

Criollos en Paris

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In months of August, September and October of last year there was an exhibition of works by Latin Americans in Paris at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. These painters and sculptors had conceived the idea of a collective exhibition long ago or so earlier during friendly discussions and eventually an organizing committee had been formed, together with a jury to select works. The artists who were still in Paris or whose reputations were high in that place were invited (Tamayo, Matta, Lam, Zañartu, and Di Teana) to give weight to the project.

It is clear that the works would be selected from those who had survived a particular European jungle, but inevitably as the project became more concrete there were talented travellers who wished to exhibit in Paris and the various embassies; their presence was made evident as all their addresses in the catalogue. This familiar situation occurs in Paris and is not characteristic of Latin Americans only. Why not? Simply because these painters and sculptors who have reached Paris in Paris have done so by accepting the material hardships and the spicacious gaze of so many and varied other painters and sculptors too. Paris has a rather smug common mercantile climate of these days, but the spiritual and intellectual outcrops have not been completely buried. In Paris they truly discovered themselves and the question of art is evoked in a poem by the Peruvian Cesar Vallejo (d. 1938), 'Paris' which appears in the catalogue, together with poems by Guala, Guillen and others.

There was a large and untidy but, even so, at least four tendencies or movements were to be noticed. The first of these and the most easily identifiable was the concrete art group in which many works appeared as impeccably constructed laboratory test pieces for visual perception (Tomasello, La, Sobrino, Le Parc). In some of these, the visual situation of a surface as the spectator moved; in others a simple motive power was at work. The most successful creator of the kinetic structure which depends upon movement must be the Venezuelan Soto, who came to Paris in 1955. The recent works of Soto are rather difficult to understand as he is now using very slender materials and delicate movements. The members of this group acknowledge the guiding influence of Vasarely and the sense of a team spirit, as is stated in the catalogue of an earlier show by Denise René in January 1961. In both exhibitions a curious situation was noted in many of the works which I would like to call that of the apprentice. It seems to me that Latin Americans have not yet come to the modern science, but are enchanted with its poetry and surprise themselves in the construction of these visual machines. Although Marino di Teana of this group, his iron sculptures belong to another tradition; at times they are even totemistic within the austere language of forms which he handles so well; as with the 'Victoire de Samothrace'.

The second tendency in this exhibition might be called that of the neo-Dada New York stylists. As, for example, the Rauschenbergian iron bedstead of the Argentinian Luis-Felipe Noé, with its hæmonic sheets. The Mexican Alberto Gironella exhibited a wooden doll 'Infanta' which was an exotic equivalent of a work by Peter Blake. The rather naïve collage of blue jeans by Alirio Oramas could not bear comparison with one of the photographs by Nigel Henderson of a similar garment. The Venezuelan Peran Ermíny showed some collage surfaces out of which a figure would emerge; these were successful and I think more orientated to Milan than to New York.

The third and the fourth tendencies are difficult to define or categorize if one is not an art critic. However, the attitude of the painters in these two tendencies may possibly be implied. Certainly the works of the third tendency were the most powerful and impressive in the exhibition; they were mythological, indeed surreal. The work which dominated the exhibition was a large frieze-like canvas about 30ft. long by Matta with a rather (for him) rugged surface and low tonality and entitled 'Encuba ahora'. One was reminded of the 'Guernica', but it was ambiguous and only in retrospect have events given it a prophetic clarity. 'Encubar' is to put in the cask, to ferment; so the title meant both 'In Cuba now' and also 'In ferment now'. At first the cryptic figuration appeared as the result of the painter's unwillingness to take sides politically. Were those figures rejoicing or tormented? Were they free or were they trapped? Both and neither. One was demanding a clumsy over-simplification of the reality. Matta's theme was the Cuban predicament and the spectator was confronted with it and it was stated with clarity in the language of a painter. If Matta dominated the exhibition, by far the best works were two of the three paintings by Wilfredo Lam; in particular 'Quand je ne dors pas je rêve'. Both Lam and Matta make oracular statements and force the spectator to make a poetic interpretation. A large number of the works in this exhibition, successful or not, were imbued with mythology; for example, Carlisky's throne-sculpture. There were two good paintings by the young Haitian Hervé Télémaque which I would include in the above tendency and yet orientated to the New York school in so far as the influence of Gorky was evident.

Finally, the fourth tendency seemed to be characterized by an investigation into the technical elaboration of the painting process in a continuous dialogue between painter and canvas. There was probably no preconceived notion about the appearance of the end result; sometimes something seemed to invade or grow out of the canvas. Good examples were the works of the Argentinian Perez Román, whose larger canvases sometimes appear as states in a restless geological process. The surface of the earth has not yet settled down. This idea of a work as a single stage in a continuous process in evolution might even be noticed in the sculptures of the Brazilian Sergio de Camargo, but in this case the similarity to a fragment of nature is perhaps too obvious; the dialogue has been rather one sided, the human intervention insufficient. With Perez-Román one feels the force of the linear hieroglyphic structure either breaking through or being submerged by the telluric masses.

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Left: construction. J. R. Soto (Venezuela)

Below: sculpture. Carlisky (Argentine)

Right: sculpture. Sergio de Camargo (Brazil)

