

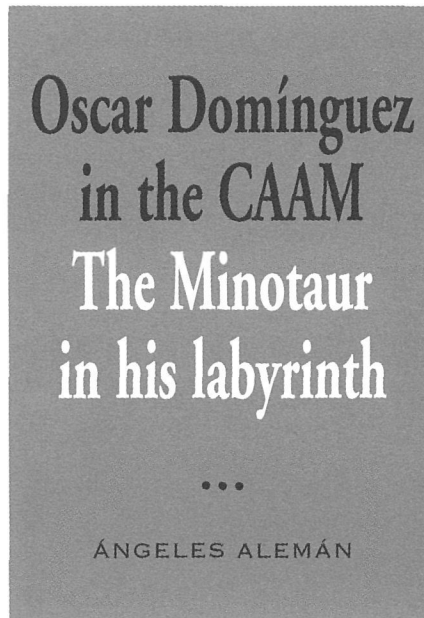
The minotaur waits in his labyrinth. He waits patiently for someone to come and rescue him from the intricate maze of galleries, of the hundreds of corridors that only the cadavers of the sacrificial victims help to distinguish. What will my saviour be like, I wonders? Will it be a bull or a man? Or perhaps a bull with a man's face? Or a creature like me? Domínguez was not the fierce and robust bull of the bullfight, but another, much more melancholy, like the minotaur of the labyrinth.

Childlike, an indefatigable creator, an avid devourer of life, with a face "double that of any normal person", as César González Ruano wrote of him, Oscar Domínguez had suffered, until now, the neglect of his work.

It is surprising to note that this man, born in La Orotava, son of a landowner who, like the first Aureliano Buendía of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, always brought home the inventions that had caught his eye during his travels in Europe, should have suffered the neglect not imposed solely by his time, but also by later times. A neglect that was overcome thanks to the first anthological exhibition of his work, following long years when it had been scattered, and in some cases, lost.

It was in his home in La Orotava where Domínguez first saw his father's butterfly collections, Mt. Teide which he discovered later, and from faraway Paris, the landscape that he could only begin to paint from memory and distance.

It was his father who sent him to Paris, first in 1927, to look after the



family fruit export business, a business for which Oscar Domínguez had no calling. Domínguez spent the income from the fruit on monumental parties, but his father never chided him for this.

At that time he was an arrogant, if rather ingenuous, youth, as can be seen in his first self-portrait, signed Oscar and with a pipe between his lips. This image was confirmed in 1928, when he returned to Tenerife to do his military service, and was photographed on a rooftop, slashing giant eggs with his sabre. The pose was full of humour, close to the surrealism that would be so important in his life.

His first attempts at painting, inspired by Cubism, were not well-received by Canary Island critics. Ernesto Pestana, writing in *La Rosa de los Vientos*, pointed out the lack of direction of his style. He was still too young.

His father's death in 1931 obliged him to return to Tenerife, where he faced a precarious financial situation. Between 1932 and 1933 he mounted two surrealist shows in Tenerife. The

fist, in the Círculo de Bellas Artes in Santa Cruz, was praised by Domingo López Torres, who wrote for *Gaceta de Arte*, and was regarded as a *theoricien radical et rigoureux*.

At the second show, held during a trip to Tenerife with Roma, whom he portrayed in a mutilated state, with bloody hands playing a piano, his connection to surrealism was obvious. Along with the disturbing portrait of his friend he showed others works with surrealist readings.

But Domínguez did not confine himself to surrealist painting. He was a surrealist at heart, as Eduardo Westerdahl noted in the catalogue of the second show: "Oscar Domínguez in his private life, is, from head to toe, and in every step he takes, an authentic surrealist." Oscar Domínguez felt he had the support of *Gaceta del Arte*. His work with the group extended into editorial tasks, and he made the cover—a decalcomania—for the edition devoted to Willi Baumeister. He had invented this technique, which fit perfectly in the "automatism" preached by Breton in the first Surrealist Manifesto.

However, it was not until 1936, when his decalcomanías would become known through their reproduction in the magazine *Minotaure*, coinciding with the execution of some of his best paintings: *Máquina de coser electrosexual* ("Electrosexual Sewing Machine"), *Mariposas perdidas en la montaña* ("Butterflies Lost on the Mountain"), *Recuerdos de mi isla* ("Memories of my Island"), which he showed in Tenerife. Alongside these paintings he displayed surrealist objects. The catalogue has a

prologue by Eduardo Westerdahl, who wrote of this artist in the last issue of *Gaceta de Arte*:

“His latest works distance themselves from the academy that threatens Dalí, and join in the adventure of a more direct approach to the subconscious world and the revelations of his persona.

In June of the same year, his decalcomanías were presented by André Breton in issue no. 8 of *Minotaure*, the same issue in which “Le Château Etoilé” reflected the poet’s impression of the islands.

This official debut was rather late in coming, since as early as 1935 Domínguez had shown his works in the café of Place Blanche, if we are to believe the testimony of Marcel Jean, who precisely defined the process in the following manner: “Liquid gouache crushed between two sheets of smooth paper”. The publication of a series of these works, with a prologue by André Breton entitled “Crisou”, was a project that had to be aborted for economic reasons. The gas emanating from the burning of coal, which Domínguez chose for his titles, reflected a pleasure in indefinite elements.

Domínguez had been the instrument of Breton’s trip to Tenerife, at the invitation of Eduardo Westerdahl and the staff of *Gaceta de Arte*, to attend the opening of the *I Exposición Surrealista Internacional*, the high water mark of the liberal, surrealist-minded avant-garde, prior to the darkness of the Spanish Civil War. At the outbreak of war, Domínguez returned to Paris, where he remained until his death. In a Paris that was free, then occupied, and then free again. There, at first, his inks to the surrealist group were beyond all doubt. His participation in the activities of Breton’s group was

connected to his own, tirelessly original painting.

Domínguez originated more than decalcomania. At the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* organised in 1938 by André Breton, he showed, among other works, the subsequently destroyed “Jamais”, an object in which a woman’s legs disappear inside a gramophone, just as in “La máquina de coser electrosexual” they disappear inside a carnivorous plant.

Given the position of the “Canary Island Dragon Tree”, as he was called in the *Dictionnaire Abrégé du Surréalisme*, and given his career, especially now that his work can be judged as a whole, one might well ask why it was that he has been so neglected. What dark shadow on his destiny kept this man, acknowledged by Breton himself as the most surrealist of the surrealists, from winning more general recognition. Something kept him in the shade, among the networks of a group whose other members gained such fame and notoriety.

The story of the fight in which Victor Brauner lost an eye, for example, could be analyzed by Pierre Mabille in *L’œil de la peinture*, to confirm, once and for all, the surrealists’ theory of premonition. It allowed Victor Brauner, who had made a number of self-portraits showing an empty eye-socket, to show that his aims were higher than the ordinary levels of perception, and even that the tragic mishap had freed him to paint better. But Oscar Domínguez would be remembered forever as the quarrelsome artist who threw a wine bottle at Esteban Francés, and missed. Domínguez was jealous of Francés’ success, both as an artist, and with a woman, Irine Hamoir. Thenceforth he had the dubious honour of being remembered as the accidentally guilty party in the bloody episode.

But the incident did not change his good relations with Breton, who described how he dreamed of Domínguez painting an aurora borealis formed by lionesses practising cunnilingus, and who wrote in 1939, in “*Des tendances les plus récentes de la peinture surréaliste*”, and with regard to Domínguez’s cosmic period:

“With a movement of the arm that is as quick and uncontrolled as that of a window washer or a bricklayer who after the house is finished signs the glass with white lead, he puts his brush at the service of several colours and manages on his canvases to define new spaces, transporting us to those scenarios that are pure fascination and that we hadn’t visited since, as children, we saw colour pictures of meteors in books.”

This gloomy fate must have become real while in Marseilles the painter waited, in vain, for a visa that would allow him to escape to the United States. In the south of France, meeting with André Breton and other surrealists, he drew that card representing Freud, the magician of the black star, for a Tarot deck. Domínguez pulled it off with humour: the card, showing Freud’s moustache with a woman as a necktie, and the dream symbols arranged as a sort of phylactery, attain all the schematicism and occult symbolism they need. Domínguez was familiar with Freudian theories, and particularly the interpretation of dreams, as were most of the surrealists.

Humour, so dear to the surrealists that Louis Aragon dedicated his “*Treatise on Style*” to it, intelligent humour that concealed the underlying desperation, interested Oscar Domínguez as much as it did his aesthetic colleagues. In 1940 the Canary Island

painter illustrated André Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir*.

After his failed attempt to leave Vichy, France, Domínguez returned to Paris. Space in his paintings then appears, as Emmanuel Guigon points out "astonishingly structured", as if the painter were beginning to become obsessed with the net from which he could not escape. A geometrically structured space now held sway in his painting—the geometry of nets, of the labyrinth.

He also contributed to the magazine *La Main à Plume*, where, as in some other underground publications, would be hatched the possibility of changing surrealist automatism into the physical gesturalism that post-war artists would try. While working with this publication, Domínguez was struggling to develop new systems for making collective paintings. In this search he discovered lithochronic surfaces, where he defined the solidification of time. What could be better than to find thus "...the point where life and death, the real and the imaginary, the past and the future ... are no longer seen as contradictory", as Breton had foreseen. Years before, in 1937, Domínguez had named one of his paintings "Le souvenir de l'avenir" ("Remembering the Future").

His exposition of the theory of lithochronic surfaces was written in collaboration with the then physicist Ernesto Sábato, and published in 1943 in *La Main à Plume*. He later broke with the magazine when it published an open letter calling Paul Eluard "an old scoundrel". But at the end of the war his heart was divided. His friendship with Eluard and Picasso, whom he admired, was incompatible with his continued membership in the surrealist group.

Oscar Domínguez was excluded

from the subsequent Surrealist shows Breton organised after the war. Although Domínguez was surrealist by conviction, he launched a new stage in his painting. His formal rendering then came to resemble that of two other artists whom Breton has "excommunicated": Picasso and De Chirico.

Domínguez brought his surrealist energies to bear on new forms. In this



*Toro moribundo*, 1944.

period he mixed heavy, thick, double brush strokes with the magic evoked by the Ferrara plazas painted by De Chirico.

It was at the end of the war when the minotaur emerged from his labyrinth. Acromegaly—the deformation of his facial features—had begun to torment it. Pierre Guéguen then wrote:

"Domínguez is the king of the Isles of Labyrinth. Aren't minotaur eyelashes used as paintbrushes?"

The minotaur had to emerge again. And thus began his richest period, when his sexual desires were poured into mobile sculptures, in which he could shape the woman into the object dreamed and formed as he wished, distorting the figures in geometric planes, pistols that point to the seeing eye, the butterflies his father collected reappear.

In 1946, his participation in the Prague exhibitions entitled "The Art of

Republican Spain: Artists of the Paris School" served to confirm his political sympathies, about which he never theorized.

His rift with the surrealist movement widening steadily. Also he turned again to decalcomia in many of his works, especially after 1947. He wrote to Eduardo Westerdahl about his friendship with Picasso, which he reaffirmed, while stating his view that the surrealist movement had died a natural death.

It was the same year that he published his poetic story "*Les deux qui se croisent*".

His admiration for Picasso shines through in many of his works, not only in the thick black strokes that surround his figures, but his figures themselves, his women, the ondulation of their bodies, and the bull and the minotaur he paints in their labyrinth.

And yet he never repudiated surrealism, even at his death, for which he chose St. Silvester's Day of 1957, while he was expected for dinner at the home of his friend Ninette.

The premonitory self-portrait of his youth, showing bloody wrists, the torture of his acromegaly in the self-portrait he called "Rhinoceros" in 1946, and the terrifying self-portrait of 1949, can all be condensed into the image of the severed head of a bull from which blood gushes onto a woman who is at the same time being engulfed by a carnivorous plant in "*La máquina de coser electrosexual*". Self-portrait of the painter, the alter ego of his own nightmares, on a bull's head, or perhaps that of the minotaur Domínguez painted, in 1937, near a palette, a still innocent and undamaged heart. The heart of the passionate, unhappy, and perhaps indecipherable, Oscar Domínguez.