

Maruja Mallo: Far More than a Surrealist Painter

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“New York is a pandemonium where everyone scurries from one place to another like madmen in an asylum, but it is the centre of the universe for art and culture.” With these words, in an article featured in *Nueva York al día* on 16 October 1948, Maruja Mallo (Galicia 1902–Madrid 1995) gave her impressions of the city when she visited during her exile in Buenos Aires. She had arrived in Manhattan shortly before to open the exhibition in the Carstairs Gallery, whose rooms would introduce New Yorkers to works including her series *Naturalezas vivas (Living Still Lifes)*: “garishly colored, [with] mathematically balanced heaps of grapes”, they wrote in *ARTnews*.

In that series – which can be seen at Ortuzar Projects in Maruja Mallo’s return to New York some 70 years on – conches and seashells take on an unexpected aspect. To be more precise, they are lavish, embodying a certain “tropical” excess that, to European eyes, might represent the American experience in its vast expanses and scale of things. These shells beget more shells, and flowers, and magenta orchids, interwoven worlds, apparent opposites... And this abundance – or excess – is the definitive lesson of the American continent that fills the eyes of the painter.

In February 1937, the Spanish Civil War in full swing, Maruja Mallo had left for Buenos Aires on the excuse of an invitation from the city’s Friends of Art Association to give some lectures there. The Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral, an ambassador in Lisbon, would provide Mallo with the safe conduct she needed to ship out of a Spain that was up in flames. In the Argentine capital, Mallo developed all of the artistic skills that had germinated in her work in 1920s Madrid. There, along with Salvador Dalí and Federico García Lorca, she had formed part of a remarkable group at the Residencia de Estudiantes, a progressive university centre in Madrid, among the most creative cities in the country during the 1920s. In one of the most famous anecdotes from that time (and one that Mallo took great pleasure in recalling), during a visit to Silos in the company of Dalí, Lorca and Margarita Manso, the women

wore jackets for trousers in order to gain access to a monastery. “They accepted our entry to the holy precinct as promoters of the inverse transvestite”.

She had held her first individual exhibition, mentored by the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, in 1928 in the exhibition rooms of the prestigious journal *Revista de Occidente*. The works on display were a hymn to modern cities and their storefronts, their *verbenas* or street parties – a series of four paintings that were considered to be her first important work and that have a clear forerunner in the delicious painting *El Mago (The Magician)*, also featured in this exhibition. In this group of paintings, Mallo condenses the essence of the popular and pagan, which intrigue her so – as she herself explains so well in her *El Surrealismo a través de mi obra* in 1983, for Mallo is a competent writer and, I would go so far as to say, art theorist. This is backed up by the abundance of notes she wrote and essays she published, some for the renowned journal *Sur*, edited by Jorge Luis Borges and Victoria Ocampo. “Amidst the art-science atmosphere the immense cardboard telescope appears, placing the planets and constellations within our reach [...]. People take ‘mystology’ and the saints as a pretext to have a collective good time. They do not feel any veneration for the Church whatsoever; rather, they engage in parodies of the celestial orders and demonic hierarchies [...] Free from superstition and the tyranny, they understand the things of man to be exclusively legitimate to man.” Mallo writes with a superb precision fitting to a precise painting style that reveals itself in the meticulousness of the paintings themselves.

Shortly after her exhibition in *Revista de Occidente*, in 1932 Mallo displayed what are, perhaps, the most “surrealist” of her works – the series *Cloacas y campanarios (Drains and Bell Towers)*– at the Pierre Gallery in Paris. There she met Breton, who would buy some of her works, as evidenced when the writer’s collection went up for auction. Those were years of great friendships – with the poet Alberti – and constructive reflections – in *Arquitecturas minerales (Mineral Architectures)* that reveal a Mallo obsessed with geometric concepts. At that point, the Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres García decided to settle in Madrid, and around him there orbited a small, exquisite circle of constructive artists that included Maruja Mallo. Torres García recalls her in his memoirs: “Maruja Mallo is *personalísima*” – supremely personal.

The circle of Torres García – who, in contrast to the rest of the avant-garde, did not believe in cast-iron divisions between the figurative and non-figurative – had a colossal influence on Mallo’s work, on her adoption of the golden ratio and tenacious study of mathematics. Her handwritten notes even reflect on Einstein and his theory of relativity. Mallo is unfailingly impeccable when rendering forms in space, an obsessive about preparatory sketches

that reveal camouflaged forms. It is this precision of form in space that is explored in *Arquitectura humana (Human Architecture)* and *La red (The Net)* both from the late 1930s and works in which it is difficult to pinpoint that “surrealism” so frequently attached to Mallo, perhaps because the vanguard discourse is unsettled by women who chose to use space in a systematic way.

Indeed, Maruja Mallo is far more than just a surrealist painter. She is a cosmopolitan traveller – to Paris, Buenos Aires, Punta del Este, Valparaíso, Santiago de Chile, New York. She is a sophisticated writer – the friend of Pablo Neruda (with whom she visited the beaches of Chile), of Ortega y Gasset, Breton, Ramón Gómez de la Serna, Gabriela Mistral, Jorge Oteiza and Rafael Alberti. She is the subject of groundbreaking photos. And, above all, she is an intellectual artist – with a style considered “excessively intellectual”, even, as commented in the *New York Sun* on the occasion of her exhibition in the city. In this respect Mallo was, moreover, passionate about diversity, about multiculturalism *avant la lettre*, as reflected in the mural on the Los Angeles movie theatre in Buenos Aires, since demolished. In the mural, dancing figures mimicking the world’s “races”, a theme so popular at the time, convey the other facet of popular art, the side that spellbinds the artist in her street party scenes; namely, masks, a subject she would systematically revisit throughout the 1940s and 50s.

This mixture of multicultural modernity, the ostensible contradiction inherent in the figurative geometry visible in the portraits of races on display here, must be what intrigued the New York press and visitors to the Carstairs Gallery. We might say the same of Mallo’s *Arquitecturas vegetales (Plant Architectures)* from the 1930s: once again, here is America, allowing the artist to build on the foundations of an exploration of race to take a step further in her experiments on the figurative and the abstract, the ways in which they complement each other – and cancel each other out. “Maruja Mallo’s masterwork is the set of paintings of heads showing the five races, with tones very faithful colour and form, which describes the races. In this work, considered a true innovation in modern pictorial art, the artist has masterfully captured the racial archetypes in visual form, in the humanized order that corresponds to each race”, wrote Zoila N. Villadeamigo de Ellis in the aforementioned article in *Nueva York al día*.

Seventy years later in this necessary return to what Mallo perceived to be the “centre of the universe for art and culture”, the artist once again surprises us with her modernity, which definitively offers much more than “surrealism” alone.