



THE NEXUS

THE CAAM

AS THE CONTINUATION
OF TWENTIETH CENTURY
CANARIAN MODERNISM

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In general, since the Renaissance to the end of the twentieth century, the relationship between “modernity” and historical evolution in Spain, has been unstable, limited and eminently discontinuous. Only great creators like Goya, Dalí and Velázquez have managed to overcome the fateful political oscillations of the Nation, that have composed the following pattern: intense years of reaction, traditionalism and conservatism that are opposed to brief moments of expansion and tolerance. At the end of the nineteenth century, with the conservative-liberal alternating partnership of Cánovas and Sagasta the country enjoys two decades of relative stability and security. It is during this era of social peace and concerted progress that some museum projects comparable to those of the European bourgeoisie are elaborated. There was then in Europe a

clear heritage-conserving mentality, a vast exhibition programme that wanted to present to the general public the great achievements of Ancient Times, the Middle Ages and the Baroque in artistic terms, for the aesthetic movements of these epochs were then undergoing revision and simultaneously feeding the eclecticism of nineteenth century architecture.

The Renaissance in the Canaries had a moment of “Atlantic” splendour, merging with the first manifestations of the baroque spirit. Cairasco de Figueroa was the poet who in the sixteenth century first created an island iconography, who developed an aesthetic phenomenology that was distinctive of Canaries. It is the beginning of a relationship with the modernity of our Western tradition. We would have to

move on to the second half of the eighteenth century to describe another chapter crucial to the modernity of the islands, José de Viera y Clavijo, Clavijo y Fajardo, and before the Vizconde de Buen Paso had founded the critical mind of the Enlightenment. As happened throughout Spain, the Society of Friends of the Nation. (Sociedad de Amigos del País) was set up, and at the same time the salon of the Marquis de Navas y Grimón flourished in the city of La Laguna, Tenerife. However, there is little that can equalize the academic and museum activity in Madrid at the time. The Academy of San Fernando rationalizes its syllabus while the Royal Art Collection gradually constitutes the basis of the Prado. The minister Manuel Godoy manages to own more than 1000 art works. We can't talk about a public artistic culture in the islands till the second half of the twentieth century. The Enlightenment has been the prerogative of the salon, of the individual, of coordinated elective affinities. It isn't until the nineteenth century that schools and public institutes become educationally stable and so are able to compete with the education of the Jesuits and the Augustines.

Enlightened education during the eighteenth century is reduced to a small circle of teachers at the Seminar, to certain episcopal cliques and to aristocratic coteries. The liberal canarian bourgeoisie during the nineteenth

century is able to gain Madrid's acquiescence in the Free Ports project of 1852, it builds the Gabinete Literario, (Literary Club), finances certain publications and leaves behind a liberal memory. The art of the eighteenth century was ecclesiastic. The art of the first half of the nineteenth century is also largely religious, and reveals notable decadence in style and models. Impressionism arrives late, and it comes as a superficial innovation, a skin-deep stylistic imitation that ignores Cezanne's conceptual revolution, Manet's deconstruction of classical pose, Monet's serialistic waterlilies, Gauguin's symbolism and innerness. Impressionism in the island ironically emphasizes traditionalist rural icons, and is useful as variation of a stiff portrait tradition, if there are some exceptions to the rule, (like some works of Carló that are more psychological). The formal and conceptual breakthroughs of that other Impressionism aren't even studied, and its force lies unexplored and untapped until the emergence of a post-symbolist painter, Néstor de la Torre: the local society and its bourgeois peers are largely conservative, their free thinking being expressed only in liberalist economics. Romanticism in the Fine Arts is virtually non-existent in the islands. We have no Fuseli, nobody that even imitates Goya in his blacker moods. Romanticism joins forces with costumbrismo and produces myth oriented justifications for nationalism. The "noble savage" exists in order to



Philome Obin. *Toussaint Louverture recibe la carta del Primer Cónsul*, 1945. Courtesy Museo de Bellas Artes de Venezuela.

validate nationalist aspirations and demands. Thus the revolutionary aspects of Romanticism surrender to Secundino Delgado's failed independentism or to the pseudo-liberalism of the leonista party. The psyche remains stagnant, unjerked by symbolism or by the Sturm und Drang. No frozen voyage to the Arctic to find the ultimate identity of man, no hard climb up the mountains to

confront Nature's grandeur with the inner ragings of the ego. Such "limit" poetry doesn't exist visually in the Canaries. This unborn romantic surge will suddenly appear in the painting "Berenice" by Néstor de la Torre, and in the Surrealism of Oscar Domínguez. This prologue only wishes to suggest that the beginnings of Canarian

“modernity” are hard and extremely modest. It doesn’t forecast great things, to the contrary, it seems to circumscribe us to a crippled relationship with modernity, suffering the mediocrity of centralist administration, ignored and scorned by a local bourgeoisie content with erecting pretty façades. The CAAM has to fight, though it is not immediately evident, against the void that this evolutionary poverty has left us. It is only this century that brings to Canarias modernity in its most complete and international form.

The incipient universality of the Canarian historical avant-garde isn’t a mere accident, nor is it a mysterious achievement.

Cubism and Surrealism arrived with a “planned” programme, with a catechism and with “rules of the game”, such as devised and preached by André Breton, in his moments of glory in the 20’s to his Parisian decadence in the 40’s and 50’s. Breton’s visit to Canarias in 1935 to present the International Surrealist Exhibition, confirmed Canarian territory as part of the surreal revolution. The combined influences of Futurism, Cubism and Surrealism that seduced the minds of Domingo Pérez Minik, Agustín Espinosa, Pestana Nóbrega and Gutiérrez Albelo and Juan Manuel Trujillo, are the innovative ferment that opens the gates of the avant-garde. A parallel activity will be the rescue, directed by Juan Manuel Trujillo, of the

work of some of the enlightened classics, like Viera y Clavijo or Cairasco.

Oscar Domínguez replied exceptionally to this Spanish and European proclamation, eventually becoming a formative influence in the aesthetic history of Surrealism, with his automatic-style creation, “Decalcomanie”. This technique recalled Victor Hugo’s “pochoirs”, powerful shadows of the Romantic imagination taken to its most expressionist consequences, and the lesser known “dendrites” by George Sand.

Continuation of this late, pre-symbolist manifestation of the Romantic are paintings like the bewitching “Guanche Cave”, (Cueva de Guanches), or the machine that satirizes the repression of the Holy Inquisition, “Electrosexual Sewing Machine”, both by Oscar Domínguez. Together with Domínguez’s output we can include the first part of Juan Ismael’s work, more indebted to Joan Miró and Dalí, with its melancholic ruins and fantastic characters that evoke Watteau’s harlequins.

These aspects are more related to a European, universalist manifestation. However, there is a more “national” and regional renewal of aesthetic based exclusively on the islands, though it also had international implications, that centred round the “Escuela Luján Pérez” and a group of young artists. Rafael Monzón, Jorge Oramas, Plácido Fleitas, Santiago Santana, Eduardo Gregorio are some of the members of the so-called

“Indigenismo”. They decided to renovate Canarian social images, to search for new feminine and masculine prototypes, to record the less charming traits of insular geography, like the desert appearance of the south and its flora. Such a regionalist and national compromise was implicit in the Mexican avant-garde, in the muralist movement, and similarly some of the Escuela’s didactic ideas were derived from the theories of Torres García and the magic realist aura possibly taken from a book by Franz Roh.

It is Eduardo Westerdahl’s personality that acts as a platform for projecting the Canarian art production of these vanguard years, and as a filter for the different European art tendencies in the 20’s and 30’s. In the magazine “Gaceta de Arte”, that had world wide diffusion, both Surrealism, Cubism and other forms of the avant-garde, along with the more conservative German and Italian realism, that would one day become the decadent art of fascism (although at the time its content had not been politicized and deviated), found expression.

Westerdahl spontaneously initiated a dynamic that the CAAM has since institutionalized: making Canarias a magnetic territory, attracting great thinkers and artists as visitors, and establishing a relationship that went beyond the writing of an article for a magazine. Thus a communication network began, that situated Canarias at a hypothetical centre, an off-centre that took advantage of its traditional

geostrategic importance as port of call on the ocean routes to Africa and America. This, in essence, is the form of a modernizing dynamic, that Eduardo and Maud Westerdahl set in motion lucidly and unpretentiously, until the brutal rupture of the Civil War in 1936.

The CAAM is the result of different needs and aspirations, although the fundamental one is the continuity of the modern, avant-garde vocation of the Canary Islands, the desire to react in some way to the demands that the first avant-garde currents established. Thus,

the surrealist exhibition, "Between the old World and The New. ("Entre el Nuevo y el Viejo Mundo"), is the link that joins together again the broken chain. A modernist vocation that has brought about an almost complete change in the cultural possibilities of the average Canarian man. Beforehand, only the considerable and selfless efforts of galleries and some institutions could to a degree remedy the exclusion of the islands from major European cultural circuits. Europe was not at all willing to include the Canaries in any cultural itinerary, other than in the superficial

images of tourist, leisure. The Casa de Colón, founded in 1951, was for three decades almost the only vehicle for mobilizing European-Canarian cultural initiatives, and the first entity that started to rationalize debate and publicize the findings of investigation into our "tri-continental" identity. (The Canarian-American Historical Symposium was founded in 1976 under the guidance of Francisco Morales Padrón). Prior to the big surrealist exhibition at the CAAM we had seen another one at the Vegueta Gallery that also recreated the spirit of 1935.



Fariba Hajamadi. *A more locked door; when history sleeps it speaks in dreams*, 1989. Oil on canvas. Diptyc. Courtesy Christine Burgin Gallery, New York.