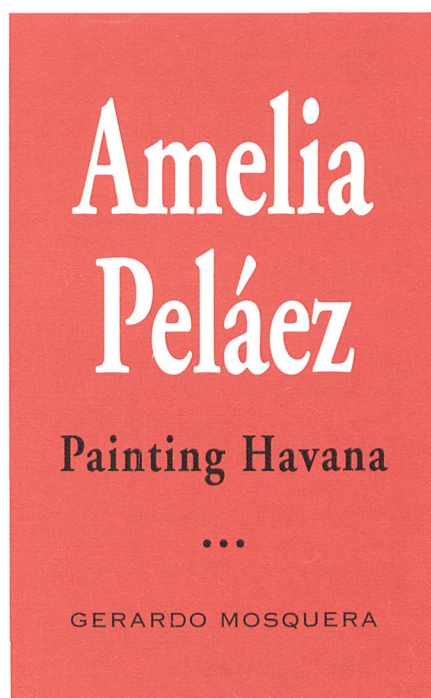


## TERRITORIES

Amelia Peláez (1896-1968) is regarded as Cuba's most important exponent of modernism after Wilfredo Lam. Her international recognition, however, is not consonant with her stature as one of the major women artists in the entire history of Latin America. For example, it is scandalous that she was excluded from the extensive "Latin American Artists of the 20th Century" show held not long ago by New York's Museum of Modern Art and taken to several countries. Her decision to remain in Cuba following the revolution limited her contacts with exhibition and publication circles, as occurred with other artists such as René Portocarrero. This unfamiliarity with her work necessitates a brief discussion of her career which will serve greatly to illuminate our understanding of Latin American modernism.

Peláez lived in her home village in the central part of the island until her family moved to Havana in 1915. This singular and fascinating city—which is now becoming both a myth and a ruin—was to fuel her artistic imagination. She and Portocarrero were to become the great painters of Havana. Not because they used the city as a subject, but because their works were infused with the spirit of the city.

Around 1927 her painting entered an academic romantic stage, under the Spanish and Italian influence of Leopoldo Romanach, her teacher at the



Academia San Alejandro in the capital. But her fluency and colour sense indicated a strong personality. In 1924 she studied at the Art Students League in New York, and in 1927 she won a grant to study in Paris, where she remained until 1934. She travelled in Spain, Germany, Italy, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. In Paris she studied with the Russian artist Alexandra Exter, which was decisive in her training, and which brought her close to Léger, Matisse and Cubism.

She immediately took her place in the field of modern art, with landscapes in 1928 that were reminiscent of Van Gogh. In them Expressionism was transformed into an abstract and ornamental use of forms. She continued to paint landscapes until 1930, and they

served as a vehicle, under the sign of post-impressionism for satisfying a desire—already evident in her earlier academic work—to flee from naturalism. Certain works from this period, such as "Paisajes con barcos en rosa y azul, Mallorca" (1929), achieved a highly refined simplicity.

After 1929 still-lives became the focus of her work, showing some influence from Soutine and Cézanne, Matisse and the Cubists, but marked with her own accents in the use of colour, and her peculiar stress on ornamentation. Outstanding among these were "La liebre" (1929), and "Floreros en interior" (1931). Already manifest in some of these works was the "hostility between the carnality and structure" pointed out by Lezama Lima as a distinguishing feature of her art (1). It could be said that Amelia Peláez was a painter of still-lives: all her mature work was dedicated to the exploration of this genre. Vázquez has argued that even the feminine figures that inspired much of her work between 1931 and 1932 (2) resemble still-lives, despite their debt to Modigliani, as may be observed in "Gundinga" (1931).

Her 1933 show in the Galerie Zak in Paris included all the genres that she worked in, and was well received. A French critic commented significantly: "her universe is somewhat enigmatic, and represents a strange departure from

the European vision.” (3) The following year Peláez came home to Havana to stay, having decided, along with other Cuban modern artists, to withdraw from the competitive Parisian art scene (4). With few exceptions, such as Lam and Marcelo Pogolotti, the Cubans shrank from the risks involved in fighting for a place in the French avant-garde.

Peláez’ European sojourn served to illustrate some aspects of the relation between modern Latin American artists and the continental avant-garde. She took no part in the experimental movements of her time in Europe, but rather, as Jubrias has written, opted to trace her own route from Cézanne to the 1930s (5). Instead of broaching the *new*, she worked her way through the codes coined by past avant-garde movements, which has tended to merge into a sort of common, ancestral stock. Viewed thus narrowly, her work was “derivative,” but in reality her Parisian phase allowed her to appropriate the means suitable to her sensibility and the different meanings she wished to express.

For the first two years after her return to Cuba she devoted herself to drawing, developing a complete dialogue between figuration and abstraction in which she forged many of the components of her definitive idiom, in the heat of her immersion into the island atmosphere. As with Lam, her *retour au pays natal* set off an explosion in her art. As Blanc wisely observed, her “hothouse flowers and fruits were no longer European, but Caribbean” (6). In



*Florero en un interior*, 1931.

this way she commenced the building of a Cuban pictorial identity, placing herself outside the avant-garde programme of her contemporaries. Because “perhaps nobody can go home again, but only take field notes for its re-invention” (7).

In 1937 she painted her first two murals, and between 1935 and 1939 she painted the series of “Creole still-lives”. There appeared organic fruity shapes integrated in compositions of decorative elements (stained-glass windows,

wrought-iron bars, floor tiles...), carried to an abstract synthesis. They resembled a sort of tropical fusion of Picasso, Léger and Matisse, with a distinctly Cuban flavour, especially in such works as “Naturaleza muerta con frutas” (1936). What took place in these works, according to Vázquez, was “the transformation of the discoveries of Cubism into a less dry idiom” (8), and in them the personal style of the artist was defined, as she entered a period of solitary and intense creativity.

There exists a sort of legend of Amelia, locked in her creole house as if inside one of her own paintings. This house, its decor and its garden, even today resemble her paintings, despite the years of decay suffered by Havana. But if it is true that Peláez shunned social life, her image as a “still-life”, painting the intimate space in which she enclosed herself, is a false one. Although she always returned to the *oikos*, the fact is she travelled frequently in Europe, the United States and Latin America.

While she belonged to the first generation of the Cuban avant-garde, and had begun to paint very early, Peláez identified more closely to the poetic vision of the second generation, which was less concerned with the anecdotal and the social than with a more inward nationalistic affirmation, aimed at apprehending the “essences” of Cubanity. Accordingly, the artist was linked with the so-called *Orígenes* group, centred on the poet Lezama Lima, which set the pace at the time. Her work had more affinities with that of René Portocarrero —the paradigmatic artist of the *Orígenes* group— than with that of her own generation, and typified the cultural atmosphere of Cuba in the 1940s. In another parallel with Portocarrero, there were affinities between Peláez’ work and that of the *Orígenes* poets. Martínez has even compared the atmosphere of her painting with the creole *nonchalance* as expressed in the famous poem by Eliseo Diego (9). It was in this period that Barr



*Naturaleza muerta*, 1961.

spoke of a “Havana School,” distinguished from that of Mexico, which was characterized by gay untrammelled colours, exuberance, vivacity and candour (10).

At the beginning of that decade, in works such as “Naturaleza muerta con frutas” (1941), Peláez’ definitive style

took shape, and it included elements of colonial and eclectic architecture, stained-glass windows, fretwork, iron bars, screens, furniture and other components of the Havana atmosphere which would complete her formal repertoire. Carpentier described it as “a visual world where the vegetable and the architectural

are blended together" (11). Meanwhile, another ingredient of major importance appeared: the black line drawing, first used in a Cubist-abstract still-life composition, which forms a proliferating tissue, as if superimposed on the painting, and which was of fundamental importance in the pictorial enhancement of the ornamental and exalted baroque effect achieved by her work.

Peláez and Portocarrero undeniably inspired Carpentier's discourse concerning the baroque as the distinguishing feature of Latin American culture (12). However, some others, such as Robert Altman, contend that Amelia "placed herself outside the true spirit of the baroque", due to her structural "inclinations" (13). But this could stem from the "arrangement through disarrangement" which Carpentier views as the key trait of her ahistoric concept of the baroque. Peláez "baroquifies" Cubism, expressionism and modern abstract painting via an exuberant deployment of the ornaments of a colonial past and eclectic traditions that are native to Havana, that most scenographic of cities. Some outstanding examples are "Figura" (1943), "Las dos hermanas" (1944), and "Interior" (1945).

Peláez began to decorate ceramic tiles in 1950, and later to design them, an activity at which she worked intensively until 1962. In the 1950s she also worked on a number of mural projects, such as the one she made with ceramic tiles for the Accounts Tribunal

in 1953, perhaps her only almost-abstract work, and another with tropical fruits, today destroyed, commissioned by the Havana Hilton Hotel (1957-58). Her dedication to these activities conditioned formal simplification and a tendency towards abstraction in her painting (furthermore, a result from the taste of the times), which appears in such works as "Naturaleza con melón" (1956),

along with changes in her treatment of



*Naturaleza muerta con frutas*, 1941.

the human form, reducing it to the minimum outlines. Her work in oils also diminished. From 1953 onward she produced many tempera paintings, which summarised the essentials of her resources and won her great popularity. But her characteristic baroque flavour, while more balanced, was not lost, as can be seen in one of her best-known works, "Interior con columnas" (1951).

Not only did she continue to paint until the end of her life, but her career culminated in a *grand finale*, according

to Vázquez, a sort of apotheosis of the still-life, in which the central motifs attained a sculptural monumentalism and the sun seemed to shine from within her paintings, endowing them with a refulgent luminosity that is unique in the history of painting. But, in addition to the various approaches to the still-life that she used during her long career, and which would culminate in the 1960s, Peláez experimented in many directions, some of them to be seen in her early drawings. Her final years brought an explosion of creativity, and some of her greatest works, such as "Florero" (1960), "Naturaleza muerta en azul" (1964), "Flores amarillas" (1964), and "Peces" (1967).

Siqueiros regarded Amelia Peláez as "the most extraordinary example of how a vigorous artist should approach the modern Parisian trends" (14). If the muralist could say this, despite his own opposite position, it was because we are standing before a paradigm of the development of modern painting in Latin America. The artist found the resources she needed in Paris, but removed from the avant-garde. Obligated to return home, for financial reasons, or because she felt herself to be an outsider, or because she had no appetite for the competitive struggle, it was back in Cuba that she consolidated her own discourse, derivative but also appropriative, which built new structures of meaning from a different reality. Beatriz González summed it up in a bit of word-play "Cubism and



*Peces*, 1967.

Cubanism" (15). But if in this formulation the latter is expressed freely and openly with imported means, the former enriches the possibilities with "alien" paths. Amelia Peláez constructed a Cuban and a Latin American identity, and she also broadened and transformed the idioms and poetics of the old avant-gardes.

Her inclination was to lend sensuality to the ornamental in its expressive functions, transforming the merely decorative into art, and she was able to recodify the abstract elements of the traditional ornamentalism of Cuba—and especially of Havana—through a non-figurational style of modern painting. This enabled her to extend a discourse of "the infinite prolongation of forms" (16), intermingling the geometric with the organic which, in a dialogue with an astonishing light-colour, lent

structure to sensuality and morbidity to geometry.

In Peláez the anti-monistic, inclusive concept of modern art was of capital importance. As Vázquez has written, "she harbours tradition within modernity" (17), and the traditional does not operate as a subject, an allusion or a reference, but rather as the most active and essential ingredient of her painting. It is a tradition of the deepest European roots, and also creole, through which she makes an icon of the Cuban, complementing that of Wilfredo Lam, which he engendered from the African tradition.

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#### NOTES

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