

A Nationally Rooted Response to Chauvinism

a response by Nathan Segura

To contemplate Antonio Saura's monster paintings is to ponder over the most appropriate grid of analysis to make sense of some of the most enigmatic artworks in the history of modern art. These paintings, which in Saura's own words, are "loaded with an air of protest," could be read in relation to the dictatorial regime imposed by General Francisco Franco in Spain from 1939 to 1975. Yet in "*Painting Viciously: Antonio Saura's Monsters and the Francoist Dictatorship (1939-1975)*," Claudia Grego March points to the issues that come with such an assumption: the artist vehemently rejected the view that his monster series was about the misery and suffering caused by the Spanish civil war and its subsequent *posguerra*. In the light of this seemingly apolitical declaration, a potentially promising avenue of interpretation for the monster paintings is one which takes into account Saura's stay in Paris from 1954 to 1955. It was in the French capital that Saura engaged with, and permanently integrated into his oeuvre, the formal concerns of Informalism, or *Art Informel*.

Considering Saura's Parisian adventure prompts us to see his monster paintings as probing the material possibilities of painting as a medium, a formal approach that stemmed from existentialist reflections about the universal and atemporal human predicament. Such a reading, however, would only do partial justice to the complexity of Saura's work. This is where Grego March's methodology comes in: aware that artists' words rarely fully reveal their ambitions, especially by someone as nuanced and circumspect as Saura, she sets out to show the ways Saura adopted *informel* techniques to make an art directed at Franco's regime. Relying on the principle that

stylistic decisions often carry political implications, Grego March performs a formal analysis that demonstrates how Saura's monster versions of Baroque and Romantic Spanish masterpieces contested and subverted their cooptation by a regime that instrumentalized the legacy left by the Old Masters (Diego de Velázquez, El Greco, Francisco Goya) to impose a conservative version of Spanishness. Her discussion of the ways Saura *informalized* the regime's *baroquicized* discourse on Spanish culture and identity makes for a fascinating and original contribution.

Art historians interested in cross-generational dialogues will particularly appreciate that Saura's "monsterized" rendering of *The Drowning Dog* by Francisco Goya (c. 1819-23) not only draws on *informel* experimentations conducted at the time, but also reflects the motifs, tones, and even the obsessions that marked the oeuvres of Old Masters celebrated by the regime. As such, this painting, like many of Saura's monsters, brings a tentative Spanish answer to a Spanish question. Because of this, scholars should distance themselves from the assumption that Saura's work was mainly the result of cross-border cosmopolitan exchanges about plastic explorations and existential thought. Such a methodological framework has also been heavily applied to the study of Latin American artists working in the 1930s and 1940s, especially those who seem to have engaged with Surrealism.

As such, if the scholarship on Frida Kahlo's (1907-54) complex relationship with Surrealism has benefitted from these distinct interpretations, studies on her compatriot María Izquierdo (1902-55) could benefit from further discussion. Acclaimed for being the first Mexican woman to exhibit her work in the United States, Izquierdo was associated throughout her career with *Los Contemporáneos*, a group of worldly avant-garde poets and art critics who promoted Mexican artists whom they felt produced "de-politicized" art that sidestepped the national trappings they saw in the Mexican mural movement. Above all, the group praised artworks that epitomized formal modernist trends.¹ Izquierdo was also a friend of Surrealist French poet Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), who stayed in her home during his 1936 trip to Mexico, and who subsequently exhibited her work in Paris. Because of these affiliations, many of Izquierdo's works have been read as conversant with avant-garde experiments conducted in Paris and in other Western capitals of modern art at the time. Notably, her still life paintings have often been considered as "surrealist-inspired" for their dream-like atmosphere and uncanny juxtapositions, as seen in the lavish presentation

¹ Adriana Zavala, "Painting in the Shadow of the Big Three," in *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*, ed. Mary Kay Vaughan and Stephen E. Lewis (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 68.

of food she staged in a deserted landscape in *“Living” Still Life* (1946)² and *“Living” Still Life with Red Snapper* (1946).³

Such an interpretation builds on Surrealist leader André Breton’s (1896-1966) famous assessment of Mexico as “the surrealist country *par excellence*”—more specifically, Breton argued that Mexico was the place where opposites reconciled.⁴ Yet contextualizing her paintings within Mexico’s socio-economic predicament at the time provides additional avenues of meaning. The 1940s were marked by the corporatization and exportation of Mexican agriculture, which President Manuel Avila Camacho (1897-1955) implemented through policies that facilitated the transfer of communal lands away from small farmers to wealthy individuals capable of mass-producing food both endemic and non-native to Mexico for an urban and global market. These politico-economic changes precipitated a massive rural exodus to urban centers.⁵ Below the ominous clouds that cover the skies of her two landscapes, Izquierdo presents viewers with an appetizing assortment of fruits. Some of them are not endemic to Mexico, and carry a symbolic charge: the apple, symbolizing sin, has been turned upside down, while the pomegranate, a symbol of fertility in the Bible, looks dried up. The two white huts in *“Living” Still Life* suggest human presence, but the farmers are nowhere to be seen. More than an uncanny contrast between modern technology and “old” provincial Mexico, the electric poles she painted in the desert of *“Living” Still Life with Red Snapper* recall one of President Camacho’s most prized achievements: his government’s staggering increase of Mexico’s electrical capacity, a project executed in service of a nation-wide modernization. Seen in this light, Izquierdo’s still-life suggests that electricity came to the Mexican countryside at a moment when farmers were selling and leaving their fields to go work in the factories of the big cities, effectively contributing to both the economic stimulation of urban centers and the “emptying” of rural Mexico.

Though such a socio-economic reading might seem nation-centric, it does not prevent critics from commenting on the ways Izquierdo’s works seem to take their cues from modern art, particularly Surrealism. In fact, these paintings suggest that Surrealism offered a set of aesthetic strategies that could be fruitfully co-opted to speak to local

² María Izquierdo, *Naturaleza viva*, 1946, oil on canvas, 45 x 55 cm. Private collection, Monterrey, Mexico: <http://www.artnet.com/artists/mar%C3%ada-izquierdo/naturaleza-viva-jZH0Rws2f2J7W7w5c2Tu9w2>.

³ María Izquierdo, *Naturaleza viva*, 1946, oil on canvas, 60 x 75 cm. Private Collection, Mexico City, Mexico: <https://en.600dpi.net/maria-izquierdo-0000677/>.

⁴ Michele Greet, *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris Between the Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 222.

⁵ Stephen Niblo, *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 4.

circumstances. Regional concerns, however, are difficult to fully discern for scholars caught up in the exhilarating international web of modern art exchanges, hence the need to descend from an aerial perspective and address concerns specific to a given cultural-geographical zone. This is certainly what Grego March has done with Saura's monsters—a series that re-configured Spanish art to respond to a Franquista discourse determined to “resolve” a conflict by force that, despite foreign meddling, was itself fundamentally Spanish. The importance of Grego March's scholarship on the subject partly stems from the fact that art made in Spain under the Franco regime has been under-studied, particularly in the English and French speaking world.

About the relations between France and Spain, filmmaker Luis Buñuel (1900-83) famously proclaimed: “It's very simple. We Spanish know everything about French culture. The French, on the other hand, know nothing of ours.”⁶ Warning against narrow-minded national self-infatuation is not sufficient though: we must continue to challenge long-lasting prejudices the public and many scholars hold regarding the “cultural wasteland” that allegedly characterize societies under dictatorships.⁷ If it is true that in times of war and authoritarianism limited relations with the outside world can curtail art production, we must not forget that cornered realities also spur resourcefulness and creativity. In this light, we can hope that the oeuvre of Saura will continue to stimulate discussions on the work of those who have made the difficult decision to stay in their troubled native land to draw on its rich artistic traditions, and of those who have adopted foreign artistic elements to comment on national events—on their own terms.

⁶ Dore Ashton, *Antonio Saura* (Paris: Galerie Lelong, 1997), 15.

⁷ Historian Jeremy Treglown explains in the preface of *Franco's Crypt: Spanish Culture and Memory Since 1936* that it was such prejudices that led him to write a book on Spanish culture under the Franco dictatorship. See: Jeremy Treglown, *Franco's Crypt: Spanish Culture and Memory Since 1936* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ashton, Dore. *Antonio Saura*. Paris: Galerie Lelong, 1997.
- Greet, Michele. *Transatlantic Encounters: Latin American Artists in Paris Between the Wars*. New Havenm CT: Yale University Press, 2018.
- Niblo, Stephen R. *Mexico in the 1940s: Modernity, Politics, and Corruption*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1999.
- Vaughan, Mary K., and Stephen E. Lewis, eds. *The Eagle and the Virgin: Nation and Cultural Revolution in Mexico, 1920-1940*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Treglown, Jeremy. *Franco's Crypt: Spanish Culture and Memory Since 1936*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.