

FOCUS: SPAIN

Avelino Sala on the emergence of a new dynamism

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There is the feeling that something is happening in Spain. Until recently seen very much as being on the periphery of world art, the once near-dormant Spanish artistic scene has begun to show signs of new activity. In Madrid, new galleries and projects open every month, many receptive to innovative fields where once they would have been directed exclusively to the more marketable areas of painting and sculpture. But the most extensive changes are taking place outside the capital, where the artistic scene is being supported by both public and private initiatives, and a new generation of artists, gallery owners and critics are suddenly making their voices heard.

Yes, art is alive and well in Spain, and not only at its centre. From a sociological perspective, it is interesting to note how much of this activity is rooted in regions which until recently had seen little activity, or had historically turned their backs on contemporary art, and that the key factor in supporting these initiatives lies with the Spanish system of autonomous regional governments. These have been encouraged to take a more radical ethical stand by promoting the latest in contemporary art, and in so doing have taken the impetus away from the more obvious and immediate commercial dictates. Nevertheless, what has been achieved of late arises very much from the complementary relationship between state and private initiatives.

In the private sector, galleries to look out for include T20 in Murcia; Galería Sandunga in Granada; Cavecánem in Seville; Sicart, Dels Angels and Toni Tàpies in Barcelona; Borés and Mallo in Cáceres; Luis Adelantado in Valencia; Fernando Serrano in Huelva; Fernando Latorre in Zaragoza; and Espacio Líquido in Gijón (one of the younger, more interesting galleries in the country). At an institutional level, one should cite CCCB in Barcelona; CASA in Salamanca; the soon-to-be-opened MUSAC in León; MARCO in Vigo; Patio Herreriano in Valladolid; CGAC in Santiago de Compostela; and MEIAC in Badajoz. Special mention should be given to Espacio C in Camargo, Cantabria, a smaller space directed by Orlando Britto Jinorio, with a hybrid policy of inviting artists from marginal countries to collaborate with Spanish artists in low-budget, yet successful, thematic exhibitions.

Another important development has been the diversification of channels for the production and diffusion of artistic practices, until recently almost exclusively the prerogative of Madrid. Without detracting from new initiatives in the capital, such as the more radical projects promoted by galleries like Espacio Mínimo, Galería Vostell, Max Estrella, Pilar Parra, Magda Bellotti or Fernando Pradilla, the focus of attention has shifted to other centres of production such as Hangar in Barcelona, and Arteleku and Bilbao Arte in the Basque Country. Here, we find a strong emphasis on cultural interchanges and dialogue, together with in-house artistic production. Sadly, though, these imported models are still rare elsewhere in Spain.

Other examples of non-commercial artistic creation include the Casa Encendida in Madrid, a new public space which earlier this year presented Generaciones, an extensive showcase for young art, or the Palacio de la Virreina and La Capella in Barcelona.

As a result of all this curatorial activity, Spain now boasts far more younger artists of note than could be addressed in this brief overview. I will therefore concentrate on a list of names which, although subjective, act as an example of the latest generation of artists, shedding some light on the concerns and thematics at work in Spanish art today.

The work of Bernardí Roig, Marina Núñez and Soledad Córdoba deals with anthropomorphic issues, albeit through radically different discourses. Roig's figurative sculpture addresses the private torment of voyeuristic repression. Work such as that represented in Leidy B, curated by Fernando Castro Florez, combines pornographic video footage with (almost literally) the Fires of Hell. We are left to draw our own conclusions here, for it is not made explicit whether

the flames emitting from Roig's life-sized figures bear the implication of eternal damnation or are simply the result of over-indulgence. Núñez's work offers a different reading of that other body transformed by madness and mediated by non-human elements: the cyborg. The work of Córdoba, on the other hand, uses a very direct discourse about the body and the corporal diversity that inhabits its transitory spaces. Her almost mediumistic practice aims to make us aware that our own body is a temporary vessel through which everything flows, even while our conscious selves remain grounded in a sterile search for a common and personal identity.

Other contemporary Spanish artists opt for parameters more closely related to performative actions and to what has become known as post-performance; in other words, the video recording. Sergio Prego and others employ sophisticated mechanisms to create images that question the meaning we attribute to our sensory perceptions. Pelayo Varela, in his Soundman series, inverts the isolating musical process of the walkman through a series of hieratic street actions with song titles in which both the visual imagery and the sound are distorted.

Other artists adopt a more critical socio-political stance by questioning power games, historical and political conflicts, repression, isolation, and violence. Fernando Sánchez Castillo camouflages his works as toys, creating machines and images that are powerful and intense yet deceptively innocent. The highly radical and polemic work of Santiago Sierra, now resident in Mexico, stirs our social conscience through performances involving minimally rewarded volunteers, through whose perverse and often demanding actions the artist seeks to illuminate the financial reality underpinning the lives of certain economic underclasses. The aesthetic of Enrique Marty borders on horror. In his work, the everyday is perceived as both horrific and shocking, while family units are transformed into groups of evil and disturbing beings.

For still other artists, process is the key. Carmen Cantón mediates the experience of life through an understanding of our own and other people's lives. Her work could be qualified as a series of oddities, such as *The Route of the Senses*, an artist's book made up of an ongoing process of communal efforts; an intense annual encounter wherein the participants meet to pool their experiences. José Arturo Rodríguez and Javier Sicilia, both from the Canary Islands, deal with issues of identity, and of social/individual space. Working as a team, their production fluctuates between painting and photography, and is self-referential and narrative, producing highly charged complex scenarios. Working in a similar vein, Salvador Cidrás's work is also centred on mechanisms of uncertainty, in which aseptic and fascinating scenes appear both unreal and curiously certain.

Mateo Maté's work is a hybrid of geographic, private and cartographic space: a bed in the shape of the map of the Iberian peninsula acts as a nocturnal travel guide, where a familiar yet dual territory becomes a mysterious space in which extraordinary things happen. Cristina Lucas's *Flying Boys* are phallogocentric youngsters rotating round their own penises. Cova Macias's documentaries are exploration of the boundary between adolescence and adulthood, an unclear stage that generates endless doubts, half-truths and outright lies.

Among painters, Eugenio Merino is one of the more surprising and interesting artists working in Spain today. Using irony as his main weapon, Merino transforms painting into a three-dimensional critical exercise.

Many young artists use digital means to create a critical discourse more in tune with the new formats of information technology. Ximo Lizana is a young artist working with robotic media to construct a puzzle with two elements – one critical, the other a reinterpretation of art history – while the Catalan artist Carme Romero manipulates commercial video games with a highly complex dynamic, transforming them into something deeply ironic and corrosive.

The list of younger Spanish artists who deserve to be taken seriously is seemingly endless, but those touched on here give some indication of the diversity of the main concerns at play. And while it would be wrong to suggest that the institutional infrastructure here is without its

faults, its changing panorama certainly has had more than an incidental effect on the artistic scene.

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