

# notes & comments

**Anna Vives**

*Joan Miró returns to  
the Tate Modern in London*

## The politicisation of art and negation of negation

RENÉ BERNARD: And yet you have never been engaged in any direct action.

MIRÓ: Don't you think that the revolution of forms can be liberating?  
Unsettling people by forcing them to wake up.<sup>1</sup>

The institutionalisation of Miró's work is shaped by its exhibiting in different foundations and museums around the world: the Fundació in Barcelona; the Centre Pompidou-Musée National d'Art Contemporain in Paris; the Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght in Saint Paul-de-Vence, France; the Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró in Palma de Mallorca;

the Guggenheim Museum, New York; the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), New York; the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; the National Gallery of Art, Washington; the Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Nonetheless, these institutions only represent one side of the public display of Miró's work. From the Sapporo-Ya restaurant in San Francisco's Japantown, through to the Fielding Johnson Building at the University of Leicester, this everyday and small-scale presence of Miró's work suggests that this artist is embedded in the collective imaginaries of a wide range of societies. The fact that such different societies embrace him links up with his idea (taken from Confucius) that all men are equal and only customs differ. The almost mythical strand that unites such a variety of places in their enthusiasm for Miró is related with the political-poetic nature of his work, which is of sufficient detail to see within it his Catalan nationalism, or his support for the Republic, for example, but also sufficiently general to emphasise the need to express the spirit of the subject through art. All these aspects are crucial for understanding Miró's socio-political position.

From 14<sup>th</sup> April until 11<sup>th</sup> September 2011 (dates of the proclamation of the Second Spanish Republic and the National Day of Catalonia commemorating the 1714 Siege of Barcelona, respectively) the Tate Modern offered *Joan Miró: The Ladder of Escape*, the most comprehensive exhibition of his work in Great Britain for almost half a century, and the tenth Miró exhibition in London after preceding shows in the following galleries: Mayor Gallery (1933); *International Surrealist Exhibition*, New

Burlington Galleries (1936); Zwemmer Gallery (1937); Mayor Gallery (1938); Tate Gallery (1964); Marlborough Gallery (1966); *Miró Bronzes*, Hayward Gallery (1972); *Miró Drawings*, Hayward Gallery (1979); and *Joan Miró: Paintings and Drawings 1929-41*, Whitechapel Art Gallery (1989). This time the Tate Modern showed a total of some 150 works distributed in thirteen rooms, the contents of which might be summed up as follows: rural motifs taken from the vicinity of Mont-roig, Tarragona; the figure of the Catalan peasant; Mont-roig from a surrealist perspective; paintings on masonite and copper and the "wild" paintings; impressions of the Civil War and the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic (World's Fair, Paris, 1937); the Barcelona series; the *Constel·lacions* (Constellations); his reencounter with the motifs of the *Constel·lacions*; sculptures and reworked earlier canvases; triptychs with chromatic saturation; the "other Miró" and the burnt canvases; the triptychs of the prisoner and the condemned man; the fireworks triptych and the Majesties sculptures. More recently, the exhibition has been shown (16<sup>th</sup> October 2011 to 18<sup>th</sup> March 2012) in the Fundació Miró in Barcelona, while the public in Washington may now enjoy it in the National Gallery of Art, from 6<sup>th</sup> May to 12<sup>th</sup> August 2012.

The cover of the catalogue for the London exhibition informs the reader, "Famed for saying that he had come to assassinate painting, Miró nevertheless made a huge contribution to the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> century [...] For the first time this book examines Miró's legacy through the context of the turbulent times in which he lived [...] Miró's political beliefs underpinned his art throughout his long and productive

■ <sup>1</sup> René Bernard, "Miró to *L'Express*: Violence Liberates", *Selected Writings and Interviews*, ed. Margit Rowell (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1992), pp. 303-305 (p. 303).

career”<sup>2</sup>. Miró’s political engagement is manifest in two ways, the thematic and the formal. This is very clear in *Aidez l’Espagne* (Help Spain, 1937) and *Le Faucheur* (The Reaper), the latter of which was exhibited very close to Picasso’s *Guernica* in the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic in the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris<sup>3</sup>. Moreover, with actions like his participation in the Spanish Pavilion, Miró was a model of democratic values for the younger artists of the Barcelona-based Dau al Set group.

What about Miró’s formal revolution? People tend to look at his paintings as if they are childlike, without grasping the passion entailed in them and making the posteros observation that, “Anybody can do that”. It would seem that only unawareness, lack of artistic knowledge and undue pragmatism could lie behind such statements. What Miró had to say about his *Peinture sur fond blanc pour la cellule d’un solitaire I, II, III* (Painting on White Background for the Cell of a Recluse, I, II, III, 1968) is relevant here: it only took him a moment to draw the black line but he needed months to form the idea of the line and maybe even years (Rowell: 275). A similar meditative state may be found in the genesis of his *Constel·lacions*, product of the restrictive situation of the Second World War when even gazing at the sky with its stars and moon was not possible during some of the time Miró spent in Varengeville, Normandy. Hence he needed to create his own constellations. This escapism enables Miró to feel things that the climate of war would not let him feel, and it is this capturing of a poetic moment of peace and plenitude that is political in

some of Miró’s works that might seem to lack a social dimension. After seeing his *Constel·lacions*, André Breton expressed this by pointing out the opposition between a time of tremendous upheaval and escapism in the form of flight to the realm of the purest, the least changeable. This aspect of Miró’s work fits neatly with his acceptance speech when he was awarded the distinction of Doctor Honoris Causa by the University of Barcelona, in which he said the role of the artist is to negate negation. If the socio-political situation gives the message that we are not going to attain inner peace, then the artist must help us to find the path of evasion. This is the “other Miró”. Hence a further example of his formal revolution is *The Other Miró* (1969), an artistic happening in which Miró painted in public and then erased his work, by this means expressing his opposition to the establishment.

The emptiness of the triptych *L’Espoir du condamné à mort I, II, III* (The Wait of a Man Condemned to Death, I, II, III) represents the apogee of *concept art* in which reality is used as the point of departure but never as the point of arrival (Rowell: 74). This work conceptualises the imminent execution of the young revolutionary Salvador Puig Antich in Barcelona’s Model Prison in 1974 (Miró finished the work the very day of Puig Antich’s execution on 2<sup>nd</sup> March). The synthesis of meaning and feeling contained in the triptych through the red of the blood, the blue of the sky and the yellow of the sun connotes much more extreme passion than that which can be achieved through typically figurative work. However, Miró’s work is not abstract art

■ <sup>2</sup> Marko Daniel and Matthew Gale (eds.), *Joan Miró: The Ladder of Escape* (London: Tate Publishing, 2011). The works discussed in this article are included therein.

<sup>3</sup> The decision as to which Spanish artists would have the privilege of appearing in the Pavilion was made by Josep Renau and his wife Manuela Ballester Vilaseca.

but a specific and poetic representation springing from the artist's mind (Rowell: 151). The importance of poetry in his work dating from his time in Paris when he was in contact with André Masson (and, through him, other surrealist poets) was fundamental in shaping the nature of his creations. Furthermore, as is the case of many other avant-garde painters, Miró wrote poetry himself and this poetic vision led him to speak of the passion and essence of his art in the following terms: "I think the only people who matter are the ones who are alive, the ones who put their blood and soul into even the finest line or the smallest dot (Rowell: 98)."

The theories of Walter Benjamin are interesting with regard to the relationship between art and politics: while fascists turn politics into art, those who subscribe to opposite ideas are apt to be in favour of the politicisation of art. One should bear in mind that the exhibition at the Tate Modern has also made its contribution towards the politicisation of Miró's work, which is to say it has reshaped his artistic corpus in order to highlight certain social and political messages. I shall not attempt to appraise this position except to note that I believe that this is an indisputable fact. In particular in the case of works that do not have an overt political message, the other element that needs to be analysed in order to understand the political dimension of Miró's work is the idea of escapism: is escaping a political act? Perhaps it is not directly political but Miró affirmed that his way of reconciling the experiences of fascism, the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War with his aesthetic world was to propose in his work a form of escapism from the reality of the present to a world where living was possible.

Two of Miró's works on exhibit in the Tate Modern have titles echoing that of the show. One is the constellation

painting *L'Echelle de l'évasion* (The Ladder of Escape, 1940), and the other is the sculpture *L'escala de l'ull que s'evadeix* (The Ladder of the Escaping Eye, 1971). In the former, black and red predominate but there are also touches of blue and white. One sees different clusters of images: stars and moon, a group of animals (a snake and a sparrow), and there are some characters that seem to be waiting for a moment of transcendence. A ladder stands out in the middle of the picture which, moreover, has a touch of white, the colour that is scarcest in the painting. The background consists of light chromatic tonalities. The emphasis lies with the colours and forms and the political thrust of the work is found in the desire to escape and the subsequent plenitude of finding oneself even among the stars. To return to the ladder, this is an element that is repeatedly highlighted in the Tate Modern exhibition and it is understood as a means for fleeing earthly circumstances together with sparrows, flying insects, stars and comets. For Miró, the ladder goes beyond the condition of being a familiar material form (*The Farm*) to symbolise escape, especially during the war. In other words, it comes to be a poetic element. The ladder means flying and elevation. The sculpture *L'escala de l'ull que s'evadeix* also shows a ladder, although this time it is set on a pedestal to draw attention to the idea of elevation of the spirit. The escaping eye suggests a new way of understanding and seeing the world. Although the exhibition curators indicate that the work which has given its name to the show is the sculpture, both of these works help to give one a more precise idea of the concept of "ladder of escape". One might say that both the gouache and the sculpture are political works because of their inherent escapism.

To conclude, the relationship between Miró's art and politics is possibly less

visible than it is in the work of some of his contemporaries like Picasso because his political engagement is more formal and less thematic, but if one looks at who bought his work (Ernest Hemingway bought *The Farm*), where it was exhibited (Pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the 1937 World's Fair in Paris), his explicit support for the Republic (political propaganda posters like *Aidez l'Espagne*), his repetition of anarchist and nationalist themes (the Catalan flag, its red and yellow stripes, and the typical Catalan peasant's cap appear and reappear in his work), and the occasions when he spoke out in public against Franco, one sees very clearly that any thinking about Miró would not be complete if one did not inquire into the moments of political upheaval in Spain and Europe during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To give one example, it has been confirmed that the sketch for one of the versions of the work *Tête de paysan catalan* (Head of a Catalan Peasant, 1925) was done over the front page of the newspaper *Le Matin* dated 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1925, on which appeared the news item titled "Rome célèbre le 6.<sup>o</sup> anniversaire de la fondation du fascisme". Faced with moments of great despair and suffering, Miró reminds humanity that the expression of man's mind and spirit is necessary. These works constitute political material from the more human and philosophical perspective. He explains

this in *Cahiers d'art* in 1939: "One must not confuse the commitments proposed to the artist by professional politicians and other specialists of agitation with the deep necessity that makes him take part in social upheavals, that attaches him and his work to the heart and flesh of his neighbor and makes the need for liberation in all of us a need of his own (Rowell: 166)."

The exhibition in the Tate Modern shows some very good judgement. For example, Miró wanted his monochrome works from the nineteen sixties to be exhibited in a sort of chapel so people could sit down and ponder them. This is how the Tate Modern presented these works and the triptychs of the prisoner and the condemned man. However, there were a couple of points that might have been improved upon. In the case of the burnt canvases, Miró talked about the importance of seeing the reality surrounding the work through the holes made by fire. In this regard the burnt canvases in the middle of the room should have been hung lower so that visitors could see the movement of people through them. Finally, perhaps some (not many) might make the criticism that Miró's work was politicised here but, the fact is, his works were already politicised by none other than Miró himself and it was only necessary to draw attention to this fact, which is what the Tate Modern did ||