



ESTEBAN LISA

Cardiel de los Montes, Spain: 1895

Buenos Aires, Argentina: 1983

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force
movement*

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texts:

Edward J. Sullivan:
Esteban Lisa: a view from abroad

Stéfan Leclercq:
The issue of movement and consciousness
in Esteban Lisa's painting

César Paternosto:
My encounter with Lisa

November 2, 2006 to January 19, 2007

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Esteban Lisa: a view from abroad

Edward J. Sullivan, New York University

In the winter of 1996 the Guggenheim Museum in New York organized a major exhibition dedicated to the history of abstract art. As is the case with large-scale shows in well known artistic institutions in European or North American cities such as London, Paris, Madrid, Los Angeles or New York, "Abstraction in the Twentieth Century", curated by Mark Rosenthal, implied a 'definition' of non-objective painting and sculpture. Seeking to establish paradigms and set the parameters for the creation of the initial artistic impulses that created an acceptance of this mode of vision, the Guggenheim exhibition concentrated on a fairly reduced number of artists.¹

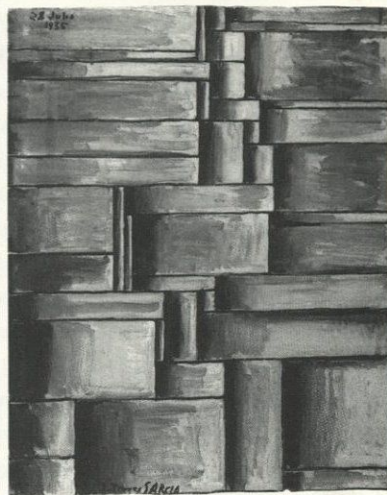
In the selection of the work as well as the catalogue essays, links were established between such initiators of non-objectivity as Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, Piet Mondrian, Robert Delaunay, Frantisek Kupka and other Europeans with the later abstractionists from both Western and Eastern Europe and the United States. Cubism was examined in the texts as a guiding force in the creation of an openness to abstraction and the gradual development of gestural art in the hands of the North American abstract expressionists (Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, Clifford Still and others). The Hard-edge abstraction of Ellsworth Kelly as well as the Minimalism of Richard Serra, Donald Judd and others was scrupulously scrutinized for its role in the development of non-objective art.

The exhibition received very mixed critical reviews. One of the principal arguments against its effectiveness was its insistence upon an essentially narrow view of the meanings and the history of abstraction, particularly as it touched upon

9. Composición, c. 1941-1944

Front side.
Oil on paper board, 11 7/8 x 9 1/16 in.
(Detail).

geographical boundaries. The omissions in the Guggenheim exhibition followed similar lacunae in some other of the vast thematic survey shows of Modern art presented by such museums as the Royal Academy of Art in London or the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The contributions by Latin American artists in this field were completely ignored, not even mentioned in the catalogue, with the exception of a passing reference to Joaquín Torres-García as a disciple of Piet Mondrian and 'De Stijl.'



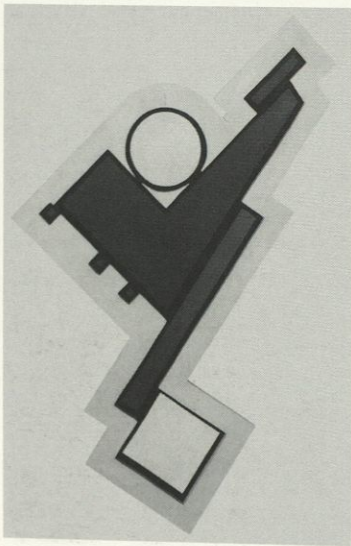
J. Torres-García
Structure, 1935
Oil on board, 31 x 26 in.
Private collection.

While advances have certainly been made in so far as the recognition of the participation of Latin American artists in the development of a western vocabulary of visual expression, the presence of artists from the Spanish and Portuguese speaking parts of the Americas in the international museum arena continues to be marginalized to exhibitions dedicated specifically to "Latin American Art."

In terms of the development of abstraction in the first two thirds of the twentieth century, one may point to the achievements of some of the most radical innovators in, for example, Argentina (the members of the "Madi" and other concrete groups) or in Brazil (Lygia Clark, Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, etc.), as harbingers of

many of the techniques and visual recourses utilized later by abstract artists in North America and Europe.

Torres-García certainly played a critical role in sensitizing artists in the Southern Cone to both the visual and psychological potentials of non-objectivity. Drawing as much upon his familiarity with the European avant-garde as with his enthusiasm for the abstract motifs of pre-hispanic design, Torres created analogues for the essences of the varied forms of visual expression in the Americas. Somewhat later, many concrete and kinetic artists in Colombia, Venezuela as well as Argentina and Uruguay (to name only a few Latin American nations), established norms that spread not only to neighboring artistic centers but to Europe and the U.S. as well, within the context of the 'artistic migrations' that were so common beginning in the 1950s and 60s.



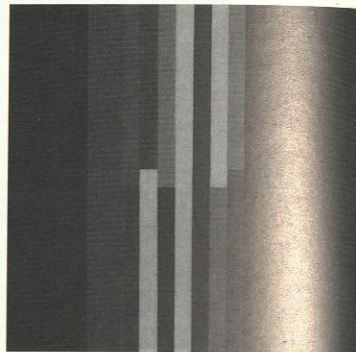
Rhod Rothfuss
Untitled, 1946
MALBA-Costantini Collection,
Buenos Aires.

In the case of Mexico, the hegemony of figuration as the chief means of visual communication, was undermined after muralism (the most well-known Mexican movement of the earlier part of the century) reached its point of self-immolation in the late 1940s. At this time even some of the original members of the Mexican mural movement, such as David Alfaro Siqueiros and especially José Clemente Orozco approached the portals of abstraction in terms that were uniquely

personal, not dependent upon direct stimulation from their European or American colleagues. In fact, an examination of some of the late images by Orozco (such as his famous "Metaphysical Landscape" of 1948, to cite only the best known example), shock us with their communicative power in an almost completely non-objective mode. By the year of his death he had all but abandoned the opportunities for direct social protest that the muralist format had afforded him and veered instead into the path of the more spiritually committed domains of abstraction.

In fact, many members of the following generation of Mexican painters were to travel a road less littered with the remains of realism's detritus. Those artists who came to maturity in the 1950s and 60s comprise a group who have become known collectively as the generation of the "Ruptura" for their wholesale rejection of the by then exhausted tenets of the dominant artistic forces of the postrevolutionary era in Mexico. International forms of abstraction were studied both within Mexico and abroad, at a time when travel and foreign residencies were becoming more the norm than the exception. Lilia Carrillo, Manuel Felquerez, Gunther Gerszo and others lead the direction toward a greater engagement with non-objectivity. Their quest persuaded them to absorb and re-invent stimuli from each other and from abroad.

In reviewing the many currents of abstraction in the Latin American countries, we turn a corner into the most unexpected path of an abstract intimiste, Esteban Lisa. In their recent text on



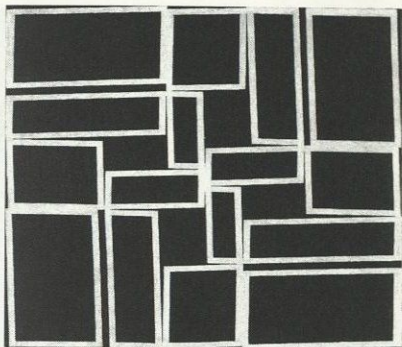
Tomás Maldonado
Untitled, 1951
Oil on canvas, 19 11/16 x 19 11/16 in.
Patricia Phelps de Cisneros
collection, Caracas.

the painter's career, Nelly Perazzo and Mario H. Gradowczyk did an excellent job in situating Lisa within a broad context of early twentieth century abstraction.²

In measuring the contribution of this Spanish/Argentine master we must indeed take into account his similarities and divergences from a spectrum that fluctuates from references to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque (especially in the works created in the 1930s in which Lisa appears to be particularly interested in the concept of passage, that is the variation of color and tonal intensity from one segment of the images, linking it to the next) to the spiritual similarities with some of the members of the Russian avant-garde (Malevich, Popova, Rozanova and others). Perazzo et. al. also state, quite correctly, that there exist affinities between the work of Lisa and some of his older North American contemporaries.

This is particularly true in the case of the relationship between Lisa and Arthur Dove. A recent retrospective exhibition of the work of Dove, a key figure in the development of American art of the 1920s, 30s and 40s at the Whitney Museum in New York, demonstrated this artist's key role in advanced art in the U.S.³ I believe that there are many parallels between the work of Dove and Lisa; more so than between the art of Lisa and some of the better known and more celebrated abstract painters of a later moment in North American art history (Pollock, De Kooning, etc.).

One of the most outstanding features which immediately

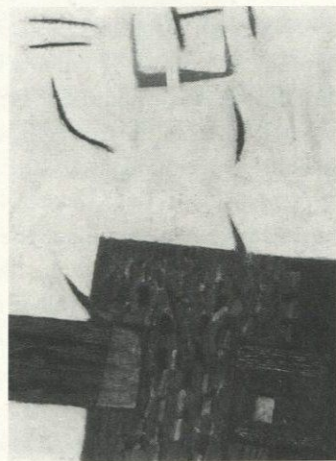


Hélio Oiticica
White Crossing Red — Metaschema, 1958
 Oil on canvas, 20 1/16 x 23 5/8 in.
 Adolpho Leirner collection, San Pablo.

becomes apparent to the viewer is the value placed by Lisa on intimacy. Lisa's paintings exude a very special element of privacy. One can get to know them only when studying that in an unhurried fashion, becoming ever more attuned to the subtle nuances present in each stroke of the brush and variegation of color.

The qualities of both intimacy and subtlety must be especially valued in twentieth century painting. In earlier epochs of the history of western art there existed the notion of the separation of the genres. From the Renaissance until relatively recently, there were specific categories of history painting, religious painting, portraiture, painting of everyday scenes, etc. The artists of these respective categories knew innately that they had to respect the limits of physical size and emotional communication in their works. With the breaking down of these barriers in the twentieth century, intimate proportion and quiet connection with the viewer has vastly and dramatically diminished in art.

In more recent times largeness is often equated with concepts of 'impressiveness' or even equated with quality. Rarely do we have the opportunity—or the pleasure—of walking into an exhibition of works of art of discreet size. We have sadly lost sight, to a great extent, of the positive criteria placed upon images that speak to us in a soft voice, whispering instead of shouting, intimating instead of declaring. With this in mind, the art of Esteban Lisa may come as a surprise or even as a shock to those who 'discover' it for the first time.



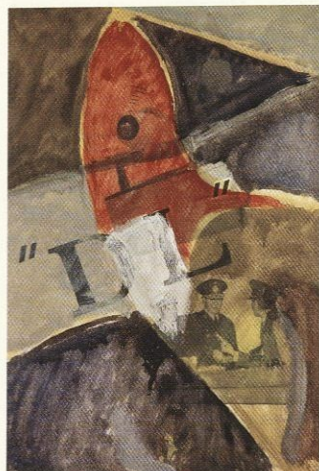
Gunther Gerszo
Hommage to spring, 1958
 Oil on panel, 32 x 20 in.
 Private collection.



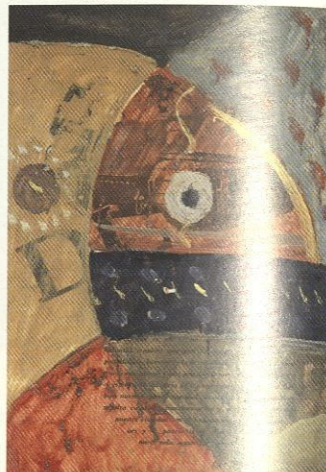
Arthur Dove.
Coloured planes (Formation II), 1942
 Wax emulsion on canvas, 24 x 32 in.
 Private collection. Courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York.

We often have the sensation that the artist was alone in a diminutive studio, communing with nothing but his own inner monologues as he painted these works. Each of Lisa's paintings represents a total engagement with the art he is creating. While they are indeed images which communicate specific messages about form and light to the viewer, we inevitably have the sensation, when looking at them, that we are somewhat of a voyeur, observing symbolic likenesses of such intensity and personal meaning to the artist that we feel somewhat disconcerted to be in their presence. I find this also to be true when examining the works of both Paul Klee and Alejandro Xul Solar, artists of such uniquely intimate intensity who create a spiritual as well as a visual energy in their work that extends beyond the normal boundaries of optic expression.

Lisa is also a chameleon-like artist. Just when we think we understand his work, he introduces confounding changes or



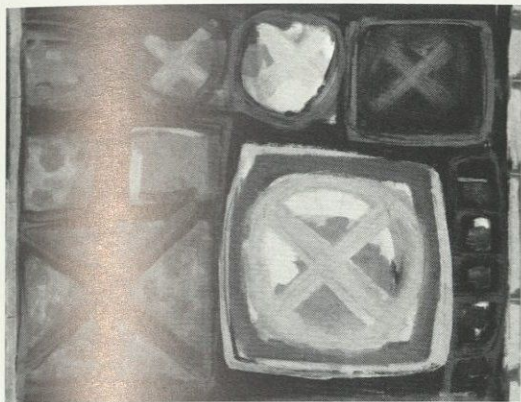
Esteban Lisa
Composición, 1945
 Oil on paper, 10 3/4 x 7 3/8 in
 Private collection, Buenos Aires



Esteban Lisa
Composición, 1945
 Oil on paper, 10 3/4 x 7 3/8 in
 Private collection, Buenos Aires

transformations. In the 1940s the artist turned from his typical employment of cardboard as a support for his works to the use of paper, and, in some instances, pages of books torn from their bindings. Enigmatic letters appear within the dense network of lines and planes of color. While, in a sense, this use of individual letters or words ultimately derives from the Cubist's introduction of fragments of words in their paintings, this recourse in Lisa arises from another, less obvious origin.

In several other instances (in at least two works dating from 1945) Lisa painted over a surface with a photographic representation of General Perón or a fragment of a military tank together with the letters "D L." While these images may have specific meanings in relation to the moment in Argentine history in which they were created, in the larger art historical scheme of things, they anticipate (in the fragmentary quality of the photographic detail, in the mutilation of the integrity of the



Guido Llinás
Black painting, 1970
Oil on canvas, 19 3/4 x 25 1/2 in.
Private collection.

photograph with smears of paint, with the use of letters and other collage-like elements) the 'radical' inventions of Robert Rauschenberg and other artists associated with the international Pop movement in the 1960s.

I am most fascinated by the development of Lisa's career in his late years. In the 1950s his use of line becomes more violently fragmented than ever before. He applies paint in a completely different way, with attention to the spontaneous effect as well as the incorporation of sets of spiral, swirl and dagger-like forms, reminiscent of many twentieth century artists who have incorporated aspects of so-called 'primitive' imagery into their art. While similarities to the art of Pollock and De Kooning have been mentioned in the past, we might look further afield for spiritual affinities in the work of other contemporary painters. The North American artist Adolph Gottlieb was also intensely concerned with the incorporation of abstract elements that bore certain relationships with the signs used in the art of Native American peoples.

We might also make some comparisons with the work of artists like Wifredo Lam or other Cuban abstractionists such as the members of the group known as 'Los Once' (whose careers developed in Havana at the precise moment that Lisa was transforming his own painting). Artists like Guido Llinás followed the path forged by Lam with his interest in veiled references to the mythology of Afro-Cuban religions. This is not to say that there are any specific correlations between the art of Lisa and these figures. I would simply like to place the Argentine master in a wider context of international experimentation with gestural abstraction and the creation of various forms of hermetic visual vocabularies.

Esteban Lisa is, in sum, a figure of intense attraction. His art may be observed from many angles and many vantage points. He is an artist whose experimentation and visual solutions are completely coherent with many similar preoccupations in the part of artists throughout the western world. Nonetheless, his small paintings exert a uniqueness and a magnetic charm very much their own. Uncovering the development of Lisa's art is like observing the flowering of a rare plant. Its surprises are endless, but we must look at the art with microscopic attention.

New York, 1998

Notes

1. Mark Rosenthal (ed.) *Abstraction in the Twentieth Century* (exhibition catalogue), New York, Guggenheim Museum, 1996.
2. Nelly Perazzo and Mario H. Gradowczyk, *Esteban Lisa (1895-1983)*, Buenos Aires, 1997. For a general discussion of the development of Argentine art in the 20th century see the essay by Marcelo Pacheco in Edward J. Sullivan (ed.) *Latin American Art in the Twentieth Century*, London and Madrid, 1996.
3. Whitney Museum of American Art, *Arthur Dove* (exhibition catalogue), New York, 1998.