

The physical realism of Millares

ENRICO CRISPOLTI

My interpretation of the work of Millares is directed towards the singular and constant use he made of his materials (at least from the mid-fifties). The character of this quality can be principally understood as the use of objective materials, traditionally considered non-pictorial and secondly, as a physical use of colour. Simultaneously, in an attempt to define it more effectively, I will consider his material realism, or rather his realist materialism, comparing it with other informalist and non-informalist "materialists", and with other "objectivist" painters that worked in European and North American art during Millares's time.

We can examine two examples of Millares's work from different periods: *Painting Number 12*, of 1957, and the 1967 *Homúnculo*. In the first case we perceive an initial aspect of Millares's material use. Material is used as a solid base where certain symbols and lines are set in relief. However I would define these lines as "passive", because the painter's attitude is expressed in them contemplatively. The second painting offers a mature and predominant dimension in his work. Material is employed as a defined base where "active" lines appear, that are the result of applied physical action, and above all, the presence of an ever more vigorous figurative reference increases, a human icon, (notable after the very well known *homúnculos* of the early sixties), that is emblematic, synthetic but quite explicit.

At this point, it is necessary to issue a preliminary warning that though it may appear obvious, doesn't seem to me so. The fact of choosing to work with physical materials instead of colour as tradition has had it, is an essential decision. It means, that necessarily, personal aesthetic communication is rooted in a dimension of "physicality" that introduces the suggested image directly into the realm of existentiality, detaching it from a purely ideal, idealizing and mental sense. The warning is the following: the meaning of a work that employs

empirical materials can't be considered, without simultaneously considering the resort to them, and thus evidently, through them. That is to say, taking into account what they are. Personally, between 1956 and 1957, I envisaged this problem when as a young man I tried to apprehend the new and revolutionary sense of Burri's work, of his huge sacks. If we abstracted the meaning of the use of material we couldn't understand Burri; likewise, we couldn't understand Millares.

When viewing the first of the two examples of Millares I have just mentioned, that of 1957, comparison with Burri is inevitable: this is an example of materialism with a passive character. Comparison is natural inasmuch as what Millares was expressing in his 1957 Madrid individual exhibition, in relation to Burri's work, was obvious, in the sense of displaying elemental physical material and image on it. (An interesting detail. Some of Burri's works from the early 50's, are surprisingly close to the work of the North American Anne Ryan, of the 40's and after, but which Burri certainly had no knowledge of.)

Anyhow, there is already a notable difference between Burri and Millares; the latter is more radical, dry, essential, even mystical. Burri, on the other hand, is refined, ambivalent, even elegant, tending almost to a type of choreography. Furthermore, Millares uses sack-cloth as support for an elementary colour painting, that permeates the rough threads of the surface.

In fact informalist materialism was expressed in pictorial material through volume, and at times it even had to combine with empirical materials, and not really in separate physical materials like sack and cloth. It is the case with Dubuffet and de Fautrier in France, Morlotti in Italy, and Tàpies in Spain.



Manolo Millares. *Homúnculo*, 1966. 130×98 cms.

Whether it is the Burri of the early 50's or the Millares of the mid-50's, both are using recognizable physical materials. However, in Burri's case, Schwitters's work of the Dada period in particular was mentioned as precedent. Schwitters used empirical materials (bits of wood, sand, pebbles), and fragments of objects as well. The first aspect is relatable to Burri's work, whereas the second fundamentally concerns the work of Millares.

In fact Millares doesn't really use objects (except as an exceptional and rare incorporation, little more than as a reference), and suggests embryonic figures. Perhaps it is through Burri that Schwitters has entered into Millares's "culture of the image". Schwitters establishes the norm in the use of empirical and material as object and figure; in the use of the object and figure as in terms of physical, empirical material. Reference to the evoked object and to the figure is constrained to an empirical and existential ambit that is self-containing, and essential. In fact Rauschenberg refers to Schwitters much more than Burri or Millares.

If Millares, at the beginning of his materialism was associated with Burri, he has never been associated with Rauschenberg, as later with Kienholz, for example. This means that Millares is not included in a relative trend towards the textual

use of empirical objects, as was the case with the trend, that stemmed from a Neo Dada juncture (Rauschenberg), veering to Pop Art, then returned to the form of a narrative critical realism. (Kienholz or Kudo.)

In Millares's work there is no real reference at large that is textual; we don't identify in him the presence of the recognizable thing in its individuality, the figure as manifested reality. He is not opportunely tragic like Kienholz, just as his works aren't "objectivist", consumerist, and sociological reference points as is the case with the french *Nouveaux Réalistes*.

Millares creates emblematic, materialist embryonisms, that point towards the human icon. He makes evocative suggestions, hard and violent; it's not a case of descriptions or references. They are to a certain extent, specific evocations (precisely evoking the human figure), but metaphorically transferred through an organic primarity.

The fact of searching for an embryonic figure-object image, created in terms of physical evidence rather than of textual references, symbolizes the intention of enlarging the referential field, making it richer in tonality and suggestiveness. In that sense Millares is predominantly evocative, more than descriptive. He isn't interested in commenting on one individual man or any particular situation, but seeking the archetypal. What really impassions him is discovering an emblematic figure that represents the condition of man immersed in his basic existence.

K. Schwitters. *El niño de la sota*. 1921.





Burri. *Saco y blanco*. 1953. 150×250 cms.



Dubuffet, 1952. *Peuplements au sol*. 66×81 cms.

His ideas differ from his contemporary Lee Bontecou, and differ from his own archetypes of organic and simultaneously mechanical evocation, sexual and automatistic. The archetype that concerns Millares is an existential human one. This can be clearly observed in works like *De este paraíso* (1971), where some apparent affinities with the north american's work could be identified.

In the years of his greatest maturity (end of the 60's and early 70's), Millares wasn't only materialist, but incipiently iconic. While Chamberlain practises the use of empirical materialism with a social consumerist context to denounce a terminal condition, linked to a sociological order, Millares is at most scatological. Catastrophe isn't to be found for him in one given situation (consumerism), but somehow underlies the whole of modern man's condition.

Millares ignores what consumerism is, and therefore he doesn't decry it specifically. His world is beyond the sociological; it is basic, primary, full of a remote anthropological conscience, and above all addresses oppression exercised by man on man, making an implicit and manifest political allusion to Spain, during the years of Francoist repression.



Kienholz. *Sollie 17*. 1979-80. 120×336×168 cms.

This essentialist condition is saturated in physical determination. This is his realism, existentially accusatory but at the same time, and logically, political.

That physical condition is evident in every element that constitutes the work of the artist. *Matter*, the sack, that he covers in colour; a basic colour, both in its choice (white, black, reddish), as in its nature and in the way of applying it on the surface. An ink-colour, physical. The *tearing* effect, and deep laceration; the stitching with coarse thread, the stretched textures, the more or less evident organic feel, forever present and conveying the reference to the *homúnculo* (the man-creature), the "character".

For Millares, matter and material is not something easily discarded. Yet material exists per se, not as an object. To the contrary, this material is the support that lends reality shape, and also, a context situation for the public exhibition of an emblematic figure. Such naked display is radicalized by the compositional frontality in the primary, devastating and primordial whiteness and blackness, as a true 'modern primitive'. Millares expresses the presence of emblematic figures that have existential finality but that require bold defence and have to be accepted. Each work of his is therefore an act of inevitable opposition.