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EXPLORING ABSTRACT TERRITORIES

Eman Grima

The existential journey of a creative person is imbued with a multifarious complexity, filled with distress, anguish and disquieting passages, as well as delight, excitement and pleasure. Held by suspense, and a feeling of a boundless uncertainty, the artist brings forth a manifestation of his feeling, thoughts and expression. These are the features which define an artist like Jose' Manuel Ciria, whose work is but a reflection of a search for understanding existence, life and humanity. His works hint at a spiritual quest, and a conceptual or intellectual exploration of reality, human suffering and existence, expressed in a visual medium. This exhibition demonstrates some passages of this creative unfolding.

Ciria's creative output, paintings, writings and the writings about his work, is very intriguing, characterised by an abstract idiom, at times arcane, having contradictory elements combined together in his pictorial images. His artistic brainchild is a product of a conceptual reflection, a philosophical yearning which takes art into unexplored territories. It can be read in different ways, interpreted and re-interpreted in order to create different levels of meanings, having different dimensions and implications.

Born in Manchester in 1960 of Spanish parents, he moved to Madrid when he was eight years old and today his residencies are in Madrid and in New York. Ciria's versatility makes him a major figure in the diverse Spanish art scene of the last three decades. Since 1984, when he had his first solo show at the Ferrière gallery in Paris, Ciria has developed a wide-ranging career for which he has been honoured with numerous awards, leading to a wide international recognition through solo exhibitions.

Early in his career, Ciria started experimenting with expressionistic figuration. In the nineties, he developed his abstract poetic expression, combining gestural flow of paint, with the rationality of geometry. In the process he redefined abstract aesthetics. The artist's interest in the diversity of image production, combined with his tireless experimentation in the use of different media and material supports, expanded further his creative activity. His work was characterized by a strong

conceptual idea, which he developed in numerous Series based on a variety of themes such as, memory and vision, grief and death, organic forms and signs

Another interesting theme which Ciria developed was the series Rorschach Heads. This Series is a visual test of his creativity as a solution to basic creative problems of modern art. This particular theme is influenced by the Rorschach psychological tests. He created his own Rorschach test — applying distinctively asymmetrical colours, blobs of grays, black, whites, to analyse the cryptic complexity of the unconscious by portraying images of human heads, perhaps a self-portrait.

Ciria's move to New York, in late 2005, marks a new point of departure in his artistic career which results in a subdued expression in his painting process, using line as a compositional possibility to combine the iconography of figuration and abstraction. In his most recent work, the artist is synthesizing the two extremes of his abstract vocabulary; namely, the dynamic flow of paint and the intense and dramatic expression, while the constructive rigour of the geometry of his composition is more accentuated as are manifested by the works in this exhibition.

Ciria's vast artistic output has been analysed in a very rich collection of essays discussing various aspects of his creativity which evolved in different phases. His imagery is deeply influenced by his Spanish roots, expressed by his forceful splashing of paint and expressive vibrant colours. His subjects oscillate between representation and abstraction, geometric and energetic action.

This exhibition offers the opportunity to appreciate three major phases of Ciria's artistic output, developed through a number of a series of works. These are: Masks of the Glance, La Guardia Place, and Abstract Memory. The themes which are represented in these series are recurrent, time and again in his artist output. The names of these series are often given in a rather playful way, to distinguish from one set of works from another, as he states "Sometimes they might try to give a clue about what the content is, but more often than not, they are just there as a way to tell the series apart."

Masks of the Glance

The Masks of the Glance, is the most far-reaching and perhaps most recognizable Series of his works. Here one finds an expressive output of works which disclose his attempt to synthesize the two classical traditions of modern abstraction, namely the rational reflective formulation and the

spontaneous gestural act of painting. They reflect both the Apollonian order with the Dionysian uncontrollable instinct, two forces which come together in a visual synthesis.

These works combine the polarity of these appearing antithetical approaches, in order to create a new binary and a new configuration, creating a new aesthetics. The formal geometric structure which constitutes the underlying plane of his works is dominated by vibrant vigorous splashes of colour which give his compositions a forceful dimension.

Some works are composed of an underlying rational structure made of linear grids which are dominated by spontaneous bursts of colour. In other works he does away with the confinement of grids and patterns, while leaving visible hints of linear geometry dominated by impulsive strokes giving vent to his expressive imagination. The colours of these works are characterised by a sequence of red and whites, with light underlying light tones of greens and yellows on grey-blackish backgrounds. His bursts of gestural strokes are transformed into continuous bold shapes and lashes of pulsating red and white colours.

La Guardia Place

The second series, La Guardia Place (Suite Green Park), features a free playful use of colour and geometry with a less dramatic expression. In these works one notes the introduction of new colours which contrast the forceful blobs of reds and blacks. He introduces green to create a complementary effect with the dominant reds. These works reflect a new phase in his artistic oeuvre whereby he introduces organic shapes and new forms in his picture planes. According to the artist this phase is a recollection of his childhood memory in Manchester.

The formal elements of these compositions distinguish themselves by organic shapes which evolve into concrete figurative forms. It is a gradual expansion of his early geometric forms which are gradually transformed into a simplified figuration, which in the artist's own words, are "a homage to Malevich's work and simultaneously a scream in response to figurative painting". Like Malevich's Suprematism, Ciria purifies the picture plane from the needless complexity of unnecessary visual expletives in order to focus on essential forms. Although oscillating between figurative and abstract representation, they are independent from the references which are found in the natural world, bringing forth a visual expression of intellectual reflection.

Theoretical Memory

Ciria's abstract art shows that he is not interested in a faithful representation of the external world around us. He dislikes works where all that one can get is retinal, aesthetic pleasure and superficial mimetic visual effects. He argues that painting is a mental process, a conceptual and creative expression. Inspiration is not drawn from nature but from people and society. His visual abstractions and abstract works reflect his concern with an existential boundless aspect of humanity. This can be seen in the last series of works of this exhibition, Abstract Memory.

These works gravitate back to his gestural abstraction. Expressive overflow of gurgles of colour developed out of a simple construction of squares which evolved into a new intricate compartmental network of frames/windows.

In this series one finds different categories of how the painting is produced. Some of these works feature the flow of colour which break the confines of the frame without any relationship, whereas others follow the underlying structure of the composition. Others still, express the geometric solidity to the extent that they interfere with the overflowing spontaneity of the gestural strokes of colour.

Conclusion

Ciria's work discloses the fertile resonance of pictorial imagery. It reflects the illimitable dimension of visual art, its complexity and its boundless significance as a medium which explores infinite territories of human thought and creativity. It reveals art's infinite resource which opens the borders for intellectual inventiveness and imagination to represent various aspects of reality and human existence.