

"Par toi je change l'or en fer"  
For you I change gold into iron  
Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*

In her book entitled *Mitos, Sueños y Misterios*, Mircea Eliade tells that in the "old times", the blacksmith-shaman touched fire with his tongue and took the red-hot iron into his hands.

Over the course of the centuries History has provided us mere mortals with demonstrations of this kind, as mythical and appealing as they are superhuman.

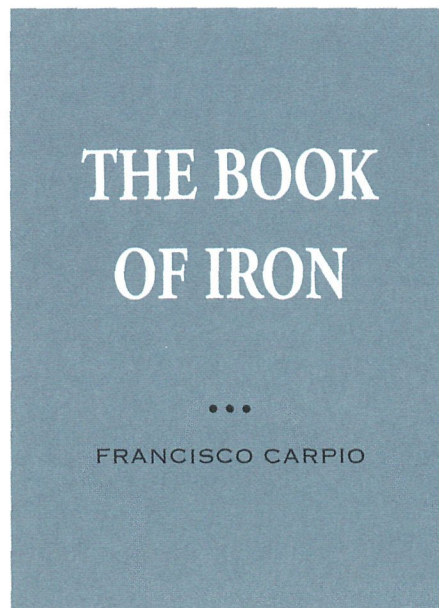
But who could prevent us from thinking that, hidden in the deepest recesses of our collective memory, the iron – wrought iron – testament of this blacksmith-shaman has not been taken up by the sculptor? In one hand that testament, in the other, the hammer, and the forge, the goddess-mother of fire.

#### OLD SIGNS, NEW HORIZONS

Martín Chirino (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1925) is a sculptor. He is thus a direct descendent of this ancient stock, of this mythical lineage of an "old time" of iron and fire. Let us concede this.

He is furthermore a sculptor whose work does not appear too frequently in exhibitions. Following the retrospective at the Palacio de Velázquez in May 1991, the showing at Galería Marlborough in Madrid last November provided a new chance to view a series of recent works which delve more deeply into, and continue, a formal discourse he embarked on back in the 50s.

This poetic expression of silence, expository silence, is a clear symptom of his own particular rhythm, of his own particular view of art, of the quest for a



discourse of his own which neither requires nor yearns for dizzying haste or the compulsion to exhibit, so common in other artists, even those of his generation.

Nor should we omit to mention that one of the reasons for his absence is his devotion to the work of cultural management. From 1983 to 1990 he was chairman of the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* in Madrid and has been the director of the *Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno* in Las Palmas since it was set up in 1989.

It is precisely this work in cultural management which affords him first-hand knowledge, almost a view from the footlights, of everything that has been happening in the modern art scene. Nonetheless, this knowledge has not had an excessive influence on his own oeuvre, which remains closely linked to work – in the purest and most physical sense of the word –, to material, to wrought iron. Like a good lover, he has been faithful to it over the years.

In the words of the artist himself, these eleven new pieces are "last works, reflecting on what I have done throughout my lifetime". Recapitulation and survival, "solve et coagula",

recurring dreams and forms with which Chirino has etched in space one of the most coherent and personal writings in Spanish sculpture this century.

Looking beyond the absurd – now outdated – dichotomy between abstract and representational art, some of these recent works display an anthropomorphic reference, a return to man, to the human being as a physical reality, a tangible and corporeal presence. I am thinking of works such as *El poeta sueña*, *La Morateña* or the two *Canarias 2000*, *El sueño*, in which the human essence is not only spirit, awareness, but also body, physical attributes. The only certainty that remains for us, Matter of the soul or the body, the two facets of man: like the body as recited by Ezra Pound, "fatto di pietra, li legno, di ferro..."

I have quoted the titles of some of these recent works and, indeed, these titles speak for themselves. *El Poeta sueña*, *Crónica del siglo XX* (The Poet Dreams. Chronicle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century): a dream of iron, curves shaped into verse, canto forged in the mineral brain of the poet. He is Dante, Homer, Rimbaud. What does it matter, the Poet dreams. The poem is twisted metal. The forge is also a dream. The verses can also be written with iron and fire.

Other works included in the exhibition are sister creatures with their spirals and winds, with their *aeróvoros* ("aerovores", devourers of air) and *afrocanes*. All in all, creatures fashioned by the same hand of metal and air: *Lectura del Viento (Homenaje a Marinette)*, *Valgrande*, *Aeróvoro de la espiral...* A synthesis and compendium of his old signs with new emphases.

Equally new are the horizons which unfold in one of the works, surely the

Martín Chirino, *La morateña. Crónica del siglo XX*, 1997. Iron, 37 x 38.5 x 27 cm. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, Madrid. Photos: Alfredo Delgado and Unidad Móvil.





Martín Chirino, *New York*, Serie *Penetración*, 1997. Iron, 229 x 140 x 110 cm. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, Madrid.

best of this showing: *Alfaguara*, a monumental and intimate piece (if it is possible to be both things at once).

*Alfaguara*. (Wellspring) a totem-like chimney which spews columns and swirls of iron smoke. It is the flight of a metal dragonfly. The capricious plaits of a girl-giant, a red-haired girl from the Country of Iron. In short, the flavour of a new page he is writing.

Other pages have already been written, forged, other verses in this book of iron. The image is this: the artist, or the man, turns off the lights in his workshop; the sparks close their red eyes; the forge dozes; the hammer rests in metallic slumber by the anvil. Dusk falls through the windows of the studio, like a baroque curtain, over the valley of Tajuña.

Three pages are marked in the book of iron. When the pages are sought a sound echoes like the mallet striking the forge. Forged music.

#### PAGE ONE: AFROCAN

This name, which provides the title to one of Chirino's most emblematic series, and more than a name, is an ancestral cry, a whistle from island to continent, embodies the presence and survival of a Canary Island and African aboriginal element in his work. The two aspects are inter-related and complement each other, creating a sort of continuum in which – again, a spiral – the beginning/end of one seems to melt into the end/beginning of the other.

The *Reinas Negras* series (1953) represents Chirino's first exploration as an artist of the African content. These sculptures pulsate – like the tam-tam of the forests – with the sound and flavour

of the coasts of Africa, as the later *Afrocán* does. But, unlike other western artists from Picasso to Matisse, also attracted by the bitter-sweet flavour of primitive cultures, Chirino's foray is like a return journey; he does not explore at Africa from the comfortable Eurocentric west; rather, the particular enclave of his origins enables him to launch his creativity from Africa to the western world.

Some first-hand links: on his father's orders – his father was in charge of shipyard workshops in Las Palmas – he had to become familiar with the tasks that are associated with shipowners: tools, mechanics and supplying of boats that generally fished off the African coasts, from Morocco to Equatorial Guinea, which would afford him considerable knowledge, and a broad view, of Africa.

And close to Africa, close indeed to Africa, the strategic location of the Canary Islands, which undoubtedly endows its artists – we should also say the character and mentality of its inhabitants – with peculiarities and characteristics of their own.

Martín Chirino, as an islander, attributes a significant role in his work to the elements – air, water, earth and fire, the materials which gave rise to his islands, his roots. They are primordial elements, the simple and plural material from which most of his sculptures, like most of the islands, are made. They are therefore strong yet delicate, primary yet dense, like fire, air, or an island on water.

The long hours he spent as a boy at the Museo Canario de Las Palmas with his friend the painter Manolo Millares, with whom he later embarked on the adventure of the El Paso group, gradually

shaped his interest in pre-Hispanic art and culture. It was during the contemplation of the spiral-shaped rock carvings, the drawings on the lava of his islands and the Canary bakers' tools for decorating bread that the foundations of his own artist's identity were laid.

There is nothing better for a man than to speak from the heart, in the company of a friend. And in the company of the friend, to be able to listen, to want to listen, to what the heart is saying. Endless walks and chats from the old district of Vegueta to the las Canteras beach. And with each step, greater certainty of the awareness of being Canary, an islander, linked to the ancestral presence of the African, continental worlds. Historic and even mythical and totemic ties, deeply rooted in a whirlwind, a spiral. His spiral.

In a multi-ethnic and plural world like ours, in which it is common practice to seek one's own identity, one's roots, through local languages, which we might even call "minuscule", Chirino has set out to reconcile the formal and cultural vocabulary he possesses as an inheritor of modernity and western tradition, and the vast plastic possibilities of his Canary ancestors and the African melting-pot.

*Afrocán*. Past and present, tradition and future. In actual fact two words, one, for the same language.

#### PAGE TWO : THE SPIRAL. LABYRINTH AND SERPENT

A constant characteristic in art, particularly in primitive cultures, consists in building the creative experience on a brief repertory of essential forms and signs. Chirino has successfully conveyed

the universal and permanent meaning of some of them.

“One day I realised”, he said, “that the wind moved in a spiral and that the germ of life is contained in a tiny seed which also develops in a spiral shape”.

In his attempt to create a series of symbols which represent the modern world as things, he resorted to a plastic sign which was to become a constant feature in his work from the early 50s onwards, almost verging on obsession: the spiral. The Canary spiral, the fingerprint of the guanche aborigine petrified in lava.

It is an encounter –we should almost say re-encounter – with something totemic in his land and his ancestors. Cultural, centuries-old and magical themes.

This symbol, which we find so complex yet simple, is so familiar yet at the same time one of the strangest forms man has captured in his art without ever being able to grasp the whole of its essence, its significance.

An original and ancestral symbol, extreme simplification of the labyrinth, brother of the meander, the serpent, the circle. Its rich symbolist can represent a thousand possible paths: the infinite in space and eternity in time; the beginning of life, germination, sex and growth; lunar animals, water and a whirlwind... Romania, Brittany, Julán, Balos... different landscapes for the same sign.

Labyrinthine frenzy of spirals, extolling the curvature of matter that it is beaten into shape: malleability versus hardness. Iron drain. Black hole that devours space and movement. Elaborateness, so present in the work of the Canary sculptor, and a forged mise-en-scène, a genuine metallic liturgy of the allegory of the spiral as wind.

An Atlantic wind which always blows in a spiral. His Canary Islands winds trapped in concentric circles. Waves rippling across the metal waters.

Hence the unfolded wings of iron: the *Aerovoros*, perhaps a metal representation of the seagulls he used to watch on the beaches as a child, like a consummation of the spiral when it has expanded. Metallic birds, both light and heavy. Is it possible to imagine the torture the iron must endure to become a bird and fly? Spiral, metal tortured with every blow of the mallet, preventing its escape, twisting it like the deformed foot of an Asian princess. Aerovore, escape, liberation; like a line of iron, rebellious and curious, which refuses to accept the eternal hum of its circular prison.

“I think I have only done one sculpture in my life”. The artist’s own words open and close this eternal curve. “When the spiral is opened it creates an *Aerovoro*, the *Reinas Negras* (Black Queens) need it, the *Raíces* (Roots) are the spiral itself, even the *Mediterráneas* (Mediterranean) need it as a reference. That is why I reckon that this sculpture is always the same”.

Sign, symbol or allegory, wind or eddy. Fingerprint etched, by flame, in the iron of his sculpture.

PAGE THREE: FORGED MEMORY

If, as Rilke said, childhood is man’s only homeland, Chirino’s childhood must be a home of iron and metal on which the cornerstone of his work is built.

Born into a family whose links with the work of the sea go back generations, he was practically lulled to sleep by the smell of metal, with the lullaby of hammers striking the anvil.

In a poem entitled *El sol de las Canteras*, his friend the Canary poet Padorno recalls the sculptor’s early contact with metal at the shipyard where his father worked.

This rather chaotic world, where wooden planks, the iron skeletons of scrapped boats, tools (did he even then sense them to be poetic and useless?), grease and fire merged into a pandemonium, must have excited his child’s sensitivity, marking from the outset his predilection for iron as a plastic and even poetic material, a material from which he was to fashion the dreams of his work, beating the memory forged from his childhood into shape.

“It was great to walk through that world so full of devices and contraptions, because it really shaped the way I saw things.. It was extremely important to me, I believe it was what made me the craftsman I am today. Using tools, fire, iron... all this was so possible because it was an inherent characteristic of what I am, what I grew up with...” The artist’s own words. Recollections of a childhood, of a forged homeland.

Indeed. He undoubtedly owes what smacks of primitive culture and mystery in his works to this material. The sculptor as Demiurge, as lord of fire and metals, inheritor of a stock of blacksmiths and alchemists, the deforciant of a language of mineral words, written by the striking of the hammer. Against a background of drop-hammers, the metal sings and groans, writhes and gives itself up. The physical gesture, the craftsman’s effort at the forge, his beads of sweat, the outline traced by his muscles beneath his working clothes are also –why not ? – words belonging to that same language.

The difficulty of working iron –

there is no surrender in love without effort, without sacrifice – enhances the craftsmanship his work displays. And drawing plays a prominent role in the early stages of his relationship with the material. It is the first contact the sculptor has with the medium, with the concept, with the idea before turning it into metal, giving it body. From paper to air, with fire and the anvil as witnesses.

The dynamism, the tension, the linear nature of his sculpture make it similar to a metallic drawing in space. Iron strokes: profiles tracing a thousand lines in the air: outlines, scribbles, ringlets. Drawing-like sculptures of metallic light. The technical mastery in

which the artist and the blacksmith, the creator and the craftsman blend into one.

Iron is converted into metaphor and memory into a forged spiral. The homeland – which is a rock – restored with fire, metal and memories.

Through the use of iron and the forge he has restored a deeply-rooted Hispanic tradition, full of austerity and strength, present both in the magnificent railing work of our cathedrals and in the more modern and personal work of artists such as Julio González, whom he has acknowledged as one of his masters.

It was Julio González himself who advocated the value and important role of this material in modern sculpture :

“...It is time that iron should cease to be a lethal and simple instrument of a science that has become too mechanical. Nowadays the door is wide open for this material, for it to be –at last!– forged and worked in repoussé at the peaceful hand of artists”.

Material of war or peace, ploughshare or sword, chalice or prison, Chirino adopted the language of iron to build an oeuvre in which sharpened forms, twisted shapes, the whirlwind of curves and spirals emanate from a deep knowledge of blacksmithing and the forge, and from an early and malleable love for this material.

Toys and tools of a modern Vulcan.



Martín Chirino. *El poeta sueña. Crónica del siglo XX*, 1998. Iron, 38,5 x 35 x 38,5 cm. Courtesy Marlborough Gallery, Madrid.