

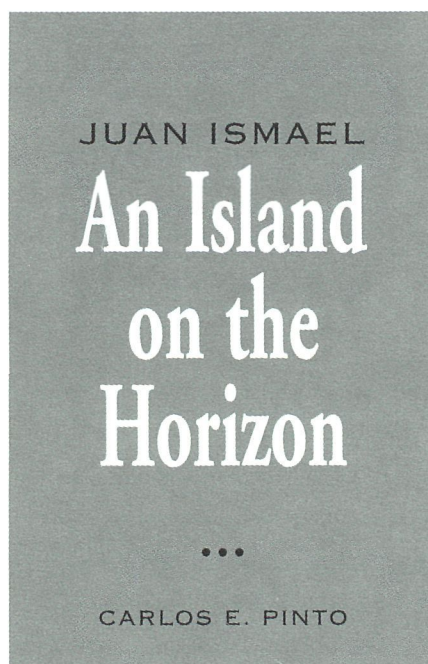
"...On an island looking at the sea, the sea of reality, the sea in which has been found the island of his artistic creation."

Ernesto Pestana Nóbrega

With the appearance late last year of the thirtieth volume of the Biblioteca de Artistas Canarios, dedicated to Juan Ismael [1], a half-decade has come to a close in which information and understanding of the author of *Nacimiento de la isla* has been supplemented with numerous documentaries, memoirs and critical studies. They have not delineated his image into a limited and easily comprehended body of work; they have caused it to expand and diversify, endowing his personality and his work with that complex weave of destiny and creative will onto which Art's features are projected.

In the years immediately following his death in August 1981, the first general studies of Juan Ismael began to appear. A few of them would become indispensable, obligatory references for all later attempts at coming to terms with his work, even up to the present time. We owe the principal study to the poet and essayist Eugenio Padorno whose work, originally published 12 years ago, is now offered in a considerably amplified and updated version by the B.A.C., accompanied by an important graphic and documentary apparatus.[2]

The first version of the text which we will discuss below was published by the Caja General de Ahorros de Santa Cruz de Tenerife, in conjunction with the retrospective exhibition that was



sponsored by the same financial institution and was curated by E. Padorno [3]. This was to be virtually the only reference for the majority of publications dealing with the painter in the years that followed, such as Michel Bernier's "Juan Ismael. La constancia surrealista" [4] or the admirable contribution of Lucía García de Carpi "La pintura surrealista española, 1929-1936" [5] which clarified one of this century's obscurer periods in Spanish art. In the chapter concerning the Canary Islands, and after having dealt with Oscar Domínguez and the *Gaceta de Arte*, García de Carpi pauses to focus on Juan Ismael as if on an exceptional discovery, even suggesting that "it is a paradox that in the birthplace of the most coherent surrealist nucleus (Santa Cruz de Tenerife), the most worthy painter should be a man disassociated from the group".

Until the end of the 80's there are no further contributions to the study of Juan Ismael except for an article by Margarita Gómez Sierra, a student of his

literary production, published in the magazine *Syntaxis* and concerned with the "photomontages". [6]

During the first half of the current decade, two coexisting facts bring about a slow awakening of interest in the painter. First, Juan Ismael is accepted without question as pertaining to the generation of artists who supplied Spain's most brilliant contribution to 20th-century culture. Second, the proof that his work is inseparable from the artistic elite that tangle and untangle the island's art and that includes Nestor, Domínguez, Oramas, Millares and Manrique.

The period began with two exhibitions that would serve to provide an inexorable impetus for a systematic review of Spanish and Canary Island art of the 20th-century. "El surrealismo entre viejo y nuevo mundo" proposed an historical but non-dogmatic interpretation of the surrealist movement which would later be universalised by the diaspora following the second World War; the show was the inaugural exhibition at the Atlantic Centre for Modern Art and was curated by Juan Manuel Bonet [7]. The other show, entitled "Ladac. El Sueño de los arqueros" [8], was organised by Pilar Carreño Corbella for the Viceconsejería de Cultura y Deportes del Gobierno de Canarias. This show offered the first academically rigorous attempt to study and document an invigorating movement within the island's visual arts culture, focusing as well on the small group of artists who were particularly sensitive to the state of the island's contemporary art, as was again the case

with the generation of avant-garde artists 30 years ago.

Juan Ismael's participation in the creation and development of LADAC's activities would inspire a flourishing of new information and documents concerning his artistic activity during an extraordinarily rich and complex moment, when he was utilising different techniques in various series or variations.

At the request of the Viceconsejería de Cultura I had the opportunity to prepare a show of Juan Ismael's paintings in 1991. The show did not attempt a retrospective approach, which would have been difficult with the limited number of works in our possession at the time. Instead, it aimed to be an invitation or introduction to his work, represented by 40 paintings made during nearly 50 years of uninterrupted activity between 1932 and 1980 [9]. Many of the works exhibited were virtually unknown, especially those dated earlier than 1940 and which had been considered lost. The exhibition made clear the importance of the avant-garde period for an understanding of the full later development of Juan Ismael's painting.

A few months after the exhibition I returned to the same subject in a seminar "Canarias: las vanguardias históricas" [10], organised by Andrés S. Robayna for CAAM.

In mid-1992 a collection of biographical essays called *La era de gaceta de arte* published a book entitled "Juan Ismael" [11] by the writer and psychiatrist Carlos Pinto Grote. The work was accompanied by important and unknown documents, both graphic and epistolary, as well as by anthologies of texts by and about the painter. Pinto Grote's suggestive contribution rests on direct accounts of his long-term relationship with the artist, and in his

familiarity with most of the works produced from 1945 until the end of Juan Ismael's life.

"*Dado de lado*", a rediscovered volume of unpublished poetry by Juan Ismael, appeared in the last months of 1992, sponsored by the Caja Insular de Ahorros de Gran Canaria [12]. The felicitous undertaking was carried out by Eugenio Padorno with the collaboration of Antonio de la Nuez. E. Padorno tells us in the introduction that "no attempt has been made to offer a critical edition of Juan Ismael's poetry. A few texts that ran the risk of being lost were brought together, onto which we have brought the title that, as the author repeated in

numerous conversations concerning his unconsummated project, it should bear." The importance resides in the virtually unknown character of Juan Ismael's poetical work, with the exception of a few poems published here and there in magazines and catalogues, such as the "*Anthología de la poesía canaria*" (1952) and in "*Facción surrealista de Tenerife*" (1975), both of Domingo Pérez Minik, and in a pair of collections published by the painter during his lifetime: "*El aire que me ciñe*" (1946) and "*Chalet de O'Gorman*" (1977).

The exhibition in late 1994 entitled "El surrealismo en España" in the Reina Sofía National Museum and Centre for



Sin título, 1977. Oil on canvas, 64 x 54 cm. Private Collection, Tenerife. Photo: Efrain Pintos.

Art, curated by Lucía García de Carpi and Josefina Alix Trueba, corroborated the existence of a group of artists whose expectations and influence before the Civil War were among the most promising in the sense of renovating and modernising Spanish painting. Some of these artists recommenced their creative efforts after the war; they endured controversial years and their poetics had to evolve independent of mainstream — in other words, silenced if not annulled. Despite all this, they continued striving in pictorial space with the same fervent anxiety [13].

Before 1994 had ended I edited a collection of letters that had been delivered to me in 1990, together with other keepsakes and documents, by the painter's widow. The letters had been sent to Juan Ismael between May and October 1929 by his mother, Emilia Mora. The letters were sent from Fuerteventura, the island where she was born and which she had left nearly 20 years earlier and to which she finally returned, tired and defeated, to spend the rest of her days. Emilia Mora is almost unknown to us today, but the letters and the singular occurrence that they have been preserved tells us that there is something exceptional about them. In fact, as we delve into them bit by bit, the main characters that inspired them begin to be outlined, telling much of the story that preceded and even the hopes which fostered them. The recipient of the missives, Juan Ismael, was the true artifice of this custody, since the packet containing the letters accompanied him like a talisman until he died 52 years later. Familiarity with these letters lends a new and unprecedented slant to the solitary, silent and pain-ridden presence of women through his pictorial and poetical work. [14]

“...Juan Ismael never abandoned his fidelity to the female figure and the feminine identity as a vehicle for revealed truth and for mystery. A faithfulness that penetrates into the irreplaceable communication between woman and nature.” With these words J. Allen begins his essay “*Juan Ismael: los desnudos en el jardín*”, published toward the end of 1995 [15]. At this stage of our knowledge of the painter, it is beyond question that the “feminine identity” is both aura and marrow of his art, even to the point where on occasion there is no difference whatsoever between the art and the “penetration” into its earthly nature. The stimulating text by J. Allen fertilises the field, which is perhaps wider than we supposed, of essays specifically addressing the content of Juan Ismael's paintings, in this instance elaborating his commentary on the paintings of 1934.

Finally, we arrive at the 30th title in the series of the B.A.C. publications which, as I pointed out earlier, brings to a close a necessary and fortunate period; it has not, however, monopolised all that Juan Ismael holds for us. Unless we allow an immobilising skepticism to delay us — for which there are reasons enough, if one considers the lack of parents, the war, the post-war period, emigration — the appearance in recent years of paintings of which we had reports but which had not been located nurtures the hope of a slow enriching of his known body of work, which in the end will indeed allow us to sketch the enduring image of his art.

Eugenio Padorno structures his study in four sections that correspond to Juan Ismael's artistic chronology and which are based on the stages that the artist himself established in 1974 at the urging of Ventura Doreste: “Landscapes abound in the first; in the second there

is a departure from references to reality, which instead is poetically transformed; the third, which extends and accentuates the essential mode of the second, sees a detour into abstract expressionism; in the fourth there is a return to poetical painting.” At this point E. Padorno establishes a chronology which, despite the claim of a merely orientational nature made in the introduction, constitutes the basic structure for his critical biography.

The first section, gathered under the title “La obra primera (1927-1933)”, studies the life and work of Juan Ismael in the period between his arrival in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria to the death of his father in 1933, which coincides with the exhibition held in May in the Ateneo in Madrid. [16] The interpretation of landscapes is one of the avant-garde's favorite themes, and in some ways we might consider it an example of the wider reading of the *locus* to which it is a kindred spirit; at the same time it aided in the slow regeneration of his formal principles during the years following the Civil War.

In this first stage there is a link between the initial cycle — represented by *Gráficos marinos*” (1928) with its echos of Nestor [17] and “*Fragmento de poema marino-gráfico*” (1930) — with the works painted in Madrid between 1931 and 1933. Quoting Padorno on these latter works, “the artist is not motivated by the desire for a faithful rendering of landscape but rather by the materialisation of a visual theory”, which has a literary embodiment in the text “*Indagación de las islas*” published by Juan Ismael in 1934 [18]. In it he wrote “I began to see the Canary Islands and to understand what its landscape was like when I began to remember it.” But the “*Indagación de las islas*” is more than just the epitome of an entire essentialist

philosophy concerned with island landscapes. If we consider its statement that “memory holds the intellect’s greatest poetic potential”, we must not consider just a mere value judgement but rather a complicit recognition — true. Juan Manuel! — of a creative principle to which Juan Ismael would be faithful, consciously or unconsciously, until at least the early 50’s.

The second section of the book is entitled “La realidad transfigurada:

Ismael, you are leaving./Juan Ismael I find you./Up and down./In and out...”

We know that he was in Madrid on November 27, 1933, from the letters sent during that period, mainly to Antonio Dorta and his sister Catana, but also those sent to E. Westerdahl.

On August 6, 1934, he is in Seville, where he will spend nearly two months en route to the Canary Islands. He is in Tenerife in October, November and December of that year, planning to

Rey, Lugo. After a year devoid of any news, we find him again in Santander in March and May of 1938, and at the end of the same year in Bilbao, where he signed various works in 1939 and exhibited in 1941. He later spent some time in Madrid, participating in the *Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes* in 1942 and the following year in the *Primera Exposición de Artistas de la Provincia de Tenerife* held in the Museum of Modern Art. Juan Ismael arrives in Santa Cruz de Tenerife in the summer of 1944.

Given this mobility, confusion is inevitable when studying the known works, especially since, apart from the three works exhibited in *Exposición Logicofobista*, we only know of the existence of works dated 1939 onward, and even these were scarce until 1945 when he was already settled in Tenerife.

After this proof of itinerant inquietude, let us now return to Padorno’s book. He indicates three developments between 1934 and 1955. The first is the conversion to and practice of Surrealism from 1934 to 1941, corresponding to his stay on the peninsula. The second, from 1944 to 1947, pertains to his years in Tenerife where he contributed to the publishing of the magazine *Mensaje* and pressed for the formation of *P.I.C.* (Pintores Independientes Canarios). The third refers to the years from 1947 to 1956, which he spent in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria where he participated in the founding and continuing activities of LADAC.

Eugenio Padorno devotes nearly half his text to dealing with the aspects and details of this instructive period, in a temporal as well as a creative sense, in the life of Juan Ismael, leading to the “recovery of subjects, specifically related to the Canary Islands, cultivated in 1950 and 1951.” Although it is possible to

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Sin título. 1967. Mixed media. 32.5 x 48.5 cm.

1934-1955.” The methodical unity applied to such an extended period in the life and work of Juan Ismael is justified, in part, by the fact that we are still scarcely familiar with the works from many of these complex years, years marked by circumstances as adverse as they were unforeseeable.

The “anxious pilgrimage” in which, according to Padorno, Juan Ismael converts his vacation in 1936, should perhaps begin to be considered as something inborn in his character. His friend Emeterio Gutiérrez Albelo, in the poem “*Romanticismo y cuenta nueva*”, gives the following portrayal: “Juan

return to Madrid at the end of the year. Between March and April 1935 he writes from Oporto, where it seems he was with a theatre company; in November he inaugurates the second exhibition of his paintings in Madrid, this time in the Centro de Exposición e Información Permanente de la Consturección, sponsored by ADLAN (Amigos de las Artes Nuevas). By February 1936 he is writing to Westerdahl from Madrid, and in May he may have attended the *Primera Exposición del Grupo Logicofobista*, in Barcelona. At the end of June, barely three weeks before the military coup, he writes from Castro del

encounter treatment of island subjects in the years immediately preceding Padorno's dates, it is between 1950 and 1952 that Juan Ismael paints a group of works that revive the mythic image of this island, showing a cohesion and intensity similar to that of the "recalled landscapes" of 1932. [19]

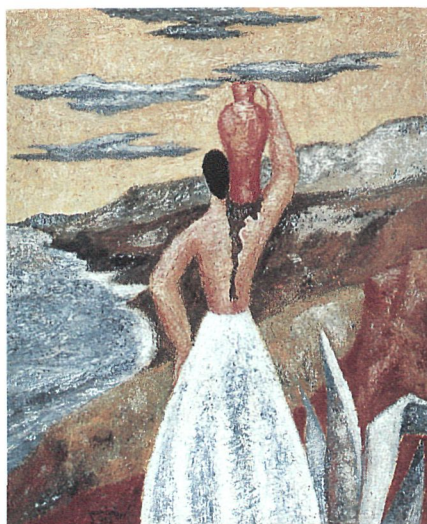
The third section of Padorno's work is entitled "Desvío hacia la abstracción informalista, 1956-1966" and deals with the artist's Venezuelan period. These ten years are not terribly productive [20], although the pictorial production acquires a distinct character in its use of sandy lines and surfaces and a sober schematicism that reaches the point of producing completely abstract compositions, at times similar to the austere, essential work of Paul Klee. Its abstract tendencies abating, the course of this work extended into the early 70's.

"Juan Ismael's final creative phase centres around drawing, and it might be said that the lyricism and lenthitude of his line reorders the rest of his artistic character". With these words Padorno opens the section entitled "Retorno a la pintura poética: 1970-1980" which concludes the book.

The final years of Juan Ismael's life are marked by his return (with his family) to the Canary Islands, his final settling in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and the gradual arranging of the civil aspects of his life until his death on August 24, 1981. His last paintings are from 1977.

I quote Padorno: "In the works that make up the core of the last three individual exhibitions, the most relevant feature is the detailed work in certain zones of representation, already almost limited to a single object, a distinct disregard for backgrounds and surroundings which are blurred in tones of grey."

Eugenio Padorno, Juan Ismael's friend and biographer, was present at the artist's deathbed. As he recalls in the emotional sentences that close the text: "He dies in a room filled with anonymous, wisecracking old people. Before the bed where the painter lies is a window, and beyond the window stand the square cottages, painted in capricious colours, of Risco de San Nicolás. It is the same final vision tendered to Jorge



La mujer del cántaro, 1952. Encaustic, 65,5 x 54,5 cm. Private Collection, La Laguna, Tenerife.
Photo: Efrain Pintos.

Oramas, the renegade barber's apprentice. The light was the hard and intractable light of an August 24th."

To close this summary of the thirtieth volume of the *Biblioteca de Artistas Canarios* it should be pointed out that, as is standard throughout the collection, the critical-biographical essay is complemented by a biographical chronology and a chronology of exhibitions held until 1993. In addition, there is a selected anthology of texts by Juan Ismael (poems, critical writings, manifestos, etc.) together with texts about the painter written by other authors. Finally, the book closes with

the fullest and most up-to-date bibliography available. All of this is accompanied by photographs that provide more than 120 illustrations of the artist's paintings and drawings.

"An artist's life," says E. Padorno, "contains the range and profundity of dreams, and that territoriality offers access that at times cannot be put into practice by the memoirist". Without a doubt, the air of a "pure and independent artist" that surrounds Juan Ismael springs from this "territory." His "philosophy of a marginalised man" that accentuates the caustic sense of irony in the last years of his life — "Otra pobre" [21], "Dado de lado" — remains a consequence of the sum of serious circumstances that influenced it, which determined the formative ingredients of the contemporary artist, which have transformed art into a profession that "will never abolish chance"; this is the same chance that spread a tragic destiny over the life of Juan Ismael perhaps only in order to leave his work "in a special sky, like an island on the horizon." [22]

NOTES

- [1] Ed. Viceconsejería de Cultura y Deportes del Gobierno de Canarias. Socaem. ISBN 84-7947-187-5.
- [2] It is a shame that the splendid B.A.C. collection continues to be blemished by mechanical errors that reduce its utility. In this case we can point to the very first reproduction of the book, on the book jacket, which is then repeated in the text. Beneath the photo on the book jacket inserted in the list of credits (p. 6) we find: *Composición surrealista*. Oil on canvas. 1983. Private collection. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria." Later, in page 49, this information is repeated but with a change of date that is yet again erroneous, dating it in 1944. Finally, in the "Index of Illustrations" on page 149 the same error is committed again. However, in the illustration on page 49 one can clearly see beneath the signature the date of 1949, which is the only correct identification.

With respect to the title attributed to the painting, *Composición surrealista* (which is also the title of a different work from 1939 currently in the collection of the Reina Sofía National Museum and Centre for Art) the issue is a different one and no one should be blamed. However, a bit of clarification may be worthwhile. It so happens that this title, *Composición surrealista*, does not appear among the nearly 300 titles which, according to our current knowledge, identified Juan Ismael's paintings. As if that in itself were not enough, it must be added that neither the word "surrealista" nor even the term "composición" is used. This is not a trivial issue, since it clearly reveals the close relation between the paintings and their titles, and the strict sense of the latter for purposes of identifying and even comprehending the former.

The first of these "composiciones" (the one on the book jacket), bears the title *La cita fallida* and is dated 1949. It was shown in the "II" Exposición de Arte Contemporáneo, organised by LADAC in the Club Universitario de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. The work in the collection of MNCARS was painted in the summer of 1939 in Bilbao and is titled *La musa en la tierra*. In all likelihood it was shown in 1941 in the Salón Delclaux in Bilbao.

[3] Padorno, Eugenio. *Juan Ismael, 1907-1951*. Ed. Caja General de Ahorros Monte de Piedad de Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1982.

Eugenio Padorno worked throughout the 70's in an ample monograph about the life and work of Juan Ismael. The direct relationship with the painter, the access to materials in his archives and his own memory endowed Padorno's project with great expectations which have now been confirmed.

[4] Bernier, Michel. *Juan Ismael. La constancia surrealista*. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1983. Col. La Guagua.

[5] García de Carpi, Lucía. "La pintura surrealista española (1924-1936)" Ed. Istmo, Madrid, 1986. Col. Fundamentos 92.

[6] Gómez Sierra, Margarita. "Los fotomontajes de Juan Ismael". Rev *Syntaxis* n° 16/17, pp. 213-224. Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1988.

[7] "El surrealismo entre viejo y nuevo mundo." Comisario: Juan Manuel Bonet. CAAM, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1989.

[8] "LADAC. El sueño de los arquero." Curator: Pilar Carreño Corbella. Viceconsejería de Cultura y Deportes del Gobierno Canario, 1990.

[9] "Exposición Juan Ismael. 40 pinturas realizadas entre 1932 y 1980, ahora reunidas para una invitación enigmática."

Curator: Carlos E. Pinto. Viceconsejería de Cultura y Deportes del Gobierno Canario, 1991.

- [10] Pinto, Carlos E. "Juan Ismael en el contexto vanguardista". In *Canarias. Las vanguardias históricas*, A. Sánchez Robayna Edit. CAAM/Gobierno de Canarias, 1992.
- [11] Pinto Grote, Carlos. *Juan Ismael. Ocultaciones*. Viceconsejería de Cultura y Deportes del Gobierno Canario, 1992. Col. La era de Gaceta de Arte.
- [12] Juan Ismael. *Dado de lado*. Published with an introduction by Eugenio Padorno. Ed. La Caja de Canarias, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1992.
- [13] "El surrealismo en España", Curators: Lucía García de Carpi and Josefina Alix Trueba. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, 1994.
- [14] Mora, Emilia. *Cartas de Emilia*. Published with an afterword by Carlos E. Pinto. La Laguna, 1994. Col. El Quicial.
- [15] Allen, Jonathan. "Juan Ismael: Los desnudos en el jardín". *La Provincia*. 30-XI-1995. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.
- [16] In the biographical appendix for 1927 we read "After the death of his father (April 18) he moves with his mother to Las Palmas". Given the letters of Emilia Mora, this information must be considered questionable. "Since March 27 when I left Santa Cruz," writes Emilia. "I have stayed in six different houses." Lacking further information that might confirm that the painter's mother stayed in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, it seems logical to conclude that after the death of her husband Emilia stayed on in Santa Cruz de Tenerife until March 27, 1929, when she set sail for Gran Canaria. Questions concerning the inheritance left by her husband and the unpleasant relations with her in-laws (which are explicit referred to in her letters), would detain Emilia in Tenerife. She leaves for Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with all her household goods and furniture, possibly intending to stay with her son. However, she continues on to Fuerteventura, the island of her birth. If this is the case, then Emilia was only in Las Palmas for two months, which makes credible a certain amount of mobility on the part of Juan Ismael between the narrowing of contacts between the members of the Escuela Luján Pérez de Las Palmas and the avant-garde artists of Tenerife, which would later crystallise in the Exposición de la Escuela Luján en Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1930. As for the rest, this would be the first but not

the only time that Juan Ismael would function as conduit and soul of cultural contacts and collaboration between the islands.

- [17] In note 14 on page 26. Padorno says "We know, by the painter's own oral testimony, that this variation [*Cráficos marinos*]" was intended as an essential and anti-modernist response, in line with the mythological and baroque conception of *El Poema del Atlántico* by Nestor de la Torre"
- In order to be objective we must recognise that Nestor was the most influential painter of the Canary Islands throughout the 20th-century, even up to the present time.
- [18] *Diario de las Palmas*, 12-III-1934. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.
- [19] It is certain that island depictions are frequent throughout Juan Ismael's paintings, but we only see his attention fully focused on the subject in these two instances. The distinguishing features of the works of these years are the use of encaustic in most of them — emblematic and "balancing" pieces such as *Nacimiento de una isla* or *Niraria de antiguos navegantes* are executed with this technique — and a reading of island subjects that is not memory-based but instead is mythographic.
- [20] Quantitative conceptions are always fallacious when discussing artistic creation. I do so here as a simple reference to the previous decade, 1945 - 1955, which was especially rich in fundamental works and variations in the career of Juan Ismael. However, as Padorno reminds us, "the pictorial work of this period is cemented in the continuation and initiation of multiple variations: musical instruments, the bull, the butterfly, fish, etc..." Most of the works in this series are made public after 1967.
- [21] *Obra pobre* was the title chosen by Juan Ismael for his last exhibition, which took place in the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1980, organised by the magazine *Papeles Invertidos*.
- [22] Paul Dermée's proposal that a work of art be "a work which lives beyond itself, beyond its own life, and which is situated in a special sky, like an island on the horizon", was recalled to Juan Ismael by Ernesto Pestana Nóbrega in an article published in conjunction with his first painting exhibition in the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1930. (V.E.P.N. "Polióramas". Selec.....Palenzuela. I.E.C. Universidad de La Laguna, 1990).