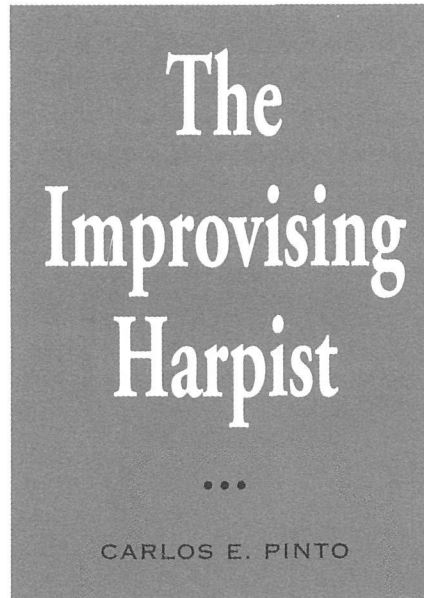


As the 20th-century draws to a close, if there is one year of the century that can be singled out as determining Spanish history, one year that has conditioned not only material and social growth but also spiritual and cultural development, it can only be the disgraceful year of 1936. The events that were unleashed in July of that year had been incubating for months within Spanish society; once alerted, and via the conscience of unique personages such as Miguel de Unamuno, there was no hesitation in signaling the dark inevitability of civil war. The bulk of the era's anxiety was transmitted, with varying intensities and intentions, to the art and literature of the time, in particular to those linked to avant-garde movements and which were beginning to stake out their own distinct fields of expression where young artists could feel secure. One of these artists, José Moreno Villa, did not disguise his emotion when recalling that "since Picasso, art has not enjoyed such liberty and consequently such joy." [1]

With the surrealists, who were transforming themselves into new apprentice sorcerers and were officiating as mediating messengers, the unchaining of events in this petrie dish could converted into inspiration or into another ingredient filtered through the unconscious in works that renounced formal dependence in favor of greater creative receptivity. This has been seen in Lorca, Dalí, Maruja Mallo, Luis Buñuel, etc; we find the same in Juan Ismael and, in an unexpected example, in a painting from that ill-fated year.



Until the date in question, the work of Juan Ismael had passed through its initial phases, starting in 1928 when he showed the "Gráficos marinos" in the theatre Circo de Marte de Santa Cruz de la Palma. Those early drawings showed a synthesis of the discovery of Nestor Martín Fernández de la Torre, both directly and through modern revisionist readings of his work that students in the Escuela Luján had undertaken. Among these students were Jorge Oramas and Felo Monzón. They also showed an avant-garde aspiration, encouraged by his early friendship with members of the Tenerife group: Pedro García Cabrera, Emeterio Gutiérrez Albelo, José Antonio Rojas, Domingo López Torres, etc.

There were to be two exhibitions of the painter's work between 1928 and 1933, although he also participated in collective exhibitions in the Escuela Luján in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (1929) and Santa Cruz de Tenerife (1930). The individual exhibitions took place in 1930 and 1932 in Santa Cruz

de Tenerife; they included many paintings of which only a few have survived to the present day. All signs seem to indicate that the first of these exhibitions generally consisted of works of a novice quality, in addition to the drawings, while in the second he showed his colleagues the first specimens of his recalled landscapes, although in both exhibitions he ventured to present portraits of Domingo López Torres, José Antonio Rojas, Agustín Espinosa, etc., which have yet to be found.

In 1932 Juan Ismael begins to paint the Tenerife landscape as rediscovered across distance and theory. He settled in Madrid in March 1931 where he rejoined his close friends from the Canary Islands: Ramón Ferial, Juan Manuel Trujillo, Antonio Dorta, Lola de la Torre, María Rosa Alonso, etc. As E. Padorno suggests, the recalled landscapes are the first attempt at distancing objects from visible reality [2]. At the same time they are a methodical approach to the mystery of painting and, in particular, to the expressive density of its poverty, an asceticism of cubist reminiscences that would be transcribed onto a few canvases in 1934. By the following year Juan Ismael opened the doors of his unconscious. A new and interesting synthesis then occurs: his engagement with surrealist objectives takes place within context of expressive sobriety and regional content that characterised the group known as the Escuela de Vallecas. After his exhibition in the Ateneo in

Madrid. Juan Ismael maintains an intense association with these painters, among whom are included Maruja Mallo, José Moreno Villa, Benjamín Palencia, Antón García Lamolla, etc.

Juan Ismael's first series of surrealist works was called *Paisajes Metafísicos* [Metaphysical Landscapes]; some of these were included in his fourth individual exhibition in November 1935, held under the auspices of ADLAN in the Centro de Exposición e Información Permanente de la Construcción de Madrid. "The outstanding characteristic of this group of paintings," Padorno points out, "does not reside in any single sense of the figurations nor in multiple meanings. What is peculiar is the narrative disjunction, the play of analogical elements" [2]. The artist focused on this series until the beginning of the civil war. 1936 sees Juan Ismael brimming with expectations after his exhibition in the Centro. In February Eduardo Westerdahl asks him to participate in the Exposición de Arte Contemporáneo, organised by ADLAN and the Gaceta de Arte and planned for June. In responding to Westerdahl, Juan Ismael mentions the presence of his work in "the exhibition of Spanish painting, in Paris", an allusion to the exhibition entitled "L'art Espagnol Contemporaine" that took place in February in the Jeu de Paume. The exhibition included an "important participation of surrealist painters" such as Dalí, Miró, Lamolla, Maruja Mallo, Moreno Villa, González Bernal, etc. [3]. Finally, the proximity of the Amigos de las Artes Nuevas (Guillermo de Torre, Joan Prat, J.L. Sert, etc.) led to his association with the Logicofobista group,

which held its first exhibition in the Galerías de Arte Cataluña in May.

But expectations do not necessarily yield creative activity, and given the course of events in the year 1936 it can be assumed that not many pieces were indeed realised. We only know two of them currently, and a third via photographs. In the same year there are



Juan Ismael, 1035.

two unequivocal references to paintings in the letter to Westerdahl mentioned above, where he also announced three new paintings that he never sent to Tenerife [4], and also by the presence of three works in the Exposición Logicofobista, of which we know the titles: *Al llegar Clotilde*, *Llegó cuando yo la esperaba* y *La arpista improvisando*.

We lack the title of one of the three known paintings, although we know that this painting belonged to Dr. Manuel Parejo Moreno [5], a friend of Juan Ismael and Oscar Domínguez and to whom Domínguez dedicated one of his earliest paintings, a still-life in the cubist style dated 1928 [6]. Juan Ismael's painting is oil on wood, 45 cm. by 32 cm. and signed only with the initials (J-Is.). It possesses general features in common to all three paintings: a sober palette, a search for

primitivist-inspired material qualities, textures and forms, and the inclusion of sense elements in a leveled landscape that converts them into transcendent substances that string together a story.

The second painting, which we only know from photographs, is titled *Huida de la tierra* according to an annotation by the painter. It appears to have been executed along the same lines of the work described above, although in a larger format. Also, the work appears to be painted on canvas. But in addition to the unity of technique that these two works share, there is also a reiteration of identifiable elements, some of which begin to acquire greater symbolic weight as they are repeated. Thus the architectonic elements (the house and the stairway), the feminine object (broken or transformed in both works) or the uneasy dwarfish form that seems to grasp or carry the house below his arm in the first painting, while in the second he stands in front of the decapitated woman.

The third painting is entitled *La arpista improvisando* and was included with the above-mentioned works in the Exposición Logicofobista. It follows the same identifying scheme that we have seen earlier: devastation and identifiable elements (architecture, woman, dwarf), in addition to a closer structural relationship with the painting *Huida de la Tierra* in the pictorial references, with no substantial differences between the two territories.

The painting *La arpista improvisando* has just the right elements to be disturbing. The apparent simplicity of the final themes is preceded by the careful preparatory work on a thin sheet of muslin. The consistency of

the final surface texture lends the work certain material qualities that the artist takes advantage of by developing the three planes of colour that divide the desolate landscape. Above, a uniform lead-grey sky, barely scratched by two stylised clouds; in a distant point on the horizon something resplendent is implied, but this light does not affect the figures. The band of sky blends into the ribbon of land, both of them monochrome. Not even the slightest emphasis is placed on drawing, constructing the landscape out of an imperceptible build-up up smears that reinforce the sense of desolation and unreality. However, this is where the scene occurs that we eventually notice. A final, nearly-black strip finishes the lower part of the canvas, functioning as foreground and supplying the necessary weight on which the impossible scene is placed; in this gloomy zone the artist paints two white flowers.

Three elements are drawn in the middle of the painting. To the left appears the corner of a temple; an amputated arm rests on the temple's only column. In the centre, a nude woman plays the harp. Her nudity presents perceptual difficulties, since it is confused on an almost conceptual level with the nudity of the brushstroke and the painting; in addition, there is a transparency that reveals her skeleton and even her terrible countenance behind the harp. The third figure, located on the right, turns toward the others; it is the dwarfish form suspended over a cloud that floats over the land. In any event, it is not a clearly defined form. It could be an empty overcoat, a decapitated statue or an anthropomorphised tree trunk. The

figure is raising his right arm in an ambiguous gesture: we do not know if he is trying to reach the amputated arm toward which he seems to move or if he is just saluting. Meanwhile, his left arm hangs down, amputated.

The three figures are treated with a different technique from that of the rest of the painting. At least on both sides the canvas is visible beneath a thin coat of oil that accentuates the drawing,

while the central figure is resolved through dense brushstrokes. We might conclude that the compositional structure in Juan Ismael's works, praised by Eugenio D'Ors two years earlier, has not been abandoned in this later painting of an irrational character. This indicates prior conception, and thus a vision that precedes the execution of the work, at least in its fundamental parts. This in turn supports the thesis that



La huida de la tierra (Paisajes metafísicos), 1936. Oil on canvas.

what we have here is not just an automatic work but rather an allegory, a highly-direct symbolisation of the historical moment in which Juan Ismael was painting; this reveals logicophobic intentions, at a time when the group's influence is inevitable for an artist of such virgin receptivity.

One last detail bids us farewell from our consideration of the painting. The intensity of the blue cloud that lifts the dwarf makes it unreal, provisional and ghostly; it also finds a subtle symbolic correlative in the imperceptible alteration of the landscape. Throughout the base of the painting's intermediate band, Juan Ismael has utilised a range of browns, sepias, ochres and thick shadows in order to achieve an inhospitable monotony. Only beneath the stairs of the temple does the Venetian red seem to withdraw into the lower darkness, toward the temple and toward the painting's left border, invaded by a deathly pale tongue.

In *La arpista improvisando* there is a conjugation of much of the pictorial tradition on which Juan Ismael's work is based at the time: the postexpressionistic directives of the "new objectivity" from Germany — known here as "magic realism" after F. Roh's book was circulated (Kanolt, Mense, Spies, etc.) — which Juan Ismael assimilated into Canary Island subjects: a brief Cubist phase (Picasso and Gris), which would lead to a group of paintings in 1934; and, finally, surrealism. This last influence reached him through two separate routes — through the Canary Islands and the work of Oscar Domínguez and also through the Escuela de Vallecas — and would influence most of the work exhibited in the Centro de

Exposición e Información Permanente de la Construcción in 1935. In the Metaphysical Landscapes, the series that ranged through 1935 and 1936, one can see a gradual departure from the abstract and primitive forms that protagonised much of the contemporaneous experimental painting (Palencia, Moreno Villa, Lamolla, etc.) and a move toward the painting of Carlo Carrá and De Chirico.

From this stage forward, we must be prudent in considering Juan Ismael's painting as exclusively surrealist, although the style might seem inseparable from all his work. In fact, during this period the development of his work resembles the painting of Valori Plastici more than that of surrealism.

Identity — features, the face, the head — disappears in metaphysical painting; it becomes objectified. Figures and objects are petrified, rescued from primitive and renaissance traditions. The painter's manipulation of structures or the skeleton of representation becomes fluid, direct and intimate, endowing forms with the conditions of personality. It is this non-expressive treatment of the painting that makes it enigmatic, putting a distance between itself and the viewer. The viewer is thus only invited to see an enigma, or better still, to feel that he sees an enigma. Moreover, in Juan Ismael's case, the introduction of features belonging to traditional Spanish painting [7], attenuated by the island perspective to a degree of innocence that raises it to the level of poetry, lends the work a dimension free from all emphasis, making it silent and interior.

Only silence is heard in the land where the harpist plays. The unchaining of events has occurred, and although

pain and surprise have still not left the stage, the final act is sanitised surgery, cold and therapeutic, on a desolate, bleak plain. It is the inevitable pruning of a livid flowering.

The harpist watches us. Beyond her, beyond her gaze, the history of events fuses into her bones and disappears, calcified into the past. And as she watches us, and as we watch her, she improvises.

NOTAS

- [1] Moreno Villa, J. *Vida en claro*. F.C.E., Madrid, 1976.
- [2] Padorno, E. *Juan Ismael* B.A.C. n° 30. Gobierno de Canarias, 1995.
- [3] García de Carpi, L. *La pintura surrealista española (1924-1936)*. Ed. Istmo, Madrid, 1986.
- [4] "...Gaceta de Arte is holding an exhibition in Santa Cruz de Tenerife in which, together with paintings, there will be photos, objects, surrealist books and magazines. *Formas* (oil) and *No despertaré en el mismo sitio* (encaustic) are the pieces that are available, lent by the painter's friends so that his name might appear together with the names of Max Ernst, Angel Ferrant, Joan Miró, etc." Padorno, E. *Juan Ismael*. Caja de Ahorros de Tenerife, 1982.
- [5] Manuel Parejo Moreno (1907 - 1980) was a neuro-psychiatric physician and a brilliant character, a hugely talented man and deeply educated not only in medicine but also in cultural affairs and the humanities. Throughout his life he dedicated special attention to the relation between creativity in the visual arts and mental illness. He was a member of the Sociedad Europea de Psicopatología de la Expresión. These interests, which without a doubt were complemented by his youthful friendships with Juan Ismael and Oscar Domínguez, eventually were expressed in important and pioneering investigative works on Goya (*Análisis biopatógráfico de Dn. Francisco de Goya y Lucientes*). Van Gogh and Antonin Artaud.
- [6] Castro, F. "Oscar Domínguez". Ed. Cátedra, Madrid, 1978
- [7] During his stay in Madrid, Juan Ismael made frequent visits to the Prado, where he obtained a Copyist's Certification. In the museum he discovered and placed extraordinary value on the paintings of Juan de Valdés Leal, whom he placed in the forefront of all Spanish painters throughout history.