

Painting Viciously: Antonio Saura's Monsters and The Francoist Dictatorship (1939-1975)

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In 1950s and 1960s Europe, painting monsters was trendy. From Jean Dubuffet's ghostly portraits to Asger Jorn's graffiti-like beasts, or Enrico Baj's nuclear creatures, monsters became one of the most popular pictorial elements during the post-World War II period. This trend to embrace monstrosity was especially common amongst painters who, by the end of the 1940s and during the 1950s, had subscribed to abstraction. From the early 1960s, monsters became a pictorial resource to re-incorporate a figuration that seemed outdated without moving away from the avenues opened by abstraction on both sides of the Atlantic and its accompanying existentialist language.¹ One of the painters who ascribed to such a trend was Antonio Saura, the Spanish *informalist* painter who, from the late 1950s onward, turned monsters into an idiosyncratic trait of his oeuvre.

In the early 1950s when Antonio Saura began to exhibit in Spain, the country's art scene was still immersed in poverty because of the geopolitical isolationism and strong censorship imposed by Francisco Franco's dictatorship—the totalitarian regime that dominated Spain's politics from the end of its Civil War in 1939 until Franco's death in 1975. Escaping the country's precarious situation and the challenges Saura

¹ Frances Morris, *Paris Post War: Art and Existentialism 1945-55* (London: Tate Gallery, 1993); Nancy Jachec, "'The Space between Art and Political Action': Abstract Expressionism and Ethical Choice in Postwar America 1945-1950," *Oxford Art Journal* 14, no. 2 (1991).

faced to exhibit his work, he relocated to Paris between 1954-5. In the French capital, Saura's stylistic evolution rose from an automatist style close to Surrealism—consider, for example, his 1950s work *The Angel's Rapture*²—to an *informalist*-type of abstraction more akin to the prevailing trends in the French capital. As can be observed in works like *Shroud* (1955)³ or *Fallen Leaves* (1955)⁴, Saura did not only incorporate into his painting the spontaneity of the gesture, but also the material possibilities of the painting techniques *grattage*, dripping, or collage, that were so common amongst the *informalist* artists like Jean Fautrier, Jean Dubuffet, or Georges Mathieu.⁵ Upon his return to Spain, the Spanish artist founded the art collective *El Paso*⁶ with other abstract painters such as Manolo Millares or Rafael Canogar, becoming one of the most prominent figures of contemporary Spanish art.

Unlike other abstract artists of the time, Saura never embraced absolute abstraction. Although he engaged with it during and after his Parisian journey, he never ceased to experiment with figuration by painting deformed bodily shapes, as seen in *Black Lady II* (1954)⁷ or *Spanish Dancer* (1954)⁸. In this way, by the early 1960s, Saura had already established the main repertoire of motifs for his monsters: portraits, crucifixions, full-body nudes, and images of crowds characterized by human bodies, or gloomily deformed animals. These distortions would end up being the most

² Antonio Saura, *The Angel's Rapture*, 1950, oil on canvas, 33 x 50 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/rapto-angel-angels-rapture>.

³ Antonio Saura, *Shroud*, 1954, mixed media on paperboard, 74.7 x 53.3 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/sudario-shroud>.

⁴ Antonio Saura, *Fallen Leaves*, 1955, oil and grattage on paper, 25.8 x 38.3 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/hojarasca-fallen-leaves>.

⁵ Martine Heredia, *Tàpies, Saura, Millares: l'Art informel en Espagne* (Vincennes: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2013), 6.

⁶ As art historians Patricia Mayayo and Jorge Luis Marzo have pointed out, *El Paso* art collective represented the culmination of an abstract-expressionist Spanish art during the 1950s. Although its triumph happened while informalism was already decaying in the international scene, *El Paso* functioned as a key piece in the modernization of the Spanish art scene after the immediate post-war years. See: Jorge Luis Marzo and Patricia Mayayo, *Arte en España (1939 -2015). Ideas, prácticas, políticas* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2015), 184-185.

⁷ Antonio Saura, *Black Lady II*, 1954, synthetic paint and oil on paper, 54.5 x 39.5 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/dama-negra-ii-black-lady-ii>.

⁸ Antonio Saura, *Spanish Dancer*, 1954, synthetic paint, ink and oil on paper, 40 x 27.5 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collection/artwork/bailaora-spanish-dancer>.

recognizable characteristics of his work.⁹ Until his death in 1998, Saura would not only paint and draw these monstrous figures, but also write about them in the numerous essays he published about his own work where he would directly refer to his creations as monsters, and relate them to what he coined as the painter's "cruel gaze."¹⁰ In this article, I analyze Saura's monsters and his theory of the "cruel look," considering the context in which they emerged—the Francoist dictatorship—and the Spanish pictorial tradition they referred to. Multiple scholars have already pointed out that Saura's figures could be interpreted as a reflection of Spain's precarious reality, as a cry for freedom, or as a form of dissidence against the regime. However, these contributions have focused on the political significance of his work without considering the aesthetic theories and the formal qualities that characterize it. Conversely, the scholarship and art criticism that have analyzed the formal complexities of Saura's work have ignored its political implications. Departing from Jacques Rancière's conception of the "politics of aesthetics,"¹¹ I intend to amend this cleavage between the formal and political dimensions of Saura's painting in order to show how the aesthetics of his monsters and his "cruel look" functioned as a strategy to ideologically destabilize the Francoist dictatorship. By analyzing the deformations that Saura made of some of the most important artworks in Spain's tradition, I argue that Saura found in these works certain "forms of visibility and intelligibility"¹² that challenged the artistic discourse that the Francoist regime had imposed since the early 1950s. Saura's monsters especially contested Franco's conception of the Spanish Baroque, and exorcised it from the ideological conservatism that the regime had conferred on it in order to resignify it in a very strategic way.

THE AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF SAURA'S MONSTERS

The scholarship on post-Civil War Spanish art has provided two main interpretations about the presence of monstrous figures in Saura's paintings. On the one hand, art historians relate Saura's deformed figures to his aesthetic program and what he called "the painter's cruel gaze." For Saura, the cruel gaze referred to a particular way of

⁹ José Manuel García Perera, "Antonio Saura y la mirada destructora. El monstruo debajo de nosotros," *Boletín del Museo e Instituto Camón Aznar*, no. 115 (2017).

¹⁰ Antonio Saura's most important articles and essays have been compiled in many different publications, the most important ones include: Antonio Saura, *Fijeza. Ensayos* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, 1999); Antonio Saura, *Crónicas, Artículos* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, 2000); and Antonio Saura, *Escritura como pintura. Sobre la experiencia pictórica (1950-1994)* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg/Círculo de Lectores, 2004).

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (Autumn 2009).

¹² *Ibid.*, 5.

looking that the modern artist possessed, which he employed to overcome the equivalence between representation and mimesis. Instead of providing meaning to reality by copying it, the cruel gaze schematizes and deforms the real—letting forms emerge, appear, and explode from the act of painting.¹³ The undefined, ambiguous, and monstrous figures that the modern painter produced were thus interpreted as an incarnation of the “paradoxical beauty”¹⁴ created from the transgression of all aesthetic laws.

This interpretation of Saura’s monsters took shape in the late 1960s thanks to Saura himself and to art critics who were close to him, such as Georges Boudaille—collaborator of the French art magazine *Cimaise*, one of the main centers of post-war French abstraction, or José Ayllón—the Spanish art critic who founded *El Paso* group with Saura. In the essays they wrote for his exhibition catalogues, Saura’s cruel gaze and its monsters were not seen as the mere result of a gratuitous iconoclasm or a destructive outrage. Saura’s monsters were a “prise de position”¹⁵ that interpellated the spectator due to their visual aggressiveness and to the art lineages they invoked. As modern pictorial elements, his monsters inherited Cubism’s and Surrealism’s efforts to disassemble reality, and therefore, possessed a “demystifying force”¹⁶ that resonated with the existentialist and phenomenological tone that art had for the French *informalists*. Regarding the painter’s origin, Saura’s “blasphemy paintings,”¹⁷ as Boudaille called them, were also very much Spanish: they were the utmost expression of a “Spanish Expressionism,”¹⁸ a “Hispanic Spirit,”¹⁹ or a “Spanish Demon”²⁰ that went together with the burlesque, sarcastic, and free-spirit attitude that painters like Francisco de Goya, Diego de Velázquez, or Pablo Picasso also possessed. On the other hand, scholars and critics have also pointed out the important role that Spain’s authoritarian politics played in Saura’s monsters when he started painting them. In this second interpretative branch, Saura’s monsters have been read in multiple ways. They can be “allegorical vehicles” of the unrest and discomfort produced by the

¹³ Jacques Terrasa, “Les citations monstrueuses dans l’œuvre d’Antonio Saura,” *Cahiers d’études romanes*, no. 5 (2001): 165.

¹⁴ Francisco Calvo Serraller, “Look to The Ladies,” in *Antonio Saura: Damas* (Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2005), 182.

¹⁵ Georges Boudaille, *Antonio Saura* (Paris: Cimaise, Décembre 1967 – Janvier 1968).

¹⁶ José Ayllón, *Antonio Saura* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 1969).

¹⁷ Boudaille, *Antonio Saura*.

¹⁸ Ayllón, *Antonio Saura*.

¹⁹ Waldemar George, “Saura et la Naissance de la Tragédie,” in *Antonio Saura, Retratos imaginarios* (Madrid: Galería Juana Mordó, 1972).

²⁰ Claude Roy, “Trois visions de Quevedo-Saura,” in *Antonio Saura, Retratos imaginarios* (Madrid: Galería Juana Mordó, 1972).

Francoist dictatorship, a “sarcastic and humorous platform”²¹ for lamenting the Spanish social and political circumstances during the dictatorship, but also part of a “demystifying”²² strategy against the regime, and a way to “delegitimize”²³ the Spanish stereotypes that Francoism promoted. This link between Spain’s social reality and the painter’s monsters also began to be defended during the 1960s and the 1970s, especially by the most politically aware art critics of the time, such as the Spaniards Vicente Aguilera-Cerni and José María Moreno Galván, or the French Raoul Jean-Moulin.²⁴

It is worth bearing in mind, however, that the painter’s position towards this politicized reading of his work was ambiguous. Indeed, Saura frequently insisted on not being characterized only as the painter of post-Civil War Spain, and in his writings, he intensely developed a conception of his artwork and his Spanish artistic referents that went beyond their nationality and tended towards the idea of a universal art.²⁵ Yet despite these claims, he cultivated an anti-Francoist position under the regime. In the 1950s, after participating in exhibitions organized by the regime – especially ones that traveled abroad, such as the Spanish Pavilion of the 1958 Venice Biennial–Saura vehemently cut ties with the regime.²⁶ From that moment on, he would never get involved in any official Francoist act, and would collaborate in openly anti-Francoist exhibitions outside of Spain, such as *España Libre* [*Free Spain*], an itinerant show that traveled around Italy in 1964 that is nowadays considered as the most radical critique against the Spanish dictatorship of the time.²⁷

²¹ Fernando Herrero Matostes, “Antonio Saura’s Monstrifications: The Monstrous Body, Melancholia and The Modern Spanish Tradition” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2014), 83.

²² Mónica Núñez Laiseca, *Arte y política en la España del desarrollismo (1962-1968)* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2006), 34.

²³ Iñigo Sarriguarte, “Deslegitimando los estereotipos pictóricos españoles: de Equipo Crónica a Antonio Saura,” *Aisthesis*, no. 53 (2013): 53-72.

²⁴ Vicente Aguilera Cerni “Saura y Arroyo,” in *La Nuova Figurazione* (Florence: Valechi, 1963); José María Moreno Galván “La heterodoxia de Saura,” in *Antonio Saura, obra gráfica* (Santa Cruz de Tenerife: Colegio de Arquitectos de Canarias, 1973); Raoul Jean-Moulin, “Saura ou la peinture d’agitation,” in *Les lettres françaises*, no. 959, Paris, 14-20 March 1963, 10.

²⁵ Julián Díaz Sánchez, “Goya según Antonio Saura,” in *Goya y su contexto: Actas del seminario internacional celebrado en la Institución los días 27, 28 y 29 de octubre de 2011* (España: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2013), 447.

²⁶ For a detailed study about the relationship between abstract art and the Francoist apparatus see: Julián Díaz Sánchez, *La idea de arte abstracto en la España de Franco* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2013).

²⁷ *España libre: esposizione d’arte spagnola contemporanea* (Rimini: Grafiche Gattei, 1964). For a general study about anti-francoist antiavant-garde art and criticism see: Paula Barreiro López, *Avant-Garde and Criticism in Francoist Spain* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017).

Saura asserted that his monsters were not representations of Franco's Spain, although as he stated, they were "loaded with a certain air of protest."²⁸ In fact, as soon as 1962, he would be one of the first to write about the relation between his deformed paintings and the visual imagery that surrounded Spain's war history:

[...] an image [Saura's monster painting] that, as that of the shot man with the raised hands and white shirt, or that of Goya, or that of the mother in Picasso's *Guernica*, can be transformed into a tragic symbol of our times.²⁹

Through the depiction of some of his monsters with a despairing open arms position, as it happens with *Scream no. 7* (1959)³⁰, Saura associated his work with some of the most emblematic images of the Spanish Civil War—Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier* (1936) and Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)—as well as one of the masterworks of Spanish art history – Francisco de Goya's *The Third of May 1808* (1814). Saura's own conception of the cruel look completely refuted the possibility of copying reality, and thus, his monstrous paintings could not be considered as a mimetic representation of the Spanish conflict. Stated otherwise, his monsters could not be identified as victims of the conflict or Franco's dictatorship. As I will argue in the following pages, the protest character of his paintings did not arise from the reference to the Spanish Civil war. It was from Saura's hermeneutical approach to Spain's art history that his vicious painting would become anti-Francoist.

VERY SPANISH MONSTERS: SAURA'S CRUEL LOOK AND THE SPANISH TRADITION

One of the most important elements to consider when interpreting the political aspects of Saura's monsters and his conception of the "cruel gaze" is his repertoire of figures. Using painting, lithography, and other graphic work techniques, Saura deformed unknown characters—usually identified by the title as female figures—and known historical characters, who tended to be important figures of Spain's art, literature, and imperial political history. For instance, in the lithograph series *History of Spain* from

²⁸ Antonio Saura, "El Prado imaginario," in Antonio Saura, *Crónicas* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2000), 208.

²⁹ "[...] imagen que, como el fusilado de las manos en alto y la camisa blanca, de Goya, o la madre del *Guernica*, de Picasso, puede transformarse en un símbolo trágico de nuestra época." Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine. Original autography by Antonio Saura, in *Saura* (Rome: Edizioni Galleria Odyssea, 1962).

³⁰ Antonio Saura, *Scream no. 7*, 1959, oil on canvas, 250 x 200 cm. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/coleccion/obra/grito-no-7>.

1964, Saura portrayed rulers like the monarchs Isabel I of Castile (1451-1504)³¹, who completed the *Reconquista* [Reconquest] of Spain, expelling the Muslims and Jews from the country, and supporting the financing of Columbus' trip in the 15th century, and Philip the Second (1527-1598)³², who reigned over Spain when the empire reached its maximum expansion in the late 16th century, or Ferdinand the Seventh (1578-1637)³³, who reigned during the early-nineteenth century, and was overthrown by French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte in 1808. This series would also include a portrait of the Spanish nineteenth-century painter Francisco de Goya (1746-1828)³⁴—who was Ferdinand the Second's court painter—in the same way that he would later paint other Spanish art masters such as Diego de Velázquez (1599-1660) or El Greco (1541-1614). Saura would not only refer to these artists by portraying them, but also through the “monstrous reinterpretation” of their most emblematic works, particularly those that he considered as portraits.³⁵ For instance, in Velázquez's case, Saura would paint countless reinterpretations of *The Crucified Christ* (1632)³⁶, whereas in Goya's case, his preferred artwork was *The Drowning Dog* (1820-1823).³⁷

Considering Saura's anti-Francoist stance, it is not by chance that most of the monsters he painted referred to historical figures and Spanish artists that Franco had claimed as symbols of Spanish national identity. Since the 1940s—the decade Saura began to paint, and which corresponded to the most extreme, repressive, and autarkic period of the Francoist dictatorship—Franco's regime had projected an idea of “Spanishness” based on a Catholic patriotism, authoritarian conservatism, and imperial triumphalism.³⁸ To support this understanding of Spanish identity, the Francoist intellectual circles recovered the most notable figures and events of the Spanish

³¹ Antonio Saura, *Isabel la Católica*, 1964, lithograph, 46.3 x 36 cm. Antonio Saura Foundation, Geneva: <http://www.antoniosaura.org/sp/su-obra-gra-fica-1964>.

³² Antonio Saura, *Felipe II*, 1964, lithograph, 47.7 x 32 cm. Antonio Saura Foundation, Geneva: <http://www.antoniosaura.org/sp/su-obra-gra-fica-1964>.

³³ Antonio Saura, *Fernando VII*, 1964, lithograph, 49 x 38.8 cm. Antonio Saura Foundation, Geneva: <http://www.antoniosaura.org/sp/su-obra-gra-fica-1964>.

³⁴ Olivier Weber-Cafilisch and Patrick Cramer, *Antonio Saura: l'oeuvre imprimé: catalogue raisonné* (Genève: Cramer, 2000), 86.

³⁵ Saura, “El Prado Imaginario,” 245.

³⁶ Diego de Velázquez, *The Crucified Christ*, 1632, oil on canvas, 248 x 169 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-crucified-christ/72cbb57e-f622-4531-9b25-27ff0a9559d7>.

³⁷ Francisco de Goya, *The Drowning Dog*, 1820-23, mixed method on mural transferred to canvas, 131 x 79cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-drowning-dog/4ea6a3d1-00ee-49ee-b423-ab1c6969bca6>.

³⁸ Miguel Ángel Giménez Martínez, “El corpus ideológico del franquismo: principios originarios y elementos de renovación,” *Estudios Internacionales*, no. 180 (2015).

Empire and of its cultural Golden Age: the Baroque period.³⁹ From the use of the imperial caravel on the commercials of the Spanish airline Iberia to the production of a series of Velázquez's stamps to commemorate his centenary, the reference to Spain's imperial times became one of the most common visual and spatial elements of the dictatorship. The meditative sacredness and fervent character of the Baroque was also consistently invoked in Francoist public processions, festivities, and architecture, as happened for instance at the *Valley of the Fallen*, a monumental memorial site that Franco built near El Escorial—the historical residency of the Spanish monarchy devised by Philip the Second—where he was buried in 1975. In this way, Francoism exploited the Baroque as a commonplace that conflated the austerity of the Spanish kingdom, the devotion and commitment of the Counter-Reformation, the expressive passion of the Catholic character, and the genius of masters like Diego Velázquez, El Greco, or Francisco de Goya, even if the latter was a Romantic painter in historiographic terms.⁴⁰

Following the Francoist ideology, the Baroque was not only a cultural time period, but it involved a transhistorical spiritual component that defined the Spanish essence.⁴¹ In this sense, it became a useful cultural instrument that also shaped art criticism under Franco. The regime-sponsored magazine *Mundo Hispánico* expended much ink on the masters of the Spanish tradition, and even devoted special issues to them. In the volume focusing on Goya, the painter was revindicated as one of the icons of "Spain's Baroqueness," whose work was "the face and the cross of our [the Spanish] national genius," "abrupt and disconcerting" like Spain itself.⁴² Goya was considered as the natural continuation of another master, Diego de Velázquez, whose paintings were also read as the utmost expression of the "Iberian lineage of the Baroque", which also had a barbarian essence marked by a genuine, passionate, rampant, and conceptual character.⁴³

For the Francoist intellectuals, this narrow-minded but malleable conception of Spain's Baroque essence was even identifiable in the Spanish abstract painting of the 1950s. Although avant-garde and experimental artists were demonized and persecuted during the 1940s, the end of World-War II forced the regime to embrace the abstract

³⁹ Tobias Locker, "The Baroque in the Construction of a National Culture in Francoist Spain: An Introduction," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 91, no. 5 (2014).

⁴⁰ Paula Barreiro López, "Reinterpreting the Past: The Baroque Phantom during Francoism," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 91, no. 5 (2014).

⁴¹ Eugeni d'Ors, *Lo Barroco* (Madrid: Aguilar, 1944).

⁴² Enrique Lafuente Ferrari, "Cara y cruz," *Mundo Hispánico*, Madrid, no. 164 (1961): 9.

⁴³ Ernesto Giménez Caballero, *Arte y estado* (Madrid: Gráfica Universal, 1935), 15. Cited in: Barreiro López, "Reinterpreting the Past."

art trends that shook the Western art scene.⁴⁴ Through a solid campaign of cultural diplomacy, the Francoist cultural institutions acted as one of the patrons of the *informalist* Spanish artists who were starting to paint at that time. The work of Manolo Millares, Antoni Tàpies, or Antonio Saura was sponsored by the regime at an international level, being exhibited at the most important museums and biennials of the time, as I have previously mentioned. International visibility, however, came at a price: their *informalist* work was presented through the ideals of spiritualism, solemnity, realism, and expressionism that constituted Franco's version of Spanishness and the Baroque.

AN ALTERNATIVE SPANISH AESTHETICS DURING THE DICTATORSHIP

Perhaps as a victim of the circumstances, or as a willful–yet not uncritical–collaborator of Spain's cultural apparatus, Saura was a firsthand testimony of the Francoist use of the Baroque. As it has been argued by the Spanish art historian Valeriano Bozal, Saura's perception of the regime's ideological and cultural manipulation clearly influenced his iconographical choices.⁴⁵ Using an iconography that invoked figures from the Spanish Golden Age and the country's imperial history, which Francoism was portraying as historical legitimation of the country's political repression, Saura caricatured the regime's mystifying reading of the country's history. However, if we consider the admiration that Saura never ceased to profess for the Spanish masters that he deformed, this satirizing gesture appears as only the surface of his paintings' dissident character. Saura did not find in Goya or Velázquez the values imposed by the regime. On the contrary, he considered the painters as pioneers of the modern artist's "cruel look."

As we can appreciate when comparing Goya's *Drowning Dog* to one of the deformations that Saura made of it—for instance, the 1963 oil on canvas *Imaginary portrait of Goya*⁴⁶—Saura brought to the limit what he valued the most about the Spanish masters' vicious painting. First, he based his monstrous paintings on what he understood as the affirmative character of an invasive conception of space. As if Saura was analyzing through his own painting the way in which Goya created the effect of emergence of the dog fighting against the sand that sucks him out, Saura distinguishes the three compositional parts of Goya's *Dog*—the sand, the background, and the head—and reinterprets them. He effaces the movement of Goya's background and soil by

⁴⁴ Genoveva Tusell, "The Internationalisation of Spanish Abstract Art (1950-1962)," *Third Text* 20, no. 2 (2006).

⁴⁵ Valeriano Bozal, *Estudios de arte contemporáneo, II. Temas de arte español del siglo XX*. (Madrid: Antonio Machado libros, 2006), 290.

⁴⁶ Antonio Saura, *Portrait imaginaire de Goya, 1963*, oil on canvas, 245 x 195 cm. Antonio Saura Foundation, Geneva: <http://www.antoniosaura.org/sp/su-obra-pintura-goya>.

painting them in a solid light gray and black, and he accentuates the importance of the head. Saura's animal is larger, less identifiable and painted with aggressive brushstrokes of gray, black, white, and ochre tones. By not only covering the soil with light and quick splits of the dog's paint, but also reconstituting the background with flatter and sharper brushstrokes, Saura emphasizes the centrality of the dog's will to emerge and conquer space.

Second, Saura focuses on the use of figuration without narration. The hybrid head that we find in his painting does not function as a narrative element. For Saura, the lack of anecdotic comment to a verifiable element of reality that Goya teaches him—it does not matter if it's a dog at all, it's just a creature—provides the image with an existential reflection about the plastic act of emerging.⁴⁷ To the postwar artist, what matters about Goya's work is how the lack of narration reinforces the image's effect of emergence. If Goya's dog is not a scene of a story, a particular moment of the tale, the notion of time that the painting is proposing distorts the limits between past, present, and future, creating a feeling of continuous flow.

This notion of time in perpetual transition that Saura adapted from Goya constitutes the painting itself as an image "in the making," as an event, happening beyond the limits of painting.⁴⁸ Saura's interpretation of Goya points out that the monstrous image derived from the master's vicious painting is a reflection on reality itself, not a duplication or a copy. Therefore, if Goya's dog is a meta-act of pictorial and existential reflection, it also resists the moralizing and religious Baroque ideology that Francoism ascribed to his work. By monsterring the monstrous image of Goya, Saura saw to dispossess it from the manipulation of the regime, re-signifying it as a disquieting reflection about the relation between reality, the human condition, and the act of painting.⁴⁹

TOWARDS AN INFORMALIST BAROQUE

Saura's monsters acted simultaneously as caricatures and homages. They were both satires of Francoism's manipulation and tributes to the amoral grotesque Saura saw in the Baroque. With this double gesture, Saura's process of resignification of the Baroque tradition did not only attack the Francoist reading of such art period, but also provided a new reading of it. Considering the existentialist and phenomenological language that surrounded Saura's writings and his plastic interpretation of the masters, we could conclude that Saura reread the Baroque through the aesthetics of the art movement that had catapulted him to fame: *informalism*. If his *informalist* paintings

⁴⁷ Saura, "El Prado imaginario," 241.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 242, 245.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 245.

were once *baroquicized* by the regime, it was now the painter's turn to *informalize* the regime's Baroque.

By deforming the masters of the monster, Saura demonstrated that Goya, Velázquez, or El Greco did not speak for Franco's Spanishness. Quite the opposite, and using the painter's own terms, the Spanish painters spoke for "the pagan element within the sacred and the aberrant side of beauty."⁵⁰ Beyond tearing down and deriding the sacred icons of the dictatorship, Saura's dissident monsters reinterpreted the politics of the Baroque's aesthetics, proposing them as a counter-model of the Francoist Spanishness. Through the deformation of the most renowned Spanish historical figures, artworks, and sacred images, the Baroque's spiritualism was redefined in terms of a secular existentialism, nourished by the rhetoric and the aesthetics of *informalism*. Saura's vicious painting became a plastic strategy that allowed him to renegotiate some of the ideological cornerstones that the Francoist regime promoted as the essence of Spain's national identity by undermining the regime's Catholic and conservative interpretation of Spain's history.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 240.

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