935.



The nineteen forties began harshly for young Spanish artists as a period laden with economic and social problems, in which it was no easy task to find a place for artistic activity. The existence of dire poverty among large swathes of the population commanded other priorities. Barring early exceptions marked by the building of the Valley of the Fallen, the Ministry of the Air Force as a replica of the Escorial monastery, the nearby Arch of Triumph at Moncloa, or the appearance of journals such as *Vértice*, *Laureados de España* or *Escorial*, the Franco regime had no such thing as a medium- or long-term aesthetic. Consequently, the new situation was not so much one of politically oriented art, but simply and plainly the victory of the same aesthetic conservatism that had always been politically powerful, and while challenged in prior decades by revitalising initiatives such as the exhibitions organised by the Society of Iberian Artists or ADLAN (Amigos de las Artes Nuevas - Friends of the New Arts), it had never been defeated. On the peninsula, the cities that had been most active prior to 1936, Barcelona, Bilbao and Madrid, attempted to recover their impetus, little by little. Hesitantly,

**1.** De la Nuez Santana, José Luis: *La abstracción pictórica en Canarias. Dinámica histórica y debate teórico (1930-1970)*. Gran Canaria Island Council, 1995, p. 33.

**2.** Mainer, José Carlos: *La Edad de Plata (1902-1939). Ensayo de interpretación de un proceso cultural*. Madrid, Cátedra, 1981.

**3.** Brihuega, Jaime and Llorente, Ángel: *Tránsitos. Artistas españoles antes y después de la guerra civil*. Madrid, Fundación Caja Madrid, 1999.

and despite a virtual lack of a community of collectors, a few galleries reopened. In Barcelona, the Syra, Argos, Augusta, Pictoria galleries, the Gaspar Showroom, the Mediterranea bookshop or the French Institute began to undertake activities which, while not radically innovative, did at least mean a return to some degree of normality. In Madrid, traditional establishments such as the Circle of Fine Art or the Cano and Vilches Showrooms were slowly joined by others, more open to novelty; these included the Biosca and Estilo galleries and, later, the Palma, Neblí, Sagra, Clan and Buchholz galleries and, finally in 1953, the Fernando Fe gallery, founded with the participation of César Manrique, among others.

Official activity in the Madrid of the forties, in turn, became the stronghold of a new conservatism. The teaching staff of the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Art, where César Manrique, like so many other artists of his generation, enrolled in 1945 in pursuit of better technical training, included Manuel Benedito, Pérez Comendador, or Chicharro, all staunch defenders of tradition. Their influence was offset by others, such as Vázquez Díaz, who, while adapting his iconography and public statements to the new situation, could, in a way, bridge the gap between the circumstances prevailing at the time and pre-civil war avant-gardism, conveying his memories of Parisian cubism or Madrilenian ultraism, to which he had been so close, along with a much freer sense of painting. The Museum of Modern Art, in turn, the only governmental institution existing at the time to promote the collection of contemporary art, which was headquartered in the National Library, inverted the progressive course charted by Juan de la Encina, the director during the Republic, to create a languishing entity, designed to be a mere receptacle for the works that were awarded prizes in National Fine Art Exhibitions or organiser of showings in which there was little or no commitment to the most recent art[4]. Insofar as the national exhibitions were concerned, the names of the winning authors and titles in the 1941 edition - Julia Minguillón for *La Escuela de Doloriñas* (Doloriñas' School), Francisco Núñez Losada for *Valle de Liébana* (Liébana Valley), or José Suárez Peregrín, for *Los caminantes de Emaús* (The Emaús wayfarers) - [5] are eloquent proof of how distant that environment was from the effervescent modernity of the twenties and thirties in Spain and of everything that meant being open to international currents. These were the years of autarchy, which was particularly hard on culture.



**4.** Jiménez-Blanco, María Dolores: *Arte y Estado en la España del siglo XX*. Madrid, Alianza, 1989.

**5.** Pantorba, Bernardino de: *Historia y Crítica de las Exposiciones Nacionales de Bellas Artes celebradas en España*. Madrid, ed. García-Rama, 1980, p. 306-310.

At the same time, in Madrid the so-called *Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte* (Brief Academy of Art Critique) initiated its activity; despite its minority and elitist nature, the academy would eventually be

an important factor in triggering the artistic revival that took place in the years that followed. This private association was founded by Eugenio D'Ors in 1941 with the aim of recovering the modernity that existed prior to the war and to invigorate the artistic environment of the age, to a degree. It grouped critics, artists, architects, diplomats, gallery owners, professionals and collectors, including the Countess of Campo Alange, Luis Felipe Vivanco, Ángel Ferrant, José Camón Aznar, Manuel Sánchez Camargo, Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, Rafael Santos Torroella, Josep Llorens Artigas, Ricardo Gullón, Pablo Beltrán de Heredia, Cesáreo Rodríguez-Aguilera and Conchita Montes. Although headquartered at the Biosca gallery, some of its activities took place in the showrooms of the Museum of Modern Art, with which it maintained constant ties, to the point that the academy has been regarded as the seed of what would later be the Museum of Contemporary Art, an institution much more open to modernity.

The importance of the Brief Academy can only be understood in its historic context: its highly eclectic yearly exhibitions, called the *Salones de los Once* (Showrooms of the eleven) progressively converged with contemporary artistic trends. Hence, as opposed to the most aesthetically and ideologically traditional academic figuration that prevailed in Madrid at the time, the Brief Academy encouraged a certain modernity that began with the recovery of some of the majors of the Spanish historic avant-garde, such as Palencia, Gargallo, Solana, Torres García, Barradas, Blanchard or Miró. But from its first exhibition, devoted to Nonell (a single painting) in 1942, the academy's proposals became bolder and bolder, making space in the latter years, in the fifties, for some of the artists who were establishing the guidelines of modernity pursuant to international tendencies. Such, for instance, is the case of Oteiza, Tàpies, Cuixart, Saura or Millares, who presented their works in this Madrilenian forum in the early fifties. Nonetheless, most of the artists who exhibited in the Brief Academy could generally be said to engage in moderately modern figuration: this description fits, for instance, Rafael Zabaleta, one of D'Ors protégés at the time, and Miguel Villá, San José, Eduardo Vicente, Cirilo Martínez Novillo or the group of "Indalianos"[6].

More or less simultaneously with the *Salones de los Once* in Madrid, the so-called *Salones de Octubre* (October Showrooms) appeared in Barcelona, in the first of which, held in 1948, the cohesive force was the collector Víctor María Imbert. More open than the exhibitions organised by D'Ors, they were instrumental in supporting young and decidedly reformist plastic artists such as Tàpies o



**6.** Sánchez Camargo, Manuel: *Historia de la Academia Breve de Crítica de Arte. Homenaje a Eugenio D'Ors*. Madrid, García Langa, 1963.

Cuixart, and in recovering, to some extent, the impetus lost with ADLAN and the Republic. It is no coincidence that Sebastià Gasch, one of the founders of ADLAN, authored the introduction to the catalogue for the 1948 exhibition.

The Brief Academy disappeared in 1954 and the *Salones de Octubre* in 1957, a sign that new circumstances had begun to reign by then in the artistic world, in which their endeavour in favour of revival was no longer required. Indeed, in the early fifties, important changes took place in the philosophy underlying the policy for cultural promotion, in response not only to a different official strategy, as so often has been sustained, but also to an artistic reality that had evolved and which required a new approach. From the end of the sombre forties and early fifties symptoms of this evolution began to appear in different parts of Spain. Groups of artists began to form, often with their own publications and journals, who opposed both purely academic aesthetics and the aseptic figuration, which was neither modern nor traditional, of the painters of the so-called Second Vallecas School or the Madrid School. In the forties the latter generally engaged in figuration - often landscapes - with a certain expressionist gloss, compatible with a strong constructivist rigour reminiscent of classicism. These new groups began to appear all across the country, committing their endeavour to something different, much more clearly reformist and cosmopolitan, which drew from the works of the great masters and movements of international modernity. Some of the more prominent of such groups were Pórtico, in Zaragoza (1947); Dau al Set, in Barcelona (1948) or L.A.D.A.C., Los Arqueros del Arte Contemporáneo (The archers of contemporary art), in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (1950). Among the founders of this last group, "the most rigorously abstract and avant-garde group of all those that had appeared up to that time in Spain"[7], were the publishers of the journal *Planas*, the Millares brothers, with whom César Manrique had long been on very friendly terms. Each of these groups proposed different visions of modernity, but they all participated in the debate on the issue that was the focus of critics' articles and studio conversations for most of the fifties: the abstraction-figuration dialectic or, more precisely, the theoretical fundamentals of abstraction[8]. While the members of Pórtico occasionally engaged in figuration influenced by Picasso, Klee and Miró, at other times their works were thoroughly abstract. The distinguishing feature of the Dau al Set group was a certain surrealist legacy, translated into what came to be called *magistic* nocturnal visions, midway between the caustic and the transcendental. With the exception of Joan Ponç, this *magicism* soon evolved into research into material and gestural abstraction. In the case of



**7.** Calvo Serraller, Francisco (ed.): *España. Medio Siglo de Arte de Vanguardia. 1939-1985*. Madrid, Fundación Santillana-Ministerio de Cultura, 1985, vol. I, p. 293.

**8.** Aróstegui, Antonio: *El arte abstracto*. Granada, Ediciones Cam, 1954.

Tàpies, the member of the group who first abandoned their experiments, material research would follow other courses that exceeded the limits of painting to include the object, a new spirituality and other sorts of content, often political. The works of the L.A.D.A.C. group, in turn, in addition to drawing from the surrealist legacy of the *Gaceta de Arte*, contained a reflection on indigenous Canary Island art.

Actually, this latter reflection can be associated with a view of primitivism as a source of inspiration for a new plastic expression that was to reach beyond the bounds of island culture. It was not coincidental that two of the members of L.A.D.A.C. who had enjoyed great relevance in the pre-war artistic world, the sculptor Ángel Ferrant and the editor-in-chief of *Gaceta de Arte*, Eduardo Westerdahl, took part in another of the most significant post-war experiences in Spain: the Altamira School (1948), whose scope and importance have yet to be studied in detail. From what we know, the origin of this school was the aesthetic discovery of the Altamira caves by the German painter Mathias Goeritz, who soon contacted intellectuals and artists such as Pablo Beltrán de Heredia, Ricardo Gullón and Ángel Ferrant. This encounter spurred international conversations on artistic modernity,



abstraction and primitivism, as well as a journal titled *Bisonte* and a collection of artistic monographs. School membership included Sebastià Gasch, Rafael Santos Torroella, Eugenio d'Ors, Llorens Artigas, Joan Miró, Modest Cuixart, Pancho Cossío - a painter much admired by Manrique -, the Italian architect Sartoris and the English artists Tony Stubbing, Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. It will be noted that concurrence can be readily found in the names behind many of the reformist activities of the forties and fifties. This concurrence partially overlapped into other initiatives as well, such as Club 49 and Cobalt 49 in Barcelona.

## Looking outward in the fifties

Thus, when the political and social change taking place in the early fifties in Spain provided a suitable backdrop for a new strategy in artistic promotion, the artistic environment was very different from the atmosphere prevailing in the early post-war years. The situation in which César Manrique had begun his life as a painter on the Canary Islands in the early forties or which he found on his arrival in Madrid in 1945, had evolved into something else. Politically speaking, 1950 can be said to

mark the beginning of an opening up of the Franco regime, concurring with the end of a boycott on the part of Western countries that spelled the end of autarchy. In the cabinet appointed on 18 July 1951, Joaquín Ruiz Giménez took over the Ministry of National Education. This appointment was instrumental for contemporary Spanish art, since from then on greater contact with international cultural circles was allowed, primarily through a series of events such as the Latin American Art Biennials or the rethinking of the Spanish representation in international events such as the Venice or São Paulo Biennials. Under the responsibility of Luis González Robles, the customary policy of designating of "established" - i.e., academic - artists for both the Venice and São Paulo events was changed to promote artists representing the new avant-garde whose proposals were more in line with international trends. This change of strategy was soon to bear fruit - the São Paulo Biennial Grand Prize went to Oteiza in 1957, the 1958 Venice Biennial Grand Prize for Sculpture to Chillida -, and moreover, portrayed an image abroad of official openness to modernity. The Latin American Biennials in turn, organised by the Institute for Hispanic Culture, constituted "official backing for the avant-garde" and "full artistic normalisation"[9], in addition to being the clearest sign of the reformist criterion that would mark governmental artistic promotion in the years to follow. The First Biennial was held in Madrid in 1951, the second - in which César Manrique participated - in Havana in 1953 and the third in Barcelona in 1955[10]. All were inaugurated in the midst of great expectation and controversy and would ultimately be "a sort of rendering of accounts of scattered modernity; an inventory of energies, a balance sheet of situations, a state of awareness"[11]. They were unable to vary the unalterable line of the National Fine Art Exhibitions, still and for many years thereafter anchored in academic premises, but they did constitute a sort of alternative that went to prove that, henceforth, academia and government did not necessarily have to be synonymous. It is in this political context that the creation of the Museum of Contemporary Art must be understood, an event that concurred nearly exactly with the inauguration of the Biennial. From then on and thanks to the active role played in its development by architect José Luis Fernández del Amo until 1958[12], the museum was largely responsible for implementing the official eagerness to further reformist art initiated by Ruiz Giménez. Hence, Fernández del Amo not only designed a headquarters for the museum whose conceptual and architectural modernity are surprising even today[13], but conducted an important programme of activities that included the Congress of Abstract Art held in the Menéndez Pelayo University at Santander in 1953, with the respective international exhibition; and the *First Showroom of Spanish Abstract Art* organised with the help of Manuel Millares in Valencia in 1956. On occasion, Fernández del



**9.** Bonet, Juan Manuel: "De una vanguardia bajo el franquismo", in AAVV, *Arte de Franquismo*. Madrid, Cátedra, 1981, p. 221.

**10.** Cabañas, Miguel: *Política artística del franquismo. El hito de la Bienal Hispanoamericana de arte*. Madrid, CSIC, 1996; Cabañas, Miguel: *El ocaso de la política artística americanista del franquismo. La imposible continuidad de las bienales hispanoamericanas de arte*. México, Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura, 1995.

**11.** Moreno Galván, José María: *Introducción a la pintura española actual*. Madrid, Guadarrama, 1960, pp. 120-121.

**12.** Jiménez-Blanco, María Dolores: *José Luis Fernández del Amo. Un proyecto de Museo de Arte Contemporáneo*. Madrid, Queen Sofía National Art Centre Museum, 1995.

**13.** José Luis Fernandez del Amo: *Museo de Arte Contemporáneo. Memoria para su instauración*. 1955. (reproduced in *José Luis Fernández del Amo. Un proyecto de Museo de Arte Contemporáneo,* op. cit.)

Amo took his endeavour beyond what governmental authorities were willing to permit, and so pursued part of his programme of activities through other channels. He persuaded the construction company Huarte, for instance, to donate premises on Recoletos Street near the museum: known as the Black Showroom, it was home to exhibitions such as *Art Autre* (1957, in conjunction with the Gaspar Showroom in Barcelona and the Stadler and Rive Droite galleries in Paris), which provided the opportunity to see the works of Spanish and European *art informel* artists and American expressionists. Some of the painters represented included the members of the recently created El Paso Group, namely Tàpies, Tharrats and Vilacasas, along with Fautrier, Mathieu, Riopelle, Burri, Appel, Wols, de Kooning, Pollock, Tobey. The showroom also exhibited works by Equipo 57 and housed the Abstract Art Week organised by El Paso. Finally, and thanks again to Fernández del Amo's governance, although inaugurated after his resignation in 1958, the museum would hold two important international exhibits: *10 years of Italian painting* and *New American painting*.

Prominent international exhibitions were also organised in Barcelona, such as the ones titled *Modern art in the United States* or *Contemporary Dutch painting* both held in 1955. It may even be said



that when the international tendencies initiated in the forties such as French *art informel* or American abstract expressionism began to be seen with normality in Spain, for some of the most restless artists, these tendencies were no longer novel: they had come to know them personally in their travels abroad. The French Institute in Barcelona awarded many artists grants to travel to Paris in the early fifties: both Tàpies and Ràfols-Casamada, for instance, were beneficiaries. A notable colony of artists began to grow up around the Spanish College in the Parisian university campus, whose membership included Palazuelo, the eldest of them, Chillida and Farreras, to name but a few. César Manrique also travelled to Paris in 1953, where he stayed for several months.

But despite the impression of normality that may be gleaned from the foregoing, the fact is that in Spain in the fifties the new artistic languages continued to have a very minority audience and the debate on abstraction was still fuelled by fiery controversy. Although some galleries were to devote much of their effort to abstraction or, at least, to artistic reform in general, in many cases painters and sculptors who decided to express themselves in more modern languages found their soundest support and field of action in the new architecture. Fernández del Amo himself worked enthusiastically to promote young reformist artists, drafting introductions for exhibitions held in galleries[14] or

**14.** The first of these was the catalogue for the exhibition *Cuatro pintores juntos: Lara, Lago, Valdivieso y Guerrero* (Four painters: Lara, Lago, Valdivieso and guerrero) in the Buchholz gallery, 1949.

commissioning works from artists such as Canogar, Mompó, Valdivieso, Rivera or Pablo Serrano for the decoration of the churches and town halls he designed for the National Colonisation Institute. He was no exception in this regard[15]. Other architects shared his ideal of integrating art and architecture. One particularly significant case was the Our Lady of Aránzazu Basilica, designed by Sáenz de Oiza and Luis Laorga, in which artists such as Oteiza, Chillida or Lucio Muñoz participated. Other architects were also on very special terms with the plastic arts in those years, such as Antonio Fernández Alba, who participated in El Paso activities, or Ramón Vázquez Molezún, painter and architect who participated in the Latin American Art Biennial of 1951, did a design for a contemporary art museum that was awarded a prize in the National Architecture Competition of 1954 and won the Brussels International Exhibition Prize for the so-called *Hexagon pavilion*, designed in conjunction with Juan Antonio Corrales. By extension, construction companies associated with these and other architects, such as Agromán, or art collectors such as Huarte - the company referred above as sponsor of Museum of Contemporary Art activities - involved artists in their construction projects, a policy that benefited César Manrique himself, who painted murals for buildings such as the Banco Guipuzcoano at Tolosa, the Hotel Fénix in Madrid or the Barajas Airport terminal.



## From *art informel* to pop art

In the Madrid of the late fifties, where César Manrique lived and worked, the main contemporary artistic trend was the *art informel* in which he himself engaged. In the early years of the decade it was difficult to define a common denominator for the art being produced in the city, which appeared to be more a sum of a variety of individual and collective options. There was, nonetheless, a certain "aura of age" that linked such scattered works and tendencies, due perhaps to a series of common but diffuse influences: Picassian cubism, Matissian colourism, and the legacy of artists directly or indirectly related to surrealism, such as Klee - in particular his geometric poetics - and Miró. All these influences can actually be applied to the Manrique of those years, who participated fully in this rather vague reformist discourse and identified with this "fifties style"[16]. This was ambiguous, eclectic modernity, that can be associated with developments in the so-called Spanish School in Paris at the time. At the end of the decade, however, *art informel* abstraction may be said to have reached a truly prevalent position, albeit in co-existence with other avenues of artistic research, from the geometric, collective

**15.** Ruiz Cabrero, Gabriel y Molins, Patricia: *L'arquitectura i l'art dels anys 50 a Madrid*. Barcelona, Fundació la Caixa, 1996.

**16.** Nieto Alcaide, Víctor: "Sobre el arte que se hizo en los cincuenta: entre la modernidad y la vanguardia". In *Del Surrealismo al informalismo. Arte de los Cincuenta en Madrid*. Madrid, Department of Culture of the Region of Madrid, 1991, p. 42 *et sequentes*.

and utopian abstraction of Equipo 57 or Sempere's kinetics, to José Ortega's incipient social realism.

This prevalence of *art informel* in the Madrilenian artistic environment of the late fifties - and in Catalonian circles as well, although with different features - was strengthened by the existence of the firm infrastructural support referred above and the advent of a new generation of artists, to which most of the El Paso members belonged and which soon became the maximum expression of Spanish vanguard art. The membership of this group, founded in February 1957, included painters Antonio Saura, Rafael Canogar, Manolo Rivera, Antonio Suárez, Manuel Millares, Juana Francés and Manuel Viola, and sculptors Martín Chirino and Pablo Serrano, as well as art critics José Ayllón and Manuel Conde. Although in general they ultimately identified with *art informel* poetics, according to their *manifesto* their initial objectives had less to do with the choice of a given tendency than with a desire to improve the situation of contemporary Spanish art:

"El Paso is a group of plastic artists who have come together to invigorate contemporary Spanish art, which has such brilliant precedents but which at this time, lacking in constructive criticism, 'marchands', exhibition showrooms to guide the public or art enthusiasts to support reformist activity, is in the midst of an acute crisis.



"(...) Writers, movie-makers, musicians and architects will be called upon to join us, to make our work more complete and help us in our pursuit, as well as to train enthusiastic youth, for whom our selfless activity is especially intended. Our sole purpose is to favour the development of the many possibilities that lie buried in an atmosphere of plastic exhaustion"[17].

The social impact and critical success of the members of El Paso were uneven, but they all benefited from this grouping, which would later become a model and benchmark for subsequent generations of Spanish artists. Presently, the role of El Paso as a turning point in contemporary Spanish artistic history tends to be questioned[18], but the fact is that this group continues to hold a relevant place in any account of the time. Much has been written about the predominance of the El Paso group in Madrilenian *art informel* or the contradiction inherent in its use of the political platforms of the Franco political regime, allegedly opposed by many of its members. In any event, and although this is not the place to pursue this discussion, it is worthwhile mentioning the reading - by both art critique of the time[19] and subsequent historical science[20] - of the El Paso endeavour as a genuinely Spanish, while at the same time modern and cosmopolitan, product. There is, therefore, a tendency to see in the *oeuvre* of artists such as Saura, Canogar, Millares or Rivera, for their dramatic and expressive

**17.** J. Ayllón: "Manifiesto de El Paso", February 1957. Reproduced in Toussaint, Laurence: *"El Paso" y el arte abstracto en España*. Madrid, Cátedra, 1983, p. 15.

**18.** Bozal, Valeriano: "El final de la postguerra", in *Pintura y escultura españolas del siglo XX (1939-1990)*. Madrid, Espasa Calpe, 1992, p. 33 *et sequentes*.

**19.** Gullón, Ricardo: *De Goya al arte abstracto*. Madrid, Seminarios y Ediciones, 1972.

**20.** Calvo Serraller, Francisco: *España. Medio siglo de arte de vanguardia*, op. cit., vol. I, pp. 61-63.; Nieto Alcaide, Víctor: "Sobre el arte que se hizo en los cincuenta...", *op. cit.*, p. 67.

qualities, a revival of the Spanish "bold streak" tradition which was, nonetheless, compatible with the international tendencies of the day. The fact of the matter is that drama, shocking realism, brazenness and blackness are key words in the definition of the poetics of this group, which was at the hub of the Madrilenian avant-garde and had gained international acclaim. This was the context in which César Manrique forsook the strong colourism of his previous painting to, in keeping with was being done by the artists mentioned, adopt a chromatic austerity unprecedented in his work until then. Beginning in 1959, all vestiges of linear composition also disappeared as he focused on research with material. Very soon the critic Aguilera Cerni certified his presence in Spanish *art informel*, including him in a chapter titled "From cry to silence", along with Millares, Rivera, Soria and Vilacasas in his book *Panorama del nuevo arte español* (Panorama of new Spanish art). Aguilera stressed Manrique's personal contribution to the materialist side of *art informel*:

"The material may be soil, stone, sand, consistency or indecisive project... It may acquire any number of forms, enclose countless suggestions, propose multiple enigmas. In this immense repertoire, César Manrique has chosen volcanic rock (...). This was the beginning of an understanding with the soil, the granular and surly lava of the most formidable island geology"[21].



Manrique, then, was recognised in the late fifties as having a voice of his own, within the co-ordinates of Spanish and international modernity, which is as much as to say the co-ordinates of *art informel*. He would pursue this same line of work in the following decade, participating in the international promotion of this movement furthered by Luis González Robles from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Here it should be recalled, firstly, that 1959, the year when El Paso dissolved, also marked the beginning of the real expansion of *art informel* throughout Spain which, in a way, converted it into a banal and superficial formula in vogue. Secondly, it will be noted that this expansion of *art informel* concurred with a different social and political context than in the years when the group was founded. Indeed, the open Christian Democratic period of the fifties gave way to the 1959 Stabilisation Plan and so-called Spanish Development, a phase designed to integrate the Spanish economy in Europe, with all the radical effects that would have on Spanish society, which in turn ricocheted on to the world of the arts.

**21.** Aguilera Cerni, Vicente: *Panorama del nuevo arte español*. Madrid, Guadarrama, 1966, p. 209.

With a somewhat more vigorous market in Madrid and Barcelona, and an incipient demand in cities

such as Valencia and Bilbao, avant-garde artistic trends diversified increasingly in the sixties. Moreover, in the art of the sixties the political factor, more and more explicitly expressed, acquired enormous importance in artistic creation, as it affected not only content but form as well. New proposals were put forward by Equipo Crónica or Eduardo Arroyo, whose peculiar interpretations of pop aesthetics responded to a very different ideological dynamic than the philosophy that spurred the movement in England or the United States. This difference had a simple explanation: in the latter countries pop art was an ambiguous reflection, oscillating between glorification and mordacious criticism of the opulent consumer society of western democracies, but in Spain the reality to be portrayed differed both in its economic and its political traits. But pop was not the only art to be ideologically *contaminated*. Other artists, such as Alberto Greco or Zaj, whose works can today be read in purely artistic terms, then acquired an immediate political connotation. Movements such as *Estampa Popular*, however, can scarcely be explained in any other terms than their social and political circumstance.

A more detailed picture of the artistic tendencies of the sixties in Spain would have to include a series of realist alternatives that co-existed with the insistent durability of *art informel* throughout the decade: first of all, the so-called new figuration embraced by artists such as Juan Barjola or *Grupo Hondo*; secondly, a dimension of realism which on occasion engaged in a language reminiscent of pop and was strongly charged with political criticism - characteristic of Arroyo and Equipo Crónica mentioned earlier, together with Equipo Realidad, Genovés, Canogar in a stage subsequent to his membership in El Paso -, while at other times acquired a meticulous and fantastic form that recreated everyday things with transcendent profiles and was the domain of artists as diverse as Antonio López or Julio López Hernández and Carmen Laffón; and finally a third, literary and perverse form of realism represented by José Hernández. But, along with realism in its diverse formulas, proposals related to the so-called *new artistic behaviour* also began to appear, such as the neodadaist provocation practised by Zaj and Alberto Greco, in addition to other artistic forms that turned to the new technical media within artists' reach, such as the new analytical abstraction which began to explore the generation of plastic forms with computers with the aid of the Complutense University of Madrid's Computer Centre. Nor should we neglect the fact that in parallel with all these new groups and proposals, artists such as Saura or Millares, members of the by then defunct El Paso, pursued their individual careers, like others such as Tàpies and Chillida, by then artists of undeniable renown abroad.

All of them, along with other *art informel* practitioners such as Lucio Muñoz, Tharrats, Farreras, Feito or artists devoted to research in geometrical abstraction such as Sempere, were represented in the new abstract art museum inaugurated in the "Casas Colgadas" in Cuenca in 1966. This museum, founded by Gustavo Torner and Gerardo Rueda, houses a private collection acquired by the painter Fernando Zóbel as a tribute to Spanish artists of the fifties. The following year, as if unintentionally offering a new approach, an exhibition titled *New generation* was organised in Madrid by Juan Antonio Aguirre. This showing included a new group of artists, most notably Luis Gordillo. Very soon thereafter, Gordillo was to be conferred a nearly tutelary role by other painters of a subsequent generation anxious, in an environment in which artistic modernity was identified with tendencies such as minimalism and conceptualism, to recover the pleasure of painting.

**1965-1968 in New York**

While the Spain of the latter half of the sixties continued to develop *art informel* and its alternatives, César Manrique moved his studio to New York. There he found a city full of life and agitation, radically different from his native Spain, dazzling at first, but perhaps overwhelming in the longer term, triggering nostalgia not for Madrid, from where he had come, but for Lanzarote, which he had actually never left. He continued to work with the *art informel* poetics of gesture and material that had been initiated in the forties by artists such as Fautrier and Dubuffet in France and abstract expressionists such as Pollock or Kline in New York, and which had been echoed in the fifties not only by the El Paso artists, but also, among others, the CoBrA group in Northern Europe. In the post-war years, certainly, *art informel* had constituted a sort of "*lingua franca* that enabled painters to communicate across national boundaries" compatible with "the vernacular language, so deeply rooted in any traveller's heart"[22]. But when Manrique arrived in New York, abstract expressionism, the tendency that had made this city the new artistic Mecca, ousting even Paris from the its primacy[23], had long since ceased to prevail. The dramatic death in 1956 of Pollock, the hero *par excellence* of American culture, had brought the expressionist adventure to a symbolic end. Many of the chief players of the New York School, in which Pollock himself had been so prominent, such as Rothko, Motherwell, Kline or de Kooning, were still painting. But they were no longer the brightest stars in the firmament. The values that critics and merchants were now banking on included,



**22.** Ashton, Dore: "À rebours: la rebelion informalista". In *À rebours. La rebelión informalista. (1939-1968)*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Atlantic Centre for Modern Art and Madrid, Queen Sofía National Art Centre Museum, 1999, p. 18.

**23.** Sandler, Irving: *The Triumph of American painting. A history of Abstract Expresionism*. New York, Icon, 1970. See also Guilbaut, Serge: *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, The University of Chicago, 1983.

movements such as so-called *post-painterly abstraction*, a reaction against the subjectivist individualism of abstract expressionism. More radical conceptual proposals also began to question the very material nature of artistic endeavour, namely the *happenings* or *land-art* of the day that were acquiring a central place in international artistic debate. In other words, abstract expressionism, the American parallel of *art informel*, was a thing of the past. This fact, which might be negatively interpreted as a time lag of which Manrique himself was very likely aware, did not prevent his work from benefiting from the contact with the dynamic reality of American art. But it should, perhaps, be a factor to be borne in mind in interpreting his decision to leave the skyscraper city to return to his native island. In any event, judging by the sales of the works he exhibited in the Catherine Viviano gallery, we may conclude that in the United States, as in Spain, while *art informel* was no longer an aesthetic or intellectual novelty, its social acceptance bestowed on it a commercial vigour that Manrique turned to advantage[24].

## From Lanzarote. Spanish culture during the transition



When Manrique decided to return definitively to Lanzarote in 1968, after having spent long periods on the island in the intervals he was absent from New York, the Spanish tourist trade boom was in full swing. We do not know whether, while he was in the United States, he became acquainted with *land-art*, a series of artistic proposals that aimed, among other things, to establish a new harmony between art and nature. What we do know is that beginning in 1966, in a somewhat different fashion, this would also be one of the fundamental objectives not only of Manrique's *oeuvre*, but also of his life. The last two decades of the artist's work, focused on his islands more than on his painting, took place largely outside the vicissitudes of contemporary Spanish artistic discourse.

Despite César Manrique's geographic and personal distance from the Spanish cultural scene in this period of his career, it should be stressed that, especially after 1975, an extraordinary change came about in the country's culture. The growing politicisation of plastic arts, literature and cinema in the latter years of the Franco regime became particularly evident in events such as the famous Pamplona Encounters of 1972[25], or the controversial opening, in July 1975, of the new Spanish Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid's university campus, the last inaugural act presided by General Franco.

**24.** *César Manrique-Nueva York*. Lanzarote, Fundación César Manrique, 1996.

**25.** Francés, Fernando and Huici, Fernando: *Los encuentros de Pamplona 25 años después*. Pamplona, Centro de Cultura Castillo de Maya and Madrid, Queen Sofía National Art Centre Museum, 1997.

One year after Franco's death, the Venice Biennial presented an exhibition that reviewed the Spanish art and culture of the last forty years titled *Spain. Artistic avant-garde and social reality: 1936-1976*; the very idea of this exhibition unleashed heated debate among the intellectuals and politicians of the day. Nothing appeared to escape politicisation in those years, in which the expectations around the change in regime were enhanced by the echoes of the events of 1968 in Paris.

With the transition to democracy, however, the situation seemed to gradually normalise. The ascetic, anti-objectual and ideologically charged conceptual art that presided the Pamplona Encounters gave way to new, purely plastic, tendencies. The movement to recover pictorial practice that had begun to brave the prevailing winds in previous years was now thriving. Names such as Carlos Franco, Manolo Quejido, Guillermo Pérez Villalta, Carlos Alcolea or Chema Cobo, encouraged by the example set by Luis Gordillo, painted in a style identified as the *new Madrilenian figuration of the seventies*. A new abstraction, in turn, heir to both the French *support-surface* movement and American post-pictorial abstraction, was ushered in by artists such as Teixidor or Gerardo Delgado, in turn inspired by the signal example of José Guerrero, an artist who had conveyed his experience to younger generations upon his return from New York. Sculpture also underwent a revival, with names such as Susana Solano, Pello Irazu, Cristina Iglesias and Juan Muñoz, to name but a few, who drew from the legacy bequeathed by Oteiza or Chillida. At the other extreme, and especially in the nineties, other more radical art forms, although less ideologised than in the preceding stage (neoconceptual, installations, video-art, etc.) began to form an important part of gallery and museum exhibitions.



Institutional normalisation was also being reached in several respects. For instance, the democratic governments of the transition period implemented an ambitious exhibition policy with two complementary aims: to recover the Spanish pre-war avant-garde and incorporate Spain into the international currents of the twentieth century. By the eighties, the flip side of this coin, this desire for normalisation, was to materialise in the campaigns to promote and further Spanish artists abroad, highly questioned today but which deftly identified names from among the young panorama of the moment, such as Barceló, Sicilia or Juan Muñoz, who would later acquire general acclaim. Finally, as the definitive proof of the official commitment to twentieth century plastic arts - in which purely political interests were not lacking - new museums mushroomed in the eighties and nineties, when not only the Queen Sofia National Art Centre Museum was created and consolidated in Madrid, but a

substantial number of centres appeared across the entire Spanish geography, including the I.V.A.M. at Valencia, the C.A.A.M. at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, the C.G.A.C. at Santiago de Compostela, the M.A.C.B.A. at Barcelona, The Guggenheim Museum at Bilbao, and the revitalised Museum of Fine Art in the same city. This artistic decentralisation radically changed the balance of power in which Spanish art had developed throughout the century, bringing the situation in Spain into line with the model prevailing in developed western countries. There was also a mass response on the part of the public to this new activity, with exhibitions and other events often attracting an overwhelming turnout. Although the optimism that may be drawn from the foregoing should not conceal the fact that all these events were subject to severe limitations and shortcomings[26], there can be no doubt that the situation in the nineties could hardly have been more different from the circumstances prevailing when César Manrique began his career in Lanzarote in 1939.



**26.** Fusi, Juan Pablo: "Cultura y democracia. La cultura de la transición", in *Un siglo de España. La cultura*. Madrid, Marcial Pons, 1999, p. 149 *et sequentes*.

# Cesar Manrique's painting up to 1958

*Lázaro Santana*



Around 1958 or 1959 César Manrique adopted the lexis that would constitute the most recognisable inventory of his pictorial language for thirty years: material *art informel* whose apparent model is the convulsive orography of the island of Lanzarote but whose plastic essence lies in the adoption of material in its own genuine essence, with no external allusions other than the anecdotal references in some of the titles. He would pursue this line of work in his maturity and his prime, which extended at least into the early eighties.

Since Manrique was born in 1919, he can hardly be said that he defined his plastic personality precociously; on the contrary, it seemed to elude him as he coupled his work to that of his Spanish contemporaries, imbuing it with only relative originality, which, in any event, differed substantially from his subsequent achievements.

In Spain, the fifties were years of aesthetic dispersion, in which the isolation from artistic currents in Europe and America, the absence of masters whose work could serve as a guide and encouragement for young artists[1], and the presence of certain painters very highly acclaimed in official quarters whose plastic language was embedded in the most mediocre realism, contributed - all these

**1.** Much has been written about the positive influence wielded by Daniel Vázquez Díaz during the post-civil war period. I believe, however, that this painter's work has been overestimated; his work has not withstood the passage of time and one wonders whether the tardy adoption of abstraction by young Spanish painters (the only avant-garde, at the time, that could pull national art out of its mediocrity) was largely due to the opinion that Vázquez Díaz expressed of if from the prestige of his chair

factors together and each one separately - to generate an atmosphere of ignorance and confusion that surrounded the youngest artists early on in their careers, who were left to their own devices and intuition. Manrique was no exception to this general rule; he lived through this experience in Madrid beginning in 1945 and much of his painting is a reflection on these patterns. Peculiarly, at around the same time, the attempts to invigorate Spanish art arose in peripheral cities - the Pórtico group in Zaragoza, Dau-al-Set in Barcelona, the Altamira School in Santander -, or even further away, in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, with the Ladac group.

Manrique was unusual, however, in the context of plastic artists in one way: he enrolled in formal schooling at a rather late age - he was 26 when, in 1945, he began his studies at the San Fernando Fine Art School. By that time he had already held a number of solo exhibitions in both Arrecife and Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. His submission for five consecutive years to academic discipline (he earned his professor's degree from the school itself in 1950), must have done very little to drive his progress in a "modern" direction (I use this term because it was very dear to Manrique; he never used the more precise, although temporary and therefore more contingent and changing expression, *avant-garde*), although it did afford him an excellent technical background to which he would not have had access through self-training. The fact that Manrique consented to study fine art when he was already an artist with a career under way is due, I believe, to two factors: one, his desire for a first-hand knowledge of new environments that would expand his precarious insular experience, both personally and artistically; and two, to learn pictorial techniques and procedures that would help him better express what he had done until then. Although these studies were not wholly to his liking, and in his later recollections would even refer to them in a rather angry tone, thanks to this training and the occasion it afforded to live in Madrid, he was able to find himself as an artist, something that he would very likely have never achieved had he remained in Lanzarote.



Manrique felt the call of the "artist" from the time he could reason. By artist he meant someone different, able to perceive and experiment reality differently from those around him. This aptitude filled him with secret joy but it troubled him as well. More than once he wondered whether he was an "oddball" because he wanted and did things that his playmates had absolutely no interest in (that frankly bored them): observing stones with unusual shapes, admiring the colours of a flower, following the winding course or spasmodic leaps of insects... Manrique's artistic sensitivity was surfacing and he

expressed it with naive drawings that he traded for other objects with his playmates[2]. This was how he began to learn about nature, with which he retained close ties for as long as he lived, through his work and his outlook on life, feeling himself an intimate part of the natural world. Another of his plastic exercises as a teenager was to copy the stills for the films shown in Arrecife: César drew and re-drew the faces of actresses such as Mae West, Joan Crawford, Gloria Swanson, Marlene Dietrich, attempting to capture the exotic mystery and air of *femme fatale* that they radiated; he was particularly fascinated (and would continue to be intrigued throughout his life) by Great Garbo's cold and distant beauty.

Not a single example of these early exercises has survived. But we must assume that he drew them ably enough to achieve a reasonable likeness with his models. In later years César did many portraits of family and friends, in which he attained a precise resemblance to the true image: these are faces painted along academically acceptable lines, many of them done before the author trained in San Fernando.

The earliest of Manrique's works that have been conserved date from the first half of the forties: they formed a part of his first solo exhibition, held in Arrecife in 1942. As would be the case in most of his exhibitions, at least until 1957, two types of works were included in the showing, which differed in intent and technique: there were, on the one hand, what we might call the *genre paintings*, done in a very orthodox manner bearing in mind Lanzarote's geography and humanity; and on the other, certain *invented* scenes, with stylised figures, staged against exotic backdrops. The former have an undeniably local flavour and the content is defined by the titles themselves: *Puente de las Bolas* (Las Bolas Bridge), *Vecinos de Famara* (Famara townsfolk), *Tocando en Tahíche* (Playing at Tahíche), *Mociando*, etc. In them, the landscape - urban or rural - is portrayed objectively and its most distinctive elements are identifiable - stone or white-washed walls, volcanoes, etc.; the people wear typical island dress, constituting perfect folkloric vignettes. The *invented* scenes, by contrast, represent places that Manrique had never been (here also the titles of the paintings clearly explain their content: *Oriente* (The East) or *Venecia* (Venice)), in which the artist painted elongated figures in rather contorted postures; most are female nudes, some sharing the canvas with giant cacti. The *decorative* aesthetic of these scenes was very close to the art deco that Manrique had very likely seen in certain films and also to the work of by a rather nondescript Canary Island modernist painter, Néstor, who was nonetheless much admired by Manrique.



**2.** See Lázaro Santana: *César Manrique, un arte para la vida*. Editorial Prensa Ibérica. Barcelona, 1993

The presence of cacti as the most noteworthy element in these compositions, with all their aggressive and sexual symbolism, was kindred to Central European painting of the twenties, in which cactus was a recurrent theme. In the Canary Islands it was Eduardo Westerdahl who drew attention to this presence, stressing "the significance of cactus in post-expressionist painting... a voluminous plant for new pictorial tendencies"[3]; and the artists (painters and sculptors) of the Luján Pérez School also used it profusely (Westerdahl's reference was occasioned, in fact, by the comparison between painters, in a review of a collective exhibition of Canary Island artists, held in 1930 in Santa Cruz de Tenerife); but there, in the common use of that specific element, is where the likeness begins and ends: Manrique's painting in those years could hardly have been more different from the works by the Luján Pérez School artists between 1929 and 1936. Manrique idealised his models in keeping with regional painting tradition; his creations were picturesque in the soundest local middle-class tradition, a procedure that contrasted, for instance, with the more critical works of Felo Monzón or Plácido Fleitas - not to mention the fact that their intention and aesthetics were likewise different. In this stage, Manrique's works concurred with paintings by other island artists such as Sergio Calvo, Tomás Gómez, Carlos Morón or Cirilo Suárez[4].

Cactus would be a recurrent element in Manrique's figurative stage and re-appear as a decorative item in the latter stage of his work. But from today's perspective, the early presence of this plant, quite irrespective of its original significance, can also be regarded as one of those premonitory signs that seem to whimsically mark the fate of certain people: indeed, half a century later (1990) the painter would put the finishing touches on a long-cherished project (envisaged since 1973, at least): the Cactus Garden at Guatiza, a splendid enclosure inspired by the author's fantasy and creative magic and wholly devoted to the numerous varieties of this plant. A huge steel cactus designed by Manrique presides the entrance to this unique garden.

Manrique did not organise a single solo exhibition or participate in any collective showings between 1945 and 1950. His San Fernando studies must have centred all his attention and take up all his time; nonetheless, the existence of a few paintings dated in those years indicates that his aesthetic ideal had not changed: *Gánigo con cactus* (Gánigo with cactus) (1948) and *Bodegón con paño rojo* (Still life with red cloth) (1950), to cite two examples that must have satisfied the author, since he included them in a retrospective showing held at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in 1957, still depict a traditional

**3.** Eduardo Westerdahl: "Regionalismo". *La Tarde*, Santa Cruz de Tenerife. 21 October 1930.

**4.** See the works of all these authors reproduced in the catalogue for the *Exposición de artistas de la provincia de Gran Canaria* (sic) (Exhibition of artists of the province of Gran Canaria), National Modern Art Museum, Madrid, 1944, and the painting by Manrique, *Campesina de Lanzarote* (Lanzarote farm wife) in the same catalogue.

view of painting; they are technically much more polished than his preceding work; one sees in them the hand of a painter in command of the resources of his trade; but the approach and execution are a classic example of an orthodox academic exercise.

This same technical skill is evident in the murals painted for the "Parador" at Arrecife in 1950; as proof, in fact, of his technical skill, he even included a number of rather naive *trompe-l'oeil* that afford a sense of relief, depth and spillover (leaves blown beyond the limits of the composition, poles that move towards the viewer and disappear in the horizon, etc.), whose sensationalist effects irremediably attract the viewer's attention. The three vignettes that comprise the mural (the central *La pesca* (Fishing), flanked by *Viento en La Geria* (Wind in La Geria) and *La vendimia* (Grape harvest), are a narrative and symbolic continuum, not devoid of classical theatricality (the presence of curtains on either ends of the composition underscore this concept). There is some good painting in all this (his own unique self-portrait, from behind); but generally speaking the work is a mere standard rendition of a conventional theme.

The stylistic progress in Manrique's painting can be established if we compare this mural to the one done three years later for the Guacimeta Airport, also on Lanzarote. The elements appearing in the new work are exactly the same in the earlier painting: the worlds of the island's fishermen and peasants (volcanoes, camels, cactus, prickly pear groves, small boats, palm trees, women, homes, etc.), but form, organisation and representation are totally different: the painting is flat, the drawing is wisely childlike, the colours are arbitrarily distributed, the planes of the different scenes overlap discontinuously; all the figurative signs are subordinate to the plastic rhythm imposed by colour, here bright and vivid under the definitive influence of the magic of Atlantic light.



Manrique's membership in the Cinema Research and Experiment Institute of Madrid and his trip to Paris both took place between these two dates; the significance of these two biographical facts must be stressed, because they provided the artist with a view of a plastic universe of a more experimental nature than anything to which he had been exposed he had observed up to then and brought him closer to a new manner of understanding and expressing art. These were also years when he was in contact with artists (Farreras, Feito), critics (Manuel Conde) and galleries (Fernando Fe, which he helped found) that worked with a new concept of art and defended the need for reform in Spanish art.

The universe illustrated in the Guacimeta mural, a sort of *island inventory*, was also depicted by Manrique on smaller works (nearly always monotypes on paper and a few oil paintings), which he painted with even greater freedom and audacity than the mural. Given the nature of fragments as intimate and private experiments, they were better suited than large public compositions, designed for mass public view, to the inclusion of expressive assays and the use of surprise and its effects. Works such as *Desnudo azul* (Blue nude) (1953) or *Noche de malpaís* (Night in the badlands) (1954) were a culmination of the way that Manrique had learned to translate the reality of the island of Lanzarote, so distant from the callow folkloric approach of his apprenticeship and at the same time closer to the genuine identity of the landscape and the local peoples.

Matisse and Picasso were unquestionably the two artists who influenced his work most during this stage; from the former he borrowed the exultant freedom of colour, its use as an independent value, sufficient in itself to express emotion (emotion that was always sunny, vital, vivid) as a translation of an optimistic outlook on existence. From Picasso he inherited the free and easy approach to drawing, scenic composition subject to no external rules, but only to the internal demands of the painting itself.



These paintings must have astonished the opaque artistic world of nineteen-fifties Madrid; Manrique's monotypes must have dazzled eyes used to seeing a grey, dull type of art that reflected misery, ruin and abandon (environments portrayed by the nascent Madrid School, Eduardo Vicente, etc., or established artists such as Benedito, Sotomayor, Sert, and others), art that was a reflection on a wretched Spain, impoverished by the war and the unending post-war. They may be thought to bear a certain resemblance to Francisco Cossio's - a painter much esteemed by Manrique - works, or Benjamín Palencia's; but the aesthetic refinement in the former's still-lifes, which while transparent lacked the bright joy of Manrique's scenes, and the monotonous insistence in Palencia's paintings on a single theme, rural life, along with its treatment - with thick and aggressive pigment - and its characters, peasants whose gesture and expression convey a certain underlying squalor, clearly distinguish them from the Atlantic paradise that Manrique painted with such impulsive exultation[5]. The respective meaning in these works also differed: while one advocated the refined and secret intimacy of interiors (still lifes) and the other rural aggressiveness (in colour and gesture), Manrique proposed the carefree poetry of life under the sun with the cool breeze of the sea either present or close enough to sense.

**5.** In any event, Palencia did not reveal his colourist tendencies until approximately 1950. "His austere landscapes" says José Hierro, referring to the change that took place in Palencia's work towards the end of the forties, "ignited, burst into a flame of unreal colour. (...) Contrast was to replace the nuance in the colourist's approach". *Artes*, Madrid, May-June, 1970.

Without dissociating himself from the world of Lanzarote, at around the same time Manrique did other monotypes in which figurative identification was less obvious: these compositions accommodate anthropomorphic shapes, bits of ceramics, indigenous drawings, etc. These works were the result of his archaeological curiosity, which he tried to express in a constructive system somewhat less rigid than existing in what we might call *surface* works to distinguish them from *buried* works, in which figuration was stylised. In a way, they were a precedent to the paintings he would do after 1953 and suggestive of a timely exploration of the neo-primitivism in fashion since the publication, sponsored by the Clan gallery, of Carlos Edmundo de Ory's *Nuevos prehistóricos* (1949) (New pre-historians) and the proposals of the Altamira School; this primitivist current would, under the influence of Miró and Klee, would be pursued by Tony Stubbing and Manuel Millares (*Pictografías canarias* - Canary Island pictographs), among others.

In 1954 Manrique held his first solo exhibition in Madrid, at the Clan gallery, a forum where artists such as Manuel Millares (1951), Joan Josep Thàrrats (1953), Antonio Saura (1953), etc., had also exhibited and which showed works by Manuel Mampaso, Eduardo Chillida and Will Faber the same year as Manrique's exhibition. Having already supported Madrid School painters such as Alvaro Delgado, Benjamín Palencia and Francisco San José, this gallery became deeply committed to new art.



Manrique hung 20 works in this exhibition whose titles - which only hazily describe their content - indicate the diversity of the proposals implicit in them[6]: from vaguely surrealist to rigorously geometric premises, without disdaining schematic figuration. The cover of the catalogue for the exhibition reproduced a geometric painting, while the back cover contained a sketch for the figurative mural that he would do shortly thereafter (1955) in Madrid's Hotel Fénix. We do not know the title of the painting on the cover; in the catalogue to the 1957 retrospective exhibition held at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, it is shown under the title *Pintura 1954* (Painting 1954).

The presence or absence here of a title in any given painting and what it means in terms of content is not a minor or anecdotal question, since it affects Manrique's changing thinking about the nature of his work. In 1955 the artist sustained that his painting was not at all abstract (although a short time later he would sustain exactly the opposite). "My style," he explained referring to the second Clan exhibition, but his words are also applicable to the first, the year before, "is in the artistic

**6.** I list them here because of their illustrative value in any attempt to understand Manrique's scattered intentions: *Astros en celos* (Stars in heat), *Calorías de Timanfaya* (Timanfaya calories), *Brújulas Atlánticas* (Atlantic compasses), *Cangrejos-espejos* (Crab-mirrors), *Origen del liquen* (Origin of lichens), *Dame tu circunferencia* (Give me your circumference), *Lava en flor* (Lava blossoming), *Diversión de la luna* (Moon fun), *Fósiles fotografiados* (Fossils in photos), *Frutos en jable* (Fruit in volcanic ash), *Origen del hombre* (Origin of man), *La llave del tiempo* (The key to time), *Abismo compungido* (Remorseful abyss), *Nacimiento oscuro* (Dark birth), *Disgregación vital* (Vital disintegration), *Cajas disciplinadas* (Disciplined boxes), *Itinerario eléctrico* (Electric itinerary), *Tierra virgen* (Virgin soil), *La multitud siempre es tonta* (Crowds are always dumb) and *Región* (Region).

line of a virgin world, a world undergoing formation, much before its natural crystallisation. (...) The forms that I bring to my canvas are the forms of a world with no dawn, on the first day. They're nature uncatalogued, without academic notes, before Linnaeus classified them [...] My botany and my zoology are fantastic"[7]. Manrique acknowledged the figurative nature of his work - the references were obvious - echoing words borrowed from Antonio Manuel Campoy in his description: "There is nothing abstract about this sensual world," Campoy wrote, "although it could be a world with no dawn, an uncatalogued world (...) nature not annotated on academic cards (...) nature is just beginning (...) this is what creation must have been like before Linnaeus pigeonholed it (...) This is fantastic botany and zoology"[8]. Manrique, and Campoy, labelled his *oeuvre* as figurative, insofar as there was a grounds in reality for what was recognisable in it, even where it was fictitious, re-created or invented. The pure speculation inherent in abstraction was still absent.

A month had not yet gone by since the above profession of faith in figuration when Manrique went back on his words, asserting to José de Castro Arines that "painting has only one short-term future: abstraction (...) I only find this [true] passion for painting in abstraction"[9]. Now then, exactly what did Manrique, and Campoy, and by extension critics in general, construe the term abstract art to mean? In principle, abstraction was anything besides a literal copy of reality, an insufficient if not wholly inaccurate definition. Castro Arines described a mural on which Manrique was working in 1955 in the following terms: "Decoration inspired by engineering: machines, geometric figures, *purely abstract inventions*" (our emphasis)[10]. The painter had also referred to another of his works - the Hotel Fénix mural mentioned above -, as a "*purely abstract work* with shapes and graphisms rich in composition and colour, representing groups of women that I title *Toilette en el campo* (Toilette in the country)"[11].

Compositions where reality has been decomposed along Picassian lines, divided by very obvious lines and organised in keeping with other than the most orthodox realist patterns, preferably colour harmonies, were regarded by both Manrique and Castro Arines to be abstract. This was a system inherited from cubism, a cubism (the comment is obvious, but perhaps necessary) deprived of its speculative radicality that many painters continue to invoke with notable effectiveness. Yet another example of the persistence of this confusion can be found in Ventura Doreste's description of Manrique's allegedly abstract works as "submarine landscapes, nude skies, nearly lunar deserts" and he refers to a painting, *Noche de malpaís* (Night in the badlands) as "the point where figurative and



**7.** *Falange*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2 January 1955.

**8.** Quoted by Gilberto Alemán in "Manrique habla para los pintores canarios". *El Día*. Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 7 April 1957.

**9.** José de Castro Arines: "Para César Manrique la pintura sólo tiene un futuro próximo: lo abstracto". *Informaciones*. Madrid, 5 February 1955.

**10.** *Ibídem.*

**11.** Juan Hernández Rodríguez: "César Manrique expone en Madrid". *Falange*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2 January 1955.

abstract tendencies converge (...) The sluggish and magnificent steer, in the mist of the freedom of the night, is converted into a nearly celestial animal, a hallucinatory Platonic archetype"[12].

In Manrique there is always what we might call *representational determination*, allusions to objects, things, pre-existing facts; all that appears in most of the paintings of this period is perfectly recognisable, not as a data item to be filled in by the imagination, but as an observed spectacle, only a fragment of which is shown, or which is portrayed simultaneously from several different perspectives; a drop of water, a piece of moss, seen through a microscope, can afford a view of planets and suns trapped in their orbits or of arbitrarily shaped, unending bristled immensities. Nonetheless, in certain compositions, particularly the incipient geometric paintings, the pursuit of abstract painting is totally obvious. If we tried to *reconstruct* the shapes in them we would very likely obtain images that resemble machine parts or some farmer's tool (at times certain of Manrique's paintings seem to be present in Ángel Ferrant's sculptures, especially n his *Partogénesis* (Parthenogenesis) series, 1951); but it is likewise true that the very attempt to conceal - or substantiate - reality, attending preferably to some other plastic demand (composition, colouring, distribution of planes, etc.) implies the painter's intention to dissociate himself from the most immediate visual sources of the object represented in order to achieve plastic results that he finds more fitting and effective. This attitude implies the existence of thinking that tends towards abstraction, which may not find the path to the purest material definition, but which is certainly seeking it.



Castro Arines recorded a comment by Manrique in which the artist showed a good deal of insight, indicative of how his vision of reality would lead him to abstraction, an approach in which his vision would be instrumental, but eventually reaching a point where the work would be released from any imitative servitude. I suspect that the language used may not be entirely his own, but the essence of what it expresses certainly is: "Figuration" Manrique said, "what we have come to call figuration, no longer says anything to us. Or at least, it doesn't say anything to me. (...) The 'earth' may be a good sentimental base, but today art goes beyond these naive naturalist references. I draw not from the architecture of the landscapes of my homeland, but from their dramatic sense, their essence, which is what I find to be important"[13].

**12.** Catalogue to the anthological exhibition. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1957.

**13.** See footnote 9.

For the moment at least, the works he did immediately after making these comments pursued the exploration of geometry, which still seemed to be unable to detach itself entirely from its

immediate reference: the land. The canvases produced in these years look, indeed, like the planimetries of some geographic space, painted à la Franz Kline (a painter that Manrique cited on occasion, not as a model but in reference to the parallels between their respective universes)[14], which is an example of the obvious penetration of American art in Spanish art at around that time. Manrique's work has a clear resemblance to the work of other members of his generation in Madrid, Farreras, Labra, Mampaso, Sempere, Planasdurá, Rueda, etc., all of whom tended to rule the surface of their canvases into squares or fields of colour, as if trying to reflect the aerial vision of an expanse of ground, either cultivated or simply differentiated by colour or material components, a compositional forms¡ that they all borrowed from American abstract expressionism.

Compared to his previous *oeuvre*, Manrique's work in this new period presented a striking novelty, albeit in reductive terms: the disappearance of colour or, rather than the literal disappearance of colour (which obviously never occurs), the eclipse of the vividness of tone of the preceding period. He limited his palette to a few shades of grey and ochre (likewise reminiscent of Kline's paintings). The greens, reds and yellows that had prevailed in his more figurative paintings were dimmed, swept over by a tide of tar. The time had come for drama, dressed in the strict black of mourning; it was time to express the exasperation, brutality, darkness and repression usually associated with Spanish painting. The El Paso group - whose members were all translators of that standardised image of Spanish art, although paradoxically influenced by American expressionism - had made its appearance; and their success imposed a new image of Spanish art[15]. Moreover, this image was deeply entrenched in Spanish reality of the time - squalid and grey, needy and repressive; it was more in keeping with what the country was thought to be like in Europe and America; hence the success of the artists who portrayed an image closer to the preconceived ideas shared by foreign audiences.

Surprisingly, in the harshest moments of his biography, when he led a very precarious existence in Madrid with barely enough to live on, sharing his hardship with the poverty he encountered daily on the street, in the underground, in the bakeries where he bought his bread, at the chestnut stand on the corner or at the news stand where he leafed through - but did not buy - the newspaper, Manrique painted works of exalted colour that celebrated the beauty of the world and the hopeful joy of living in it. By contrast, when he was a successful painter, who sold whatever painted, and at a good price; when his activity as a decorator - a hazard that continuously threatened his pictorial



**14.** "I feel drawn [to nature] and I wish to express my feelings with images of my own, the way Kline expressed his relationship with the cityscape". *Arte y literatura*. New York, April, 1966.

**15.** I don't know to what extent this "success" of Spanish art abroad, along with the esteem of domestic critics, influenced the change in Manrique's work. The fact is that he associated the terms "abstraction" and "success". On one occasion he said "Everything I am today I owe to abstract painting. I received no praise from Madrilenian critics until I adopted this pictorial approach. (...) Of all my paintings, the non-figurative works have always commanded the highest price". *Falange*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 13 July 1957.

career - was in demand by the Madrilenian bourgeoisie and professionals (he painted many murals and created diverse objects, including sculptures, for hotels, private homes, construction companies, etc.)[16], he became austere, severe; he contained his urge for colourist opulence - so innate in him, as would be seen after the end of this period - and he imposed self-restraint, deliberately closing the doors where he gave vent to his sensual and, in a way, naive (insofar as it was uncontaminated by moral or social prejudice) animalistic instinct. Gaya Nuño refers to "asceticism and self-punishment", of a "purifying and moralist period"[17], insisting on the "penance" inherent in these paintings. Given the colourist vein that always existed in Manrique, I believe that this penance was assumed more as a concession to fashion than as atonement for any sin.

Nonetheless, not even here, reduced to black, white, grey and ochre, did Manrique betray the refinement that characterised the best of his work: the delicacy of tone that he achieved with such scant means, the expressive wealth of the pigment (a certain roughness, not yet quite material) brought to his canvas a tone of peaceful poetry, closer to his previous work and very remote from the dramatic expressionism of Millares' or Saura's paintings. At the same time, geometry constrains the drama, dispossessing his painting of the gesticulation to which colour had seemed to be leading it, placing it in a field of stresses where only strictly plastic problems appear to be at risk. Manrique's painting remained, then, distant from the moralistic, exemplary - "social" was the term used then and for many years to come - intention of other painters of his time (no value judgement is intended in this clarification, either in favour of or against such circumstance; it is merely the assertion of a fact that can be confirmed viewing the paintings themselves).



After the exhibition in the Ateneo (December 1958) Manrique began to number his paintings; there he exhibited seventeen, all painted that same year. *Painting No. 20* (done in 1959) showed a significant change with respect to the ones that preceded it; the linear patterns disappeared and the roughness referred earlier was replaced by material, material with an obvious, powerful relief, making it the most distinctive element in the painting.

Manrique had finally found his own and most original plastic language.

**16.** I find a portrayal of the author's self-regard at the time, in his own words, to be particularly revealing: "(...) I started to receive commissions from the most important architects. I did work for the Castellana Hilton, Julio Cano asked me for over forty paintings for the Hostal Reyes Católicos (...) I did the mural decoration for the Princesa cinema (...) A ceramic mural for a construction plant, I did a mural for the Huarte offices in conjunction with Oteiza and Ferreira. I worked for the Banco Guipuzcoano in Madrid, San Sebastián and Tolosa, collaborating with Chillida (...) I'm practically the official painter for Agromán. I decorated the lobby in the Hotel Fénix, which is almost like my own personal museum. An fluorescent iron sculpture lit with a strobe light against a black wall. Ceramics, lamps and three murals using three different techniques. A sample, in short, of everything I do". Gilberto Alemán: "César Manrique habla para los pintores canarios". *El Día*. Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 7 April 1957.

**17.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño: *La fase austera de César Manrique*. El Ateneo. Madrid, 1958.

# César Manrique

*Mariano Navarro*

«[...] I had a sense of belonging,
of being absolutely one with Nature.
That sensation marked me for the rest of my life.»[1]



Historians have long acknowledged the deep wounds that the two world wars inflicted on the world's cultural flesh, particularly after the horrors of World War II in the West and Japan and the ethical devastation that came in the wake of the holocaust and the use, on two consecutive occasions, of the atomic bomb against the latter country.

These - according to Dore Ashton - were the painful roots of two distinguishing characteristics of post-war art: the rebellion against established systems and the use of one and the same abstract language by artists hailing from very distant latitudes. "Their emphatic responses" - he adds - "soon received a series of labels: *art informel*, tachism, abstract expressionism, lyrical abstraction, action painting, new figuration ... [...] painters the world over found a pictorial language that adapted to their circumstances. Nonetheless, the existence of an international *lingua franca* did not entail the disappearance of the vernacular language, so deeply rooted in any traveller's heart. Local circumstances inevitably yielded local dialects and accents"[2].

Several of the American abstract expressionists confessed, sooner or later, that all the kind of painting they had practised in the forties induced in them was desolation, despair and emptiness, which may be what drove them, in Adolph Gottlieb's words, to "try anything".

**1.** "César Manrique", *Diario de Avisos*, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2 December 1979.

**2.** Dore Ashton, "À Rebours: La rebelión informalista", cat. *À Rebours: La rebelión informalista*, Atlantic Centre of Modern Art, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and Queen Sofia National Art Centre Museum, Madrid, 1999.

A similar awareness, albeit for different reasons, may be assumed to have arisen among Spanish painters. Dispossessed of their own heritage - destroyed or exiled after the civil war - , they floundered in a world where their pursuit was lacking in any significance or influence and deprived, moreover, of an established market of its own.

One sector of artists - the one most absorbed by the Franco dictatorship - was, like the rest of the Spanish population, anchored by these specific circumstances to dialects and accents that might be better defined as domestic than local, and imposed by a despot of conscience. At the same time, a second sector of artists, those who preserved more of the culture and thinking that prevailed prior to the civil war, remained wide open to international plastic exploration.

As far as we are concerned, César Manrique's *oeuvre*, and specifically the works he produced between the late fifties and the dawn of the seventies, the period addressed in this essay, can be set squarely in the domain of that international *lingua franca*, although in his case, deliberately modulated by personal rather than local chords and realities.



## Madrid – Paris

Manrique travelled to Madrid in 1945, and in the month of October of that year enrolled in fine art studies[3]. At the time, Manrique had a very modest background in the plastic arts. His critics, other than the recurrent reference to the Picasso influence on the young painter, cite very few names, some of whom are merely regional and others, such as Braque or Modigliani, known to him - like Malaga's most famous painter - only through reproductions. The one artist who I believe had any real influence on Manrique was Pancho Lasso, a sculptor who prior to the civil war had shared the concerns of the first Vallecas School and who, I surmise, in addition to inspiring Manrique's enthusiasm and curiosity through his abstract pieces - made from volcanic stone - was a specific model of how to express the young artist's passion for nature.

Such a model was what likened all the various members of that school - from the most theoretically established such as Alberto Sánchez and Benjamín Palencia to its most delirious

**3.** Lázaro Santana notes that his professors included: «Manuel Benedito, Ramón Stolz, Vázquez Díaz, Juan Adsuara, Julio Moisés, Pérez Comendador, Eduardo Chicharro, etc. (that is to say, members all of the elite artistic community favoured by the regime); Enrique Lafuente Ferrari delivered the lectures on art theory». Lázaro Santana, *César Manrique. Un arte para la vida*, Editorial Prensa Ibérica, Barcelona, 1993.

formulations in the person of Maruja Mallo -, who combined a passion for their personal abode on earth with a dark delight in eschatology and the certainty that what human beings carry through life is largely fossilised. Eugenio Carmona called it "an aesthetic conception of rural nature"[4], other specialists term it "earthly surrealism" and in a way, neither is very far from the definitions that might be sought for Manrique's mature *oeuvre*.

When he finished his studies five years later, in 1950, he began what was up to that time his most ambitious and coherent work, the murals on the National *Parador* or Inn at Arrecife, in which specialists have identified the influence of Picasso and Matisse and, especially, a functional and very naturalistic understanding of colour. His brief membership soon after in the Institute of Cinema Research and Experimentation proved to be very fruitful. After a transition period, whose results may be described as what José María Moreno Galván called "figurative eclecticism", his work gradually turned, as did the *oeuvre* of other young avant-garde painters of his times, towards abstraction. He was predisposed to take this direction both by a series of events in Spain and a trip to Paris - with his friend and fellow painter Francisco Farreras - which was his first opportunity for first-hand contact with the work of the classic artists of modernity and with what was being done by young painters as well as by artists who had reached creative maturity.



What was it that Manrique found in Paris? On the one hand, the classic presence of Picasso and Matisse, who had reached the category of unquestioned masters, towered in the horizon; and on the other, the personality of Francis Bacon, which had emerged just as the war ended, reigned in figuration.

As far as abstraction is concerned, since before the end of the war, Jean Fautrier had already been experimenting with his thick and sensual pastes - which he would use both in a certain sorrowful neofiguration and in purely abstract works -; Wols, in the brief period between the end of the war and his death in 1951 had artfully drawn the broad lines of tachism that others would later follow - Georges Mathieu, Pierre Soulages, Hans Hartung, Jean Bazaine or Jean Michel Atlan among them -.

Two characteristics, identified by Edward Lucie-Smith, of the majors of European lyrical abstraction of the fifties, seem to me to be highly pertinent for an understanding of Manrique: their

**4.** Eugenio Carmona, "Materias creando un paisaje. Benjamín Palencia, Alberto Sánchez y el 'reconocimiento estético' de la naturaleza agraria. 1930-1933", cat. *El surrealismo en España*, Queen Sofia National Art Centre Museum, Madrid, 1994.

ties to the historical avant-garde and their attention to landscape as a point of departure for their abstractions. "Despite what we may think today, lyrical abstraction was definitely the predominant pictorial style in Europe in the late forties and throughout the fifties" writes Lucie-Smith "and its fundamental premises were subject to any number of different versions. Bazaine, for instance, conserved elements deriving from cubism, to prove and preserve his connection with the past. An occult play on natural forms is likewise perceptible in his work. Nature, slightly camouflaged, played an analogous role in Manessier's typical compositions, while the nearly eponymous Messagier produced paintings that seemed to be less perfect versions of de Kooning's landscapes»[5].

## The Spanish scenario

As early as 1960, José María Moreno Galván - quite certainly the critic who, at the time, most staunchly defended and drew attention to the work of Spanish abstract artists - sustained that: "If we attempted to summarise the ultimate aim of all the stylistic and critical premises, all the position-taking, all the tendentious attitudes that came to light between 1940 and 1950, we would have to say that it was the determination by painters to absorb the avant-garde" And some pages later he insists: "We affirm that art in Spain was faced with this alternative [the antagonism between abstraction and figuration] at approximately mid-century"[6]. He cited two events in support of this assertion: the First Latin American Art Biennial held in Madrid in the Autumn of 1951 - the year after César Manrique earned his degree in Fine Art - and the Santander Abstract Art Exhibition, held in the summer of 1953 - the year that Manrique travelled to Paris and a few months before he was to experiment with his early and very hesitant abstractions -.

In the First Biennial which, in his words, was a meeting of "the entire wide and varied range of eclecticism that arose in the previous decade"[7], the only "abstractising" (a term much in vogue at the time) artists were Manuel Mampaso, Julio Ramis and Planasdurá[8].

The showing at the capital of Cantabria, however, co-ordinated by José Luis Fernández del Amo - then director of a virtual Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid - was the first true (collective) exhibition of abstract art; a series of parallel conferences - later published - was held to address



**5.** Edward Lucie-Smith, *El arte hoy. Del expresionismo abstracto al nuevo realismo*, Ediciones Cátedra, Madrid, 1983.

**6.** José María Moreno Galván, *Introducción a la pintura española actual*, Publicaciones españolas, Madrid, 1960.

**7.** José María Moreno Galván, *op. cit.*

**8.** Some pages later in the same book, Moreno Galván subdivides the different variations on abstraction, with headings that seem surprising today; and he includes Manrique in the group of the following artists: *The expressive zone*. *Liberal expression*: Santiago Lagunas, Julio Ramis, Manuel Mampaso, César Manrique ("César Manrique's painting comprises mineralogical pre-forms: in directions that sometimes initiate volume a nd at others take a voluptuous turn back towards the creative plane"), Manuel Viola, Manuel Rivera, Gerardo Rueda, Luis Sáez, Fernando Zóbel, Joan Hernández Pijuán, José Luis Balagueró, Antonio Lorenzo, José Luis García, García Vilella, Jiménez Balaguer, Isidro Balaguer and José María Iglesias.

theoretical issues of abstract art. I shall come back to these later, because some of their conclusions and working proposals are, in my opinion, directly related to the premises sustained by Manrique at the end of this decade.

Be that as it may, the fact is that the option between figuration and abstraction was the main dilemma confronting artists who wanted to enrol in the ranks of modernity of their times.

What concepts prevailed in Spanish abstraction during these embryonic years?

In 1952, shortly after and in the wake of the First Latin American Biennial, the journal *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos* published an anonymous "Vaguely approximate decalogue of young painting" which summarised - rather naively, in fact, even in its typeface, the thinking that was then regarded, in semi-official quarters, to underlie the break with "old" art:



"1. Painting begins tomorrow.

2. Artistic creation, i.e., new art, consists in "translating" reality in an unprecedented manner.

3. In art, whatever is not new is not authentic.

4. Beware of disorder: clarity is the charity of style.

5. Drawing is not form, but the way the painter sees form.

6. "The theme" and "the subject" of a painting should not be confounded. The total area of the canvas is the only **theme** of the painting.

7. Painting is born **from** colour; in other words, colour is the very nature of painting.

8. Leave them be! Art needs its elderly, all we know for sure is, indeed, what they teach us: what has already been explored, what we need not do.

9. The eye does not see reality. Eyes do not **see everything**. In each gaze, the eye selects the reality of its own vision.

And finally, 10:

To see

One must look

And know."

A review of the proposals and conclusions set out by the participants at the Santander event reveals that critics, historians and commentators stressed the distance between Spanish painting of the time and the problems and fundamental intentions that prevailed in the New York School on the one hand and, although different in its formulations, in European *art informel* or lyrical abstraction on the other, especially with respect to what Michel Tapié called *Art Autre*.

Seen from today's perspective, the factor most likely to attract the contemporary reader's attention is the fundamental importance attached to the religious question and the transcendental potential of abstract or non-objective art.

Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño reproached abstraction for the absence of any social, political, philosophical or religious content (without specifying direction or intention) and sustained the inexorable need for such expression: "Only non-objective painting, with its precedents and recent sires, has been removed from any religious, political, social or philosophical belief. It is, moreover, viewed by all such beliefs with distrust and hostility, because they all seek their own specific ends and



are only willing to accept plastic language insofar as it serves as propaganda. It would not appear to be easy to maintain this isolated arrogance. Abstract art, and specifically painting, cannot escape from this historic law and to survive will have to bow to one of these systems, or otherwise suffer total confinement and desertion"[9].

But paraphrasing Eugenio d'Ors, Gaya later contradicts himself by asserting that "Today, years after the mid-twentieth century, the only religious painting is abstract painting"[10].

Such devotion, I would hasten to add, was always, or at least always appeared to be, far from Manrique's intention, but its redundant appearance in the comments of the time must not have been indifferent to him. In any event, in 1953 he participated in the exhibition *Religious art today*, held at the Hostal de Los Reyes Católicos in Santiago de Compostela, and as late as 1958, a year which we shall later see was substantial to his artistic evolution, he participated in the collective shows *Continuity in sacred art*, at the Ateneo in Madrid, and the *Exhibition of sacred art*, held in the Bishop's See at Zaragoza[11]. Nor does it seem to me to be irrelevant to recall, for instance, that in 1950, Jorge Oteiza was commissioned to do the sculptures for the Aránzazu Basilica - the year prior he had won a

**9.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, "La pintura abstracta", in *El arte abstracto y sus problemas*, Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, Madrid, 1956.

**10.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *op. cit.*

**11.** Lázaro Santana reports that he exhibited *Símbolos de la Pasión* (Symbols of passion), a design for a mural, and *Cabeza de Jesús* (Head of Jesus), the latter in the See only. Lázaro Santana, *Manrique*, Edirca S.L., Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1991.

competition for a monument to Philip IV - that would be prohibited in 1954, or that the following year the Basque sculptor would, together with architects Sáenz de Oiza and Romaní, be awarded the National Prize in Architecture for a design for a chapel on the Road to Santiago.

It is nonetheless obvious that Manrique replaced this dry and at the same time imposed fundamentalist spirituality with a pantheism bordering on paganism and the orgiastic rapture of the senses.

These conferences also emphasised the absence of "literature" that should preside abstraction. Oddly, this literary aspect would become the monster to be most forcibly slain in the immediate future.

As far as technique is concerned,. there was "A very nineteenth century concern to use the right technique for each and every piece was also very much a part of abstract painting, which was performed with formal perfection, striving for durability in a way that was absent in previous schools"[12]. César Manrique would comment on that shared penchant on various occasions: "The mechanics of painting is [...] of primary importance for me. Without a command of craftsmanship no-one can do anything worthwhile, whether with a canvas or a jack plane"[13]. There is also nearly unanimous recognition of a Spanish palette, a legacy of the Golden Age tradition, emanating from obscurity and linking chromatics to spiritual loftiness.



Hence, in an unusual article intended for circulation abroad, *La pintura informalista [española] a través de los críticos* ([Spanish] *Art informel* painting seen by its critics), published in three languages by the Directorate General of Cultural Relations, a department under the aegis of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Carlos Areán explains how "The two non-objective schools presently existing in Spain, the Madrid school, headed by Saura, Canogar, Suárez and Vela, and the Barcelona school, whose most prominent member is Tapies (*sic*, hereafter, correctly spelled Tàpies), update the Spanish chromatic tradition (which Areán defines in terms of the limitation of range and interpenetration of colour), enriching it with slight modifications and nuance. In Madrid, Saura's gold-hued sepias, Canogar's flashes of red in a chain of sandy greys, Suárez' blood-stained and pasty white and Vela's sandy and light-streaked ochres, greens and blues, honour tradition, while restricting the range and multiplying the tones of each of the few colours used. In Barcelona, the most innovative contribution is the discovery of luminescent colour, which may be gold or fire in Cuixart, multiple in Puig or Vallés, silvery or golden

**12.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *op. cit.*

**13.** *Informaciones*, Madrid, 5 February 1955. Quoted in Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.* (2)

in Mier and coolly blue in Tharrats or Planell. [...]Tàpies' countless hues fall outside the emotive chromatic luminescence that prevailed in Barcelona and the voluntary constraint in inland Spain; his wide range admits any number of nuances, over which the painter spreads delicate veils that seem to project them into a glossy, ideal distance"[14].

## Promise in mural painting

Finally and yet crucially in Manrique's immediate understanding of his work was his general conviction that the field of action most open to abstraction and where it could be most fruitfully applied was mural painting. Manuel Sánchez Camargo predicted, in his rather affected style, that "architecture would provide the essentials for a movement that was to regard mural art as explanation and redemption"[15]. At about the same time, Sebastián Gasch subdivided the various directions taken within the abstract movement and declared his intellectual preferences: "Yet others, and we focus on them in particular, associate poetic expression with an attempt at mural-scale animation. Such artists must be given credit for humanising abstract form and enriching the pictorial metamorphosis of surfaces to reach the broader mural dimension"[16]. He draws most immediately from the authority of Léger who, in turn, propounds that the "highly decorative qualities of abstract art" are the reason behind its adaptation to "purely architectural production", and uses that as grounds to reject the easel, which he sees as being inevitably bound by figurative ties, proposing to "set our sights on the monumental potential of abstract art which undoubtedly will find its most perfect expression in mural art, presently in the midst of a brilliant rebirth.

"As it breaks with the easel, takes possession of space and adapts to what is useful, abstract art will be in a position to transform the decoration of our lives and rise to the very pinnacle of style"[17].

Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, another speaker at the Santander Congress, was of much the same opinion, on the grounds of the "immense power of abstract painting [...], the greater possibilities reserved to it in terms of execution which will materialise not on the easel, but in murals[18]. Both analysts also concurred in a regret, the absence of architecture able to correspond to the aesthetics of abstraction. This concern would later guide Manrique's building and urban planning endeavours.



**14.** Carlos Antonio Areán, "El color en la pintura española", in *La pintura informalista en España a través de los críticos*, Directorate General of Cultural Relations, Madrid, 1961.

**15.** Manuel Sánchez Camargo, cited in Vicente Aguilera Cerni, *La postguerra. Documentos y Testimonios*, Ministry of Education and Science Publications Service, Bilbao, 1975.

**16.** Sebastián Gasch, "Evolución del arte abstracto", in *El arte abstracto y sus problemas*, Ediciones de Cultura Hispánica, Madrid, 1956.

**17.** Sebastián Gasch, *op. cit.*

**18.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *op. cit.*

There is no question in my mind that the first works of importance that Manrique did were the successive murals that he painted in the mid fifties for the Hotel Fénix in Madrid, the Banco Guipuzcoano in San Sebastián and, later, after finishing the latter, the purely abstract and, strangely, at the same time very gestural, mural for the Barajas Airport terminal.

Although today they have all unfortunately since disappeared and our information is based on photographs only, these enable us to at least elucidate one controversial aspect of his work: the existence and possible consequences of the Kandinsky influence. John Bernard Myers, one of Manrique's most passionate and enlightened commentators and certainly the one who interpreted his early maturity with the finest sense of humour, sustained in 1966 that it was after Manrique saw Kandinsky's *oeuvre* in Paris that he did his best contemporary work, dated from 1958 to 1966[19]. In view of the available documents, there appears to be no doubt that Kandinsky's compositional system of closed, fractionally coloured forms in contrasting shades, included in the general subject with a rhythm closely reminiscent of a musical tempo, is visibly present in the three panels painted by the artist for the Banco Guipuzcoano. This method was used in combination with the more Picassian universe to be found in the Hotel Fénix' single body mural.



The most thought-provoking interpretation, in my view, for the astonishing diagnosis it establishes, was put forward by Eduardo Westerdahl in a text written in 1960 when the style that Manrique would definitively adopt was still developing, a text which, announcing that style and identifying the causes of a profound change, sustained that "the mysterious door that Kandinsky had opened in the human body just a half century before [...] reached its ultimate consequences in the informal tendencies of abstraction" Whereas the Russian painter subdivided his research into "improvisations", "compositions" and "impressions" "in an evolutionary process running from chaos to grammar", in other words, from free forms to geometry and lines, the latter painters, among whom he names Manrique and to whom he specifically refers, move towards their objective in the opposite fashion: they start off from geometry to "leap to the reality of the earth, the soil. Kandinsky's formula is devitalised", replaced by two elements brought into play by surrealism, the found object and decalcomania. "The priority of aesthetic concerns such as tension, structure, composition, weight or measure, declines. And with them, the grammatical meaning of a language. Man's supremacy in pre-digesting these values is lost. The found object was not a human creation and decalcomania was a

**19.** John Bernard Myers, "Un singular artista español y su entorno: una opinión estadounidense", versioned by Antonio García Ysábal, cat. *César Manrique. Hecho en el fuego (Obras 1968-1990, una selección)*, Madrid, 1991.

mere matter of chance. This is César Manrique's immediate legacy as he turned his steps towards a cosmic reality that had already ceased to be an interior necessity"[20]

## From monotypes to the austere period

Gloria Moure, in turn, valued the ease with which Manrique slid from this eclectic but conservative neofiguration to lyrical abstraction, and the reasons behind it: "In his case, such an evolution was not merely to be a response to the objectivising and didactic avant-gardes, as it was for many an artist who embraced the most existential subjectivity in the fifties, but would, moreover, entail a direct connection with his native concerns and an urge for reconciliation with the organic universe"[21].

And, indeed, between 1953 and 1954, at the same time as he began to experiment, as mentioned above, with non-figurative painting, Manrique, together with Fernando Mignoni and the critic Manuel Conde, fostered the foundation of the gallery Artistas de Hoy, in the flat over the Fernando Fe bookshop. Run by Lola Romero and Conde, the gallery exhibited paintings by Manrique, among others, in April 1954, as a member of an eponymous group[22] that would play a very important role in reviving the Madrilenian avant-garde. In addition, however, he ran two ongoing solo showings, in 1954 and 1955, in the Clan gallery, founded and directed first by Tomás Seral - who in 1956 moved on to Fernando Fe and in 1958 took over the Artistas de Hoy gallery, renamed the Seral showroom - and where Manrique worked with his successor José Antonio Llardent. In the first of these showings he exhibited the monotypes - a technique which, although invented by Max Ernst, was so exhaustively developed by Óscar Domínguez that it can be regarded to be a Canary Island form - that actually constitute the most immediate precedent to his abstractions *per se*[23] .

These, like other subsequent works and some gouaches, inks and acrylics on paper or cardboard, dated between 1954 and 1958, are definitely, as other authors before me have sustained, "equivocal abstracts"[24], because of the permanent figurative presence lurking within them - even in the titles, *Objetos enterrados*, (Buried objects) or *Flores y un pez* (Flowers and a fish), both dating from 1954 -. But it is no less true that, in many, the absolutely highlighted clash between background and figure, the schematic nature of the forms in which the author often appears to pursue a reiteration

**20.** This and the preceding quotatons in Eduardo Westerdahl, *Manrique*, Colección del Arte de Hoy, Madrid, June 1960.

**21.** Gloria Moure, "César Manrique", cat. *César Manrique*, Sala d'exposicions de l'obra Cultural de la Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, 1983.

**22.** The exhibtion showed works by Censoni, Francisco Farreras, Luis Feito, Carlos Pascual de Lara, Manuel Mampaso, César Manrique, Fernando Mignoni, Molina Sánchez, Nellina Pistolesi, Tony Stubbing and José Vento. This list and the information on the gallery are given by Chus Tudelilla, "La vanguardia insomne", cat. *Tomás Seral y Casas, un galerista en la postguerra*, Government of Aragón, Zaragoza, 1998.

**23.** Lázaro Santana records a remark made by the artist that is symptomatic of this vacillation between figuration and abstraction, identified above as a key issue in modernity in the forties and fifties: "My style is in the artistic line of a virgin world, a world undergoing formation, much before its natural crystallisation. No, my painting is not abstract, not by any means. Look: the forms that I bring to my canvas are the forms of a world with no dawn, on the first day. They're nature uncatalogued, without academic notes, before Linnaeus classified them [...] My botany and my zoology are fantastic. Look at this: light is solidifying on the canvas, but conserves its clarity and brilliance, as if it were mutating into solid bodies. And here: the transparency of the air grows tangible" Lázaro Santana, *César Manrique. Un arte para la vida*, Editorial Prensa Ibérica, Barcelona, 1993.

**24.** Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.*

bordering on pattern and the completely artificial - in the best sense of the word - variety and sensuality of the chromatic range - impossible blues, lime greens, earthy dilutions, not to mention blood reds - make them particularly attractive samples of the artist's work. At the same time, the voluntary coarseness of the profile and lines of the figures in many of them - such as, for instance, two untitled pieces dating from 1955, in the José Luis Balbás and the Balbás Villar collections respectively - render them strangely prefatory to current art, likening them to, without confounding them with, certain contemporary proposals.

Carlos Edmundo de Ory, - who levelled a "sweet insult" at him, as "a one-piece dragon of aesthetic luxury" - presented some of these early pieces in the following florid terms: "What is meant by 'aesthetic luxury' is [...] no more than concentration, extreme grace, ultimate sacrifice to sensitivity, algorithm, infinitesimal power, qualitative nature of image, jollying and juice and, in the end, idealistic substantivity of fact. Now, each of César Manrique's paintings emits, in itself, a radiation of a precise determinative nature, in other words, the phenomenic impact of a material focus of aesthetic substance on a dense synthesis of tone. With this what we are proposing is the unquestionably perfective quality of each of these incarnations.



"César Manrique's stylistic unilaterality establishes its prerogatives in direct and univocal relationship to its temperamental craving for a voluntary discipline of occult, atavistic significance, making technique - indeed - a cult of aesthetic devotion. [...] In keeping with the historic aristocracies in art that have bequeathed such examples as the unique filigree, the unique filter, the likewise unique seal and facet of incomparable ineffability. Hence oriental lacquers, Athenian flasks from the Dipylon cemetery, Byzantine enamels, Java prints..., a model of eternity in which César Manrique's thoroughly narcissistic art is submerged."[25]

Although he represented Spain at the Third Latin American Biennial held at Havana in 1955 and at the Twenty Eighth Venice Biennial of 1956 and did his first retrospective exhibition in 1957, the first truly crucial year in his artistic career was 1958, when he held a solo exhibition at the Ateneo in Madrid, presenting a consistent collection of abstract paintings with characteristics that would later be found in what may be regarded to be his works of greatest depth, endowed with a consolidated style.

**25.** Carlos Edmundo de Ory, "El nivel estético de César Manrique", cat. Galería Clan, Madrid, 1954.

But first a brief clarification: in 1957, when El Paso was founded, Manrique was in Madrid, but the only Canary Islander members of the group were Millares and Chirino[26]. Fernando Castro Borrego notes that another artist who was an island native, namely Cristino de Vera, was likewise excluded, to explain the reasons that the two were left out: "The reason for this exclusion was ideological in the case of the former, and ideological and linguistic in the latter. César Manrique was a modern painter: he used abstraction before many of the members of 'El Paso' but, and herein the ideological element, his conception of abstract language excluded any critical allusion to the Spanish context; against the dark backdrop of a country shackled by a dictatorship, his art was sensual and playful"[27].

His personality more than his art, in which he may not have publicly expressed himself with the contained will for change exhibited by the more aggressive members of 'El Paso', was very close, in keeping with his singularity, to a widely extended vision[28].

In the text he wrote for the catalogue to the Ateneo exhibition, Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño identified what were the fundamental features of the artist's work or substantial variations with respect to the preceding period. Firstly, the question of colour: "César Manrique's palette, previously so vital and polychromatic, is restricted to the solemnity of black and white, their grey offspring, tanned ochre and the mother earth"[29].

Secondly, the reduction of the complex geometric games that characterised both the murals and, to a lesser extent, the monotypes, to simple variations on chequered design: "The pattern in our case, in César Manrique's present work, is a grid, a series of forces from different directions [...] this chequered rhythm is enhanced by the subtle and millenary iridescence and rough consistency that we have come to call good workmanship and good cuisine"[30].

Finally, although not the first to do so[31], he likened Manrique's plastic intentions to the geology of the island of Lanzarote[32]: "What abounds in this, César Manrique's austere period, is plot. A fierce, immanent and eternal plot, a plot written by geography"[33]. We shall come back to this orographic question and its topography.

Myers, cited above, in what I believe to clearly be an exaggeration, associated his origins with the

**26.** Martín Chirino would define his own presence as "expectant", from Juan Manuel Bonet in "Martín Chirino, un recorrido en espiral", cat. *Martín Chirino*, Queen Sofia National Art Centre Museum, Madrid, 1991.

**27.** Fernando Castro Borrego, "Luces en la escena canaria. Un ensayo general de interpretación", cat. *Luces en la escena Canaria. Un ensayo general de interpretación*, Jerusalem Artist House, Jerusalem, 1987.

**28.** The suffocating aroma of the times, twenty years after the nation-wide victory of the uprising against the Second Republic, is perceptible today even in the wording of an introduction to the painter included in the slender catalogue edited on the occasion of the showing. It read, in literal translation: "César Manrique was born in Arrecife de Lanzarote on 24 April 1920. After a number of solo and collective exhibitions on the Canary Islands, he was granted a scholarship to study in the San Fernando School of Fine Art. His first monographic exhibition was held in Madrid in 1954, at the 'Clan' Gallery. In 1957 he was officially invited by the Canary Island authorities to hold an anthological exhibition of his *oeuvre* on the occasion of the CDLXXIV anniversary of the incorporation of Gran Canaria to the Crown of Castile. He participated in the Second Latin American Art Biennial, the 1956 Venice Biennial and the 'Continuity of Sacred Art' exhibition organised by the Ateneo of Madrid in 1958. He has painted a number of decorative murals in different Spanish cities and hung works in the Westerdahl Museum at Puerto de la Cruz, at the Columbus House in Las Palmas and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Madrid. As well as in many private collections in Spain and elsewhere, such as New York, Cincinnati, El Cairo, Paris, Limerick, etc.".

**29.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, "La fase austera de César Manrique", Cuadernos de Arte, Ateneo de Madrid, 1958.

**30.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *op.cit.*

**31.** Eduardo Westerdahl, in a text dated in 1957, already sustained that "Manrique is from Lanzarote. He lives in Madrid. He says he tries to bring his volcanoes to his painting".

**32.** Gaya Nuño defined the term "austere", and its synonyms "nude," concise," "elementary" or "ascetic" to mean "what should be said in painting, a decisive national mandate which would at least affect the best and most select artists and (as a constant in Spanish art) would necessarily have to appear in our non-figurative colours. [...] And if you think not, have a look at the work of its young masters, the restrained drama that underlies the rough Tàpies textures, Manrique's dry geologies, Lucio's chafed and artisanal configurations, Canogar's dense decisions, the voluntary renunciation in any other painter". Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, "La austeridad", in *La pintura informalista en España a través de los críticos*, Directorate General of Cultural Relations, Madrid, 1961.

**33.** Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *op. cit.*

possibilities he inferred from his Parisian experience, not with Kandinsky, but with Mondrian. "Mondrian was to mean to him what cubism meant to Gorky [...]. These early canvases are indicative of his passion for constructivism, order, elimination, despite his apparently misty and transparent imagery"[34]. Lázaro Santana believes that this is "abstract constructivism, similar to what Farreras, Feito, Labra, Mampaso, Sempere, Planasdurá, etc., were doing at the time"[35]. I, in turn, would add that I also feel that the influence of another artist was equally important, namely Alberto Burri, a painter who had already explored the possibilities of burlap, certain material-like monochromes similar to those with which Manrique would assert his artistic personality in the sixties and who, perhaps less curiously than may seem, had already lit fire to his early *Combustions*. This law of fire in painting would also be invoked by Yves Klein in the early sixties. One of the last paintings of this series was used as a background for the most important collective exhibition of the period for Manrique, the *Jeune peinture espagnole* (young Spanish painting) showing held in Freiburg in 1959.

**Madrid – New York**



John B. Myers tells us that by 1953 Manrique had already "begun to use a mixture of casein, rubber and varnish, a medium which, while difficult to apply, yielded rich and unusual effects. He also used the most recent plastic pigments"[36].

The documents showing what the mural at Barajas Airport looked like are indicative of the deep and sudden change that had taken place in Manrique's painting, which continued to metamorphose, to reach what thereafter became, with minimal albeit significant variations, his personal and distinct style: painting that is sheer material in the embodiment of pictorial determination.

The earliest pieces in this long period date from the latter months of 1959. They may be described as the extension of things material - in addition to the ones referred above, a long list of others from akil and other glues to lye, sand and other oxidisable soil, etc. - mixed on the surface of the canvas, which one assumes was in a horizontal position - such as in Pollock and Motherwell -. Jackson Pollock's working methods, in particular his decision to lay his canvases on the floor and dripping paint over them, are perhaps the most universally known of all those fathered outside

**34.** John Bernard Myers, *op. cit.*

**35.** Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.*

**36.** John Bernard Myers, *op. cit.*

academic orthodoxy. Strangely, some of the features of his art, such as a certain pantheistic vein, are, I believe, concurrent with Manrique's approach. According to Robert Rosenblum "The classical Pollock of the late forties and early fifties thereby became a freak of nature, a reckless turbine of pure energy able to carry us to the extremes of microscopic and telescopic vision, the flash of an atomic or galactic explosion, or in more earthly terms, the crushing force of nature's least tangible elements, such as air, fire, water"[37].

The successive layers are spread with sweeping or dragging movements, divided into two large zones made to clash due to centripetal or centrifugal forces, piled up from the lower to the upper edge of the painting, bored into without tearing the canvas, accumulated to form a false figure or scattered like vertical rivers or clawed fingers. The descriptions can be as extensive, numerous and prolific as we want, but actually, the conceptual substance with which Manrique composed these works appears to be homogeneous and unitary, in my view. I would stress, however, the modulation of the chromatic variations and an undeniable monotony which, I suppose, Manrique would liken to the monotony of the forces of nature.

"Let's have a look" wrote Eduardo Westerdahl, "at his palette in the works sent to the 1960 Biennial: black, grey, brown, earthy Seville red, orange-brown and an occasional very sober red highlight. His *oeuvre* in these periods, generally speaking, was based on a very sober palette, where bluish greys and light ochres contrasted with an occasional orange touch.

"In the crossroads year, 1958, the major variation was not only colour, but the structure of the painting, with orthogonal lines, enlivened by the freedom of execution and vibration of the material. But it was in 1960 when this freedom and vibration confronted the work with its author, giving rise to a vital and indeterminate style of painting, an adventure in material and what we have [...] described as the encounter with the parched earth and the virginity of geology"[38].

"In Manrique" - writes Lázaro Santana in turn - "material is everything, its tridimensional aggressiveness constitutes the expressive core of the painting. Colour emanates from it as a part of its very nature and no other element is added to the painter's exploration of the universe: it is only enlivened by the original fire; some accident, perhaps not so distant, may provoke the appearance of

**37.** Robert Rosenblum, *Modern painting and the northern Romantic tradition*, London, 1975.

**38.** Eduardo Westerdahl, *Manrique*, Colección del Arte de Hoy, Madrid, June 1960.

plant or animal life but, for the time being, everything is mineral, the existence of man is nowhere acknowledged, no graphic sign testifies to human presence. There is only matter, enclosed in its own solitude, attesting only to itself, ceaselessly creating itself as a self-sufficient being, abiding by certain aesthetic rules of its own to occupy all voids in ways suited to nature"[39].

Towards mid-decade, when he had reached a position of certain privilege among the more successful domestic artists and, like his colleagues, had participated in the international dissemination of Spanish art - with official or semi-official support -, when he had reaped concrete and specific recognition in the form of awards and purchases for international collections, Manrique - very likely urged on by painful personal circumstances[40] - moved to New York, where he would live on and off from 1964 to 1968, year of his definitive return to Lanzarote. The various analysts of his *oeuvre* concur that this intermittent period in New York was essential to his artistic and personal development. Lázaro Santana even sustains that Manrique regarded those years as the "richest of his entire life"[41]. I am not so sure. By the time Manrique went to New York, his artistic domain, abstraction, in the form of either European material *art informel* or American abstract expressionism, had ceased to be the predominant tendency on the market - that was the year that José Guerrero chose to return to Spain, under the conviction that pop art, then at the height of its popularity, had decidedly won the day -.



As far as possible changes in his work are concerned, formally speaking they were scant. "He pursued his work on canvas" wrote Lázaro Santana, "along the same lines as he had established since 1960: at most, there was a slight change in the amount of material and the way it was arranged, insofar as it receded, leaving more space on the canvas for smooth surfaces, painted with bright, vivid colours"[42] Myers also noted this chromatic change and added that "Manrique did not paint for two years. He would not go back to canvas painting until 1965, on his return from America. [...] With regard to his new paintings, all done in New York with casein, paste and varnish reinforced with acrylic paint, they differed from the previous works - not in content (theme and landscape were still there), but in a totally renewed concept of colour and space -. New York unquestionably had a considerable impact on Manrique and was very likely the source of his new colour scale. In the 1965 canvases, colour has a very vivid tone and emits nearly metallic light, like the colours in caves when the beam of a flashlight bounces off the quartz, basalt and mica"[43].

**39.** Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.*

**40.** The sudden death of his partner Josefa (Pepi) Gómez in 1963 left Manrique, according to all those who knew him, emotionally destitute.

**41.** Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.*

**42.** Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.*

**43.** John Bernard Myers, *op. cit.*

Attention has also been drawn to his contact with some of the major abstract expressionists - Mark Rothko and one of Guerrero's close friends, Teodoro Stamos -, with a second generation of artists such as Frank Stella and some of the young sculptors - César, Chamberlaine -, and to his exposure to pop art - through Andy Warhol - and kinetic art. Pop and kinetic art have been interpreted to have had a direct influence on his spatial concepts and the generation of his mobiles, the *Juguetes del viento* (Toys of the wind) series. This may be, but if so, in my opinion, he only assimilated some of the most superficial aspects of the pop art proposals. In this regard, I must mention a feature of his artistic personality so paradoxical that it never ceases to surprise me, although I must acknowledge that contradiction was central to his very nature. The more we know about him from those who knew him and, primarily, the different accounts narrated by Lázaro Santana, the more convinced I become that Manrique, intellectually and aesthetically, was a sponge who thrived on whatever he had around him, including the works or discoveries of other artists, in which he invested no mental speculation of any sort.



However, unless he kept it a secret, as there is definitely no written record that things were otherwise, he showed a flagrant lack of interest in the most exciting things that were happening in Paris or New York. The only other painter, outside of Picasso, he named during his stay in Paris was André Marchand and the scant information on his successive periods in New York is equally discouraging[44]. Lázaro Santana reproduces a letter to Dámaso dated 10 May 1966 in which Manrique wrote: "The artist in vogue now is Barnett Newman, who's achieved papal status. All it is, is SHIT (sic). Each of his paintings is a stripe of a different colour, a vertical line running from top to bottom, and that's it. That's all his paintings are"[45]. The same author notes that in the diary that Manrique kept that year, one entry reads: "I was talking to Teodoro Stamos and Mark Rothko", and even the commentator has to exclaim, "without the slightest reflection on the painter's *oeuvre* or personality"[46].

In any case, he did undeniably enter the American market very quickly. A few months after arriving in New York, an artist friend, Mauricio Aguilar, introduced him to Catherine Viviano, owner of the eponymous gallery, with whom he signed an agency contract for North America and exhibited on three occasions. The first was on 11 February 1966 - after which Myers drafted the article cited on several occasions in this essay and when he presented his first *collages* -. The second was on 11 April 1967 and the third and last, which was apparently inaugurated in his absence, on 22 April 1969. The

**44.** Lázaro Santana published what he regarded to be the most interesting fragments in Lázaro Santana, *Manrique*, Edirca S.L., Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1991, but the truth is that they provide little information other than the steps he took to further his career, certain details about his social life and, more intensly, his nostalgia for Lanzarote.

**45.** Lázaro Santana, *César Manrique. Un arte para la vida*, Editorial Prensa Ibérica, Barcelona, 1993.

**46.** Lázaro Santana, *op. cit.*

only frankly innovative feature of his production was the *collage*s, eighteen of which were exhibited in New York and which merit a detailed study in their own right. In them, Manrique's leaning towards material is as evident as it is in his painting. Most, if not all, are made with paper cuttings; the torn and fringed edges enable him to create broad areas of flat colour - non-existent in the paintings except as background - whose rhythm and overlapping elements would have an almost immediate impact on the murals he painted in that decade, which often drew from *assemblage* techniques, based on the *collage* principle, more than from Rauschenberg's contorted objectualisation, for instance Moreover, compared to the near monochromism of his painted works or the harmonious relationships among hues, the *collages* afforded the artist the possibility of confronting smaller swathes of colour and using vivid tones that he had practically abandoned since the austere period.

## Lanzarote is MY TRUTH

One fact that is unanimously identified by his commentators as symptomatic of his nostalgia for his native island, was that he replaced the successive numbering with which he had been titling his paintings with place names and geographic contours characteristic of Lanzarote. I am not the only one who finds this merely anecdotal and very likely no more than a way of conferring an exotic touch to painting that in itself must not have been particularly unusual in New York. Moreover, in 1963, nearly a year before he moved to that city, he had titled a work *Fariones* and in 1964 he also gave some of his works English titles, such as *Road to Plato* and *High noon in the moon*. But the Lanzarote reference and Manrique's intimate and permanent link to his homeland do merit some comment in connection with its impact on his pictorial production.



Lázaro Santana regrets that: "Since the mid-fifties when this painting was defined by critics as a nearly realistic likeness of Lanzarote's volcanic orography, that definition has been repeated with relentless monotony; no-one has suggested a new interpretation or attempted to trace the origins of this very specific singularity. And yet Manrique's *oeuvre* [...] comprises an exciting formal universe that extends far beyond this likeness. Its genesis and structure is immerse in the most active stream of contemporary art and makes a substantial contribution to Spanish art in particular"[47]. Nonetheless, even the artist himself insisted on that interpretation. Hence, when he sustained "I try to be like the

**47.** Lázaro Santana, *Manrique*, Edirca S.L., Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1991

free hand that forms geology"[48]. And like Manrique, the writers and critics who knew him best viewed his work in that light. Manolo Conde, in the presentation for a collective exhibition of works by Manrique, Rueda, Sempere, Vela and Zóbel held at the Neblí gallery in May and June 1962, after confessing his friendship with the participating artists, "of whose present tense and circumstances I'm more or less aware", insisted on this unitary perception of Manrique's painting: "That lost world has unquestionably exercised a magic influence on César Manrique's spirit, an artist who obsessively attempts to convey his childhood memories, reworked with the passing of time and in constant pursuit of pictorial expression."

"Earlier, it was the crops of his island, Lanzarote, the wise and millenary way of using a nearly barren soil, that inspired his paintings. Now, in possession of a simple and elaborate technique, nude mountains and cones of volcanoes preside his work."

"His is painting with a cosmic intention, therefore, sensitive and tactile, its topography reveals man as loyal to his origins and at the same time, in a broader dimension, the constant concern in Spanish painting for the material worked, a dense, viscous reflection of the baroque spirit lurking, to a greater or lesser degree, in the hearts of all Spaniards"[49].



Manrique's own writings, both with respect to himself and, more rarely, to some of his artist friends - Pepe Dámaso I would say more often than any other - confirm this mooring to his childhood, the pantheistic experience of existence and the animism of an extinguished mineral fire from whose vestiges Manrique obtained his intensity as a painter.

Early in the sixties, Manrique returned to, or more precisely, articulated the discoveries made in previous years on the treatment of material in figuration interpreted with an *art informel* approach. This concurred, time-wise, more or less with Millares' *Antropofaunas* (Anthropofauna), for instance and Martín Chirino's first *Aeróvoros* (Airovores) and *Afrocán*; as well as with Lucio Muñoz' first organic or organicist period, to name but a few of his contemporaries.

At the time he drew extensively from the fields of archaeology, palaeontology or anthropology for his main subjects; such themes were also addressed by the above artists in response, I assume, to

**48.** Eduardo Westerdahl, *Manrique*, Colección del Arte de Hoy, Madrid, June 1960.

**49.** Manuel Conde, texto cat. *Manrique, Rueda, Sempere, Vela, Zóbel*, Galería Neblí, Madrid, 1962.

a certain depletion of what might be called the purest *art informel* and to the shared expression of a more and more widespread awareness of the stagnation and petrification not only of the political regime, but of the habits, customs and self-image shaped in the course of those black years by the society that sustained or resisted it.

These are dates when a younger generation began to establish a discourse and practice that intrinsically and permanently rejected the aesthetic code and theoretical and practical models that prevailed in preceding generations. The changes in paradigm, the variations in which international artists were regarded to be influential, the very interpretation of artists' role and the events that should interest them, prompted this generation's divorce from its immediate and triumphant predecessor. The distance that imposed, not lacking in hostility, was established with respect to Manrique, among others.

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By way of recapitulation of the foregoing and a review of César Manrique's pictorial work from today's perspective, the first observation I would make, in apparent contradiction to what has been sustained by most analysts, is that it can be readily separated from the artist's other activities - sculpture, architecture, design - and can also be singularly framed within the whole of the production and *oeuvre* with which it concurs chronologically.



It is true that as a painter, Manrique did not cover very extensive ground. His hesitant, academically realistic beginnings were followed by decorative figuration and that, in turn, by his equally ornamental conversion to neofiguration with the incorporation of constructivist traits, under the influence, referred above, of Picasso, Matisse, Kandinsky or Klee; his most signal achievements during that decade were his mural paintings. His most intense and longest period focused on abstraction, which he explored exclusively from the material standpoint and, even then, limiting the materials used. In the late seventies Fernando Castro elaborated on this opinion. "I deduce that all of César's painting, from the fifties to date, is no more than an intelligent reiteration of certain *leit motifs*, a condensation of experience on the bidimensional surface of the painting"[50].

**50.** Fernando Castro, "Aproximación a César Manrique", cat. *Manrique*, Galería Leyendecker, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1979.

Finally - because his latest work features, in my opinion, the phantasmal apparition of fleshy figures

whose ingredients are the same as in his abstractions -, he engaged in the construction of *collages* which either followed the same compositional guidelines as his paintings or reverted, essentially as respect the vividness of colour, to the mural activity referred above.

Manrique's position concurred in many important ways with that of his European or American counterparts, although these traits arose spontaneously and unquestionably with a total lack of chronological co-ordination, lagging, like all his Spanish contemporaries, behind international developments. Two such traits are: the importance attached to chance, an indispensable ingredient in avant-garde artistic creation since its advent with Dadá and its systematic formulation by surrealism. Evidence of this widespread importance was its adoption by North American abstract expressionism. Also, and in this regard Manrique was more significant than any other painter, the conviction that the artist creates the way nature itself does, attempting to reflect its flows, its rhythms, its bewitching cruelty. It is likewise undeniable that while Manrique may not have been a pioneer, he was one of the most active participants in the movements that revived the sorry state of Spanish painting from the late fifties through the sixties, and it is precisely in the context of this group of artists and this school



of thought, only partially developed at the time, that his endeavour can best be appraised. With the exception of Antoni Tàpies - exceptional in the validity of his *oeuvre*, including his very late works - and Antonio Saura between the mid fifties and early sixties - when he formalised the very powerful figurational model on which he would draw monothematically and exclusively - the truth is that both the main members of the El Paso community and other painters not collectively grouped opted in those years for solutions and approaches very similar when not identical to Manrique's. His predilection for material is closely related to Manolo Rivera's for metallic screens, Lucio Muñoz' for wood, Gustavo Torner's for sheet metal. I feel he merits the company of these artists more than that of other lesser names with whom he has often been associated.

Ultimately, he was an artist and a painter absolutely sure of his intentions and objectives: "The artist's mission in our times is to convey good taste and talent to all that surrounds us and my impression is that lately we've forgotten something very important, and that is to make life's panorama more comfortable and beautiful so human beings can develop more harmoniously"[51].

**51.** Fernando Torrijos, "Entrevista a César Manrique", cat. *César Manrique*, Sala d'exposicions de l'obra Cultural de la Caixa de Pensions, Barcelona, 1983.

# Preformational stages in César Manrique's latter production

*Fernando Castro Borrego*



In biology, the meaning of the term *preformation* is: "Theory according to which every germ cell contains the organism of its kind fully formed and complete in all its parts and development of the being is a direct result of what existed from the outset in the genome of the initial cell"[1].

I sustain that all of César Manrique's work responds to this idea of *magmatic preformation*; this makes it difficult to classify his painting by chronological periods, in particular after the consolidation of his material language in the sixties. For this reason, the present essay stresses the constants in his production rather than the variables, the reason underlying his obsessions rather than the description of any differences that may be detected in them.

In the beginning there was fire, the origin of all things. This definition, which could have been extracted from a treatise on pre-Socratic physics, brings to mind the volcanologic trope, the well-known commonplace to which art reviews usually resort to interpret César Manrique's pictorial work. The fact that this figure of speech has prevailed over other critical interpretations of his *oeuvre* is not coincidental, because it is based on the relationship between the material textures of his pictorial work and the volcanic geology of his native island, Lanzarote. "All my painting," the artist once said, "is,

**1.** Georges Tiñes y Agnès Lempereur: *Diccionario general de ciencias humanas*, Cátedra, Madrid, 1978, p. 718.

essentially, volcanology and geology"[2]. Nonetheless, I propose that an effort should be made to reach beyond the most banal aspects of that interpretation, without forfeiting the symbolic wealth it affords.

The magmatic state is preformative. César Manrique saw it that way: "Immersed in the calcinated magmas of Timanfaya, direct contact with the volcano kindles an urge for absolute freedom and a strange premonitory feeling, a clear insight into space and time"[3]. There is, in that statement, an irrepressible sensation of symbolic empathy. The artist feels that he forms a part of the original magma and that sensation, far from oppressive, "releases" him not only from the artificial bonds created by humanity for the sake of social organisation (laws, rules, etc.), which are necessarily coercive and restrictive, an obstacle to happiness, but from spatial and temporal relationships as well. It should be noted that the isomorphism in César Manrique's paintings cancel out spatial and temporal relationships (there is no depth, no before or after).

This intuition extends beyond the level of aesthetics, which is sensory experience, to reach a higher rung of cognition; that is why, in his aphorisms, he sustains that "there is still room for truth in art and life"[4]. These two concepts, truth and life, can be reconciled through art, not through reason. Painting represents this link. It arises where a concealed, unobvious truth is revealed. "In nature's organic system, in its powerful hidden reason, I have found the most transcendent truth"[5]. César Manrique's naturalism, like that of other abstract painters, is clearly symbolistic and therefore precludes any impressionistic interpretation. "I have always sought in nature its essential condition, its hidden sense: the meaning of my life. The wonder and mystery which I have found on that long exploratory trail are as real, as apparent, as tangible reality"[6].

Confronted with the ambivalence of fire, which is both destructive and formative, César Manrique proposes a magical neutralisation of these forces in his pictorial work. Painting is where opposites are reconciled. As in volcanic eruptions, the artist proceeds by controlling the transition of liquid to solid. The lava solidifies due to the cooling of the incandescent mass, which forfeits its liquidity to become a solid and stable body, subject only to the laws of material erosion or wear. Like any natural process, it cannot be regulated; there is no subject or will to whom it may be attributed (although César Manrique often expressed himself as though everything existing responded to a preconceived plan). But there are aspects of the pictorial process that can be neither controlled nor explained; so that when the paint



**2.** Fernando Gómez Aguilera: *César Manrique en sus palabras*, Fundación César Manrique, 1995, No. 78, p. 88.

**3.** Translated from the Spanish original in Fernando Gómez Aguilera: *César Manrique en sus palabras*, Fundación César Manrique, 1995, No. 115, p. 114.

**4.** Fernando Gómez Aguilera: *César Manrique en sus palabras*, Fundación César Manrique, 1995, No. 80, p. 88.

**5.** *Ibídem*, No. 103, p. 105.

**6.** *Ibídem*, No. 127, p. 122.

spreads over the canvas from the acrylic tube it is like solidifying lava. And although - as Goya said - time also paints, for César Manrique painting was a negation of time, which is another way of saying a conjuring of death. The ultimate and explicit goal of alchemy was to stop time. The idea of solidifying time in painting was even given a term, "lithochronism", coined by the Canary Island surrealist painter Óscar Domínguez and his friend the Argentine novelist Ernesto Sábato.

In a critical text on César Manrique's work, the poet Edmundo de Ory broached the ontological status of what I have called the preformative states of his painting, referring to the "organic progeny of being and nature"[7]. This is tantamount to proclaiming the illusory nature of the evolution of living creatures: everything *exists* and *is present* in nature from the beginning. Therefore, if beings do not admit development (epigenesis), nothing is born, nothing dies. It is no coincidence that anything suggestive of construction (epigenesis) is flatly rejected in César Manrique's work. And the mobiles? Well. First of all, they are toys of the wind, they interact with it. They are essentially related to place and the forces of nature. They are not reason's artefacts, despite their geometric structure. We could even say that, given their radial and symmetrical configuration, these mobiles are steel cacti. Although they are machines composed of arms, bearings and so on, there is something in them that pertains to nature. The image gives no account of the construction of the object, because everything already existed in the original preformative state. The astral scheme that presides all his pictorial work explains the genetic meaning of the images. This strange inversion of the origin of all things was exemplified by César Manrique in the trees he planted at the Martiánez pools in Puerto de la Cruz (Tenerife), with their roots pointing upward.



Although his pictorial images appear to respond to a powerful urge for material and sensual pleasure, they are but reflections of the astral order referred above: cosmic resonance in which sensitivity and love are requisite to visual perception. One needs to be alert to these echoes to perceive them as images and commit them to eternity.

In his latter years, when his reputation as a landscape architect continued to grow, he never ceased to reaffirm his faith in painting: just as Leonardo sustained that, as the universal science it is, it could accommodate everything, César Manrique believed that because of its relationship to nature, painting should be attributed the task of reflecting universal truth. He regarded Leonardo's marvellous

**7.** Carlos Edmundo de Ory: "El nivel estético de César Manrique", text for César Manrique's first solo exhibition at the Clan Gallery, Madrid, 1954, reproduced in the Retrospective Exhibition, Casa de Colón, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, February 1980.

universality to be the ideal to which the true artist should aspire, despite the obstacles existing today to reach that goal. He thought that if decrepit industrial civilisation were to one day give rise to a new Renaissance, it would spring both from a renewed relationship with nature and the faith that society places in the freedom of creative individuals. Neither of these two conditions appeared to be in place at the end of the twentieth century. Nor was César Manrique deluded in this respect: "(...) The Renaissance was an example of diversity, symbolised in history by Leonardo da Vinci. Without freedom, wisdom and creativity cannot flourish"[8].

It was from this definition of the universality of painting that César Manrique regarded not only architecture but also his struggle in defence of endangered nature. Even when he was under greatest pressure to comply with his architectural commitments, he always turned to painting, which was his inexhaustible spring. "And then, in a very significant manner, there is my painting, the starting point of my true quest, to which I am intensely devoted day by day, making use of all the possible revelations which form, colour and texture may bring"[9]. Painting was, then, the core that nourished all his creative activity. He regarded painting to be a sort of research, a fact that confirms the idea that all his findings



in other fields were no more than the development of forms that he had "experimented" with on canvas. Knowledge is not incompatible with pleasure, and just as painting was like a test bench for him, his studio was a laboratory.

In the seventies he introduced what in my opinion is the most significant variation in his pictorial language: the presence of embryonic forms under the compact surface of the canvas. These images (e.g. *Enterrados* - Buried -, 1974, Castillo de San José) have been construed in palaeontological terms, i.e., as fossil vestiges from the remote past. Underneath this initial superficial description we might wonder why César Manrique took this turn in his painting, which until then had been rigorously abstract. Many Spanish painters who had been militant lyrical abstractionists began to include veiled figurative references in their works in the sixties (Millares, Saura, Canogar, etc.). César Manrique took a little longer, but he, too, followed this tendency. And yet there is a substantial difference between the iconographic allusions of the above artists and those that abound in César Manrique's paintings after 1974: the former are always broken, misplaced human figures, whereas there is no human trait whatsoever in César Manrique' painted works. There are primitive animals or embryonic forms from which human beings might or might not derive in the evolutionary chain. In the artists cited, the

**8.** Fernando Gómez Aguilera, *op. cit.*, No. 74, pp. 82 and 83.

**9.** *Ibídem*, No. 82, p. 88.

human reference nearly always has an ethical and political meaning. These planes of meaning never interested César Manrique, at least as a subject of his painting. In his *oeuvre*, primary significance appears to lie on the biological or biogenetic plane. What interested him was the origin of life in all its forms; so the frequent critical emphasis on the interpretation of these figures as fossil remains is, in my view, completely erroneous; because what they actually proclaim is the beginning of life, not death. They are embryos, not fossils.

The cosmos has its flags. Does it need them? César Manrique believed so, because that would mean the abolishment forever of the false differences that prompt people to follow the patriotic flags of human societies into bloody combat, which is always fratricidal; or to raise those flags, guided by Baudelaire's "baneful beacon of progress", paying no heed to the damage caused to nature and invoking the imperative to increase the wealth of nations. "The creation of flags, borders, anthems, religions and political organisations has contributed to the progressive paralysis of any sane, peaceful effort of human coexistence"[10]. The only fatherland is the cosmos, he appears to say. And that is what he fought for. That was his idea of a "good combat": the struggle for life.

From that perspective it might be concluded that painting was no more than a means for him. But this was not the case, because his idea of painting implied the defence of nature; so any distinction between ends and means is futile. This holistic view enabled him to sort out the contradictions arising when the two domains are attributed instrumental value: painting is neither a means to define nature, nor is nature a mere pretext to engage in painting. Painting and nature are one and the same thing.

For César Manrique, the opposition between organic and constructive is equivalent to the opposition between life and reason. We must let life flow. The secret order of the cosmos must not be altered. This is what César Manrique meant when he pitted the wisdom that governs the acts of nature against the idiocy and haughtiness of reason. The instrumentalisation of painting (as a means to defend nature) does not fit into his scheme, nor does a functional view of nature as a means to nourish the artist's imagination.

The recurrent reference to these biogenetic concepts is a fitting explanation for César Manrique's creative process and his constant obsession with the cosmic dimension of life. When he

**10.** *Ibídem*, No. 16, p. 46. He never tired of condemning progress and nationalism as two ideological currents in the modern world whose consequences were particularly pernicious and unwanted: "Arrogantly, man has always wanted to impose his system on others through borders, flags, nationalities, religions, political systems, armed forces, mental superstructures and many more social and political formulas which have nothing at all to do with the elementary, biological principles governing nature. They have chained the human race to an uncertain destiny, incapable of making us imagine a future of happiness" (No. 37, p. 58).

gazed at the stars through the telescope on the flat white roof on his home in Tahíche, he brooded on the soul of the universe that quivers in all things, from the nearest to the most remote. But the principle of life, according to his thinking, leads not to a new dualist spirituality, but to the dissolution of the differences between spirit and matter.