

From Painting to Installation

An exhibition of the work of
Josune Amunarriz

This exhibition of two major installations by Josune Amunarriz will introduce the American public to the unique art of the only Basque woman painter working in monumental dimensions and three-dimensional installations. The opportunity to show these works within an international context to which they belong will help both the artist as well as the image of Basque artists in general because they will be seen by the influential New York press which forms the world opinion. This is essential since the American public has no concept of the artistic legacy of the Basque Country. This is due in large part to the vast publicity surrounding the Guggenheim Bilbao which is thought of as an extension of the American Guggenheim and not as a Basque museum.

Amunarriz was trained as a mural painter, but her most recent works are installations in which images begin to break apart, bursting the conventional limits of the frame and the wall to reach out into real space. Her work will have special appeal to the American public because of this large scale and the relationship of her installations to architecture, both primary issues in the American context. More so than a European audience, the American public is particularly focused on the issue of women in art, which assures a widespread response to Amunarriz's ability to engage with the cutting edge issues of advanced abstract art while maintaining individuality and creating a highly individualistic style.

The exhibition will consist of two major installations which will fill the two exhibition spaces of Queen Sofía Spanish Institute: *Glacial*, which after being exhibited in San Sebastián at her retrospective at the Kubo Gallery was purchased by IVAM and is being sent to China, and a new installation designed specifically for the New York show. It is hoped that *Glacial* can be returned to IVAM by way of New York, where it will be part of the exhibition at Queen Sofía Spanish Institute. The new work must be transported from Madrid to New York and back. There will be an illustrated catalogue in English to be printed in Basque as well.

The environmental quality of her recent paintings has now become dominant in a new installation, *Edad de Hielo (Ice Age)* that recalls the glacial forms and colors of the Arctic. Like her other works, it is dramatic, enveloping, and suggestive, and as is all her imagery, linked to the movement of the sea.

Born in the Basque coastal town of Fuentarrabia, Amunarriz spent her childhood with the sea literally at her feet. Her broad gesture brush strokes are characteristically wavy rather than linear or structural in the sense of Cézanne, for example. Her modernist sources are not Cubist but Impressionist and it is not solid forms that attract her but rather atmospheric effects, currents of air or energy that cause waves to ripple and crash on a rocky coast. Although the sea is her inspiration, there is nothing literal in her interpretation of its movement and alternating moments of tempest and calm. Yet this consistent interest in atmospheric effects and high drama characterize her as a romantic, which in today's cold conceptual climate seems an anachronism. There is no irony or camouflage in her work: it is bold, direct and uncompromising.

There is also little in her work to relate it to modern Spanish painting. On the other hand, even if it is coincidental, there is a locking together of shapes on a plane that reminds me of the American painter Clyfford Still, whose abstractions were rooted in a vision of nature. Like Still and the other artists of the New York School, Amunarriz gives us no horizon line to provide orientation. Instead she plunges us directly into her maelstrom of surf and stone, reducing the distance between the spectator and the painted image. In her most recent work, she eliminates that distance entirely. We have no choice but to pay attention because she has created a situation that literally engulfs us.

It is this need to address the viewer more directly that was the impulse behind the very large formats of American artists. They did not want to decorate bourgeois interiors but to make art for public spaces. Mural painting of course is public art by definition, and Amunarriz's choice of working in very large formats expresses a desire to create powerful images that are literally larger than life. At the same time it also avoids the confines that modern art suffers in its necessity to become domesticated in order to be consumed. She resists, and this resistance in itself becomes part of the content of the work. Looking at these huge impressive canvases, one remembers Hans Hofmann's comment to Lee Krasner on seeing one of her works: "This is so good you would not know it was done by a woman." Today, such a statement would seem not only politically incorrect but also irrelevant. Nevertheless there is something striking about a woman who paints in a muscular, athletic style that lacks all coquetry and who demands to stake out her own territory in her own terms.

The Expanding Universe of Josune Amunarriz Barbara Rose

The great Swiss art historian, Heinrich Wölfflin, in his seminal book on art historical style, *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriff* (The Principles of Art History), distinguished between two basic types of pictorial compositions. He identified these polarities as the classical and the Baroque. According to Wölfflin's analysis, classical styles are fundamentally architectonic; and their elements relate to the horizontal and vertical frame of the canvas. Respecting the limitations of the rectangle, their forms do not break the framing edge but stay strictly within its limits.

The Baroque, on the other hand, according to Wölfflin, is always an expansive style. Baroque forms burst with a vitality that overflows the limits of the frame. In Baroque styles, images continue beyond the boundaries of the frame into the space beyond the rectangle's edge rather than lining up with the edge of the canvas. The spreading outstretched areas of brilliant color that overflow the limits of the Basque painter Josune Amunarriz's large-scale canvases identify her style with the drama and spectacle of the expansive Baroque rather than with the strict austerity of classical canons of decorum.

Saying this, however, is not to imply that her work belongs to any past tradition. There is no doubt that her style is definitively abstract and contemporary. However, the way that her intense colors flow across the canvas surface breaking the frame to extend into the space beyond the canvas rectangle identifies her sensibility with the expansive energy and exuberance of the Baroque, rather than with the containment and restrictions of classical modes.

There is an excitement and sense of the spectacular in her dramatic palette and jolting rushing forms that is far more akin to Baroque formats and to the wild, romantic temperament more at home in nature than in the city and the strict rules and unities of classical art. Established by the ancients, these rules were adopted by the Renaissance as the basis of harmonious relationships. Both the oversize scale and the unfamiliar palette of Amunarriz's work imply a defiance of any set of academic textbook rules. The anti-classical core of her style may perhaps be explained by the fact that she is from the Basque country, where the Renaissance never took root and remoteness from the humanistic traditions of antiquity has resulted in an uncommon individuality.

The ruggedness of Amunarriz's native Basque landscape, on the other hand, can be perceived in the images she invents, which refer not to the human figure or to architecture, but to natural formations in their irregularity and unpredictability. Similar to the works of painters like Helen Frankenthaler and Joan Mitchell, Amunarriz's images suggest abstract landscapes. Indeed, her imagery, while abstract, suggests more than anything aerial views of mountains, valleys, rivers and lakes. She does not extract her images from the landscape in the manner of Kandinsky or Matisse, but rather that she captures the *feeling* of landscape in her forms.

For example, at times her clasped, interpenetrating forms taper off into attenuated shapes suggesting winding rivers and gnarled trees. None of these associations is specific or even necessarily intentional. Nevertheless, we sense that the world being pictured is not the closed hygienic space of modern architecture, which inspires Mondrian and constructivist art, but rather the wild and tumultuous, unpredictable space carved out of the landscape by nature.

Given that her forms are irregular as well as aggressive in their forward thrust, it is notable that they are neither angular nor violent. The idea of a gentle aggressiveness is of course a contradiction in terms. However, this sense of contradiction creates a tension that keeps the eye interested. We follow the winding and twisting interpenetrating paths of the liquid colors that pool into shapes that suggest a vigorous and muscular physicality, absent in purely cerebral, non-objective painting. We gain from the experience a sense of freedom, if not in fact of flight, of seeing the panoramic landscape as if from an aerial view.

The sense of having an aerial or bird's eye view of landscape is hinted at in old master paintings by such Flemish artists as Patinir and Breugel. In the twentieth century, such views could actually be experienced as a result of the invention of the airplane. Early in the century, the Russian constructivist Rodchenko took aerial photographs, which influenced the sense of infinite space he achieved in his atmospheric geometric abstractions. More recently, the American painter Georgia O'Keeffe was inspired by aerial views, which gave her abstraction a startlingly original quality. Amunarriz's work, although much larger in scale than O'Keeffe's easel paintings, shares with the works of the famous American abstractionist their capacity to suggest a liberating feeling of soaring through space above a dramatic and changing terrain where land and water interpenetrate and rivers run into lakes of color.

Large scale comes naturally to Josune Amunarriz. Even as a young painter, she felt the urge to create big, impressive images. Attracted to mural rather than easel painting, as a student she painted oversize wall paintings rather than confining herself to canvas and the scale of easel painting. This meant of course reacting against any kind of academic training and limitations. Her style is naturally direct, emphatic and dramatic. She has always worked *alla prima*, directly on the canvas, without preliminary sketches or studies. This is of course a risky method and her earlier works show corrections overlaid on the surface. However, as she has gained confidence and experience as an artist, hesitation has been replaced by assurance. Now the paint flows evenly and seemingly effortlessly covering the expanse of surface. Colors are mixed—none come straight from the tube—but because the pigment is diluted by the medium they retain a sharp and biting clarity.

Even when she chooses tones or shades, she uses them without modulation so that no space is suggested behind the picture plane. Most of her works are made up of multiple panels that she began using mainly as a convenience, but which now seem intrinsic to her style. An exception to the multipartite construction of most of her recent works, the single rectangle in the current exhibition pairs two tones of gray with orange, mauve and an intense pink that suggests not flesh but the colors of sunsets. Despite her refusal to articulate a theoretical position at this moment when theory seems to have displaced spontaneous creativity, Amunarriz appears to understand instinctively what is currently at stake in painting today.

Her experience as a mural painter is reflected in her ability to keep stretched paintings on canvas as flat wall paintings, which seem as if she has translated the conventions of mural painting into oil on canvas. Again, this translation was instinctive rather than willed or strategized. Yet often it is in the translation from the conventions of one medium into another that progress is made. Take for example, the choice of both Miró and Matisse to return to the pictorial conventions of medieval manuscript and mural painting for inspiration. In Josune Amunarriz's oils as in the works of Miró and Matisse, the flatness of the wall remains intact and is felt as a continuous surface.

According to the American critic Clement Greenberg, the acknowledgment of the implicit flatness of painting is a necessary step in stripping painting of academic illusionism to reveal its actual physical properties as a real object in the world. Because of her preference for the large scale— achieved by

breaking down a continuous horizontal image into a series of vertical or square canvases— Amunarriz's paintings seem more in tune with the ambition of the New York school to paint the "Big Picture" than they do with European easel painting. Moreover, the way she eliminates the distinction between the linear and the painterly also relates her work to the latest developments in modernist painting, which reject the academic distinction between drawing and painting.

Her monumental forms are articulated where painted edge meets painted edge rather than being confined in discrete shapes bounded by line or hard contour. One can define her forms as biomorphic and organic, but only in a general sense, simply because they are not geometric or mathematically measurable. Like all biomorphic forms, they suggest breathing and expansion rather than limitation and intellectual or conceptual structures. In her refusal to locate her aesthetic in terms of the reigning fashion for minimal and conceptual art, Amunarriz turns her back on modishness and places all her bets on the superiority of energy, vitality and spontaneity over the standard formulas of repetition and appropriation.

When Wolfflin distinguished not only between the classical and the Baroque styles, he also categorized their constituent elements as the linear and the painterly or *malerisch*. Painterly painting, which descends from the Venetian tradition, emphasizes brushwork and tactility. These oppositions continue to apply even in contemporary abstract painting. Classical or constructivist painters such as Josef Albers, Pablo Palazuelo or Ellsworth Kelly, use geometric forms and hard edges to define shape and contour. "Painterly" painters like Tapies, de Kooning and Jasper Johns, on the other hand, emphasize surface texture and the marks of the hand. Amunarriz's style is closer to that of artists like Adolph Gottlieb, Lee Krasner and Jack Youngerman whose shapes have contour and definition but remain soft and penetrable rather than closed and silhouetted as in Cubist painting.

In order to go beyond the Cubist opposition of figure and ground, which separates shapes from their background in a manner that recalls the conventions of academic representational art, post-war abstract artists sought ways of integrating figure and ground to annihilate this duality. Jackson Pollock resolved the problem by sinking his images into raw canvas and creating a web that seemed to hang in infinite space. Barnett Newman covered the entire canvas and identified the image with the field so that no figure-ground, positive-negative dualities could be perceived. Clyfford Still suggested another form of integrating figure and ground with jagged edge forms that seemed to fit together like a puzzle. It is doubtful that Amunarriz has seen Still's immense abstract landscapes, yet there is an affinity between her unconventional work and that of the grandiose painter from the rocky regions of South Dakota where, as in the remote regions of the Basque country, nature constantly reveals itself as greater than man.

By associating Amunarriz's painting with that of American abstractionists whose metaphor is landscape, I recall an earlier affinity of nineteenth century Spanish landscape painters like Perez Vilaamil with the vast heroic and romantic landscapes of the American Hudson River School. Unlike the Italian or the French landscape, the Spanish landscape is not soft and sweet; it is tough and unforgiving, awesome and mysterious. If one senses an affinity between Amunarriz and Georgia O'Keeffe it is because the badlands of New Mexico that inspired O'Keeffe have much in common with the drama and difficulty of the Spanish terrain.

In this attitude towards shape as legible but not confining, as well as in her decision to prioritize color over line, Amunarriz defines her style as a post-Cubist form of abstraction, that in its ambitious format demands not only attention but implicitly aspires to public rather than private space. This taste for a monumental public expression rather than for a sentimental collectible art for the private living room also relates her aesthetic to that of the New York School, who wished their works to become total environments rather than charming or decorative objects.

Amunarriz's recent work is not only more assured; it is more adventurous and inventive as well. No longer content simply to acknowledge the flatness of the painted surface, she is now pushing out into three-dimensional space in a way that echoes developments in advanced painting elsewhere.

Projecting the shapes and colors of the canvas rectangles on the wall on to wooden cubes, which suggest that parts of the painting have become detached to sit in front of it in real space, she brings her work into line with the anti-illusionist stance of the most contemporary art.

That the depiction of an illusion is a form of deception that the contemporary artist, who is dedicated to truth, cannot afford to devise ways to assert the real properties of their materials and the space created by color. This attack on the illusionist basis of representational painting was carried out by different artists in different ways. Projecting materials, objects or shapes in front of the picture plane into a literal third dimension was an important innovation. Among the pioneers of this effort were artists like Tápies and Burri in Europe and Rauschenberg and Johns in the United States. Thus the decision of Robert Morris, Donald Judd, Claes Oldenburg and George Segal to abandon painting for three-dimensional sculpture was because, since the Renaissance, the basis of western painting was in projecting an illusion of the third-dimension on to a two-dimensional surface.

In this connection, the painted cubes that seem to have fallen from the painting behind them, whose colors and shapes they share, add an additional element of surprise and precariousness to Amunarriz's recent work. They suggest a dynamism that not only expands laterally on the wall but projects into the viewer's own space. The separate panels that make up the paintings on the wall now sometimes tilt as if they, too, are ready to drop and fall. This sense of imminence and potential action also adds to the excitement of the pictorial drama.

Her palette, too, is exciting because it is unfamiliar and strange. Her attitude toward color is intuitive rather than theoretical. She pairs and opposes colors that are bright and dark, but not with the usual opposition of warm and cool colors that traditional color theory calls for. Her mixed and invented shades and tints are as far from Impressionist color theory as one could imagine. She does not fear pairing hot colors together in one painting, like the scalding hot orange and red polypitch in which there is no cooling relief from the fiery palette. Her reduction in the number of colors she uses in a single work echoes the decision of post-Cubist abstractionists to limit the number of colors and broaden their expanse to create a stronger and more instantaneous impact that a fewer larger forms convey.

Despite the limitation of the number of colors that she chooses to employ in a given work, she significantly extends her palette to create new hues and tints by mixing pigment to the degree that one cannot quite name her colors because they belong neither to the spectrum nor the rainbow. In the largest painting in the current show, a dark gray violet suggests shadow but does not sink into the background because its shape is locked in place by the adjacent orange and bluish red surroundings. While her shapes are large expanses of color, their edges and interaction offer a great variety of detail to keep the eye engaged. This taste for nuance distinguishes her work from that of her minimalist contemporaries who believed that detail lessens impact. In front of this huge orange and mauve painting, five cubes painted on all sides the same color as the wall pieces, sit on the floor. Their puzzle-like shapes seem to invite participation. They suggest that turned in different directions, the patterns would match up differently giving us an infinite set of permutations that are both playful, engaging, and visually stimulating. The suggestion of physical participation—the idea that we could pick up the cubes and move them around as we do the pieces of a board game like scrabble—is intriguing and suggestive.

In Josune Amunarriz's latest paintings, one perceives a hard won confidence that permits her to cover surfaces quickly, broadly and without hesitation. This confidence gives a clarity to color that is laid down with a deft transparency that leaves no room for corrections. In the most recent works, she now takes a step into the third dimension of real space. The painted cubes that project into the space in front of the painting allow her to keep pace with developments in contemporary painting that link artists as diverse as Kiefer, Tápies, Barceló, and Stella.

This unapologetic strength and refusal to make anything except her own personal vision of the world her agenda does separate her work from the current fashion for gender based and political art, which

as far as I personally am concerned is a great relief. In important and lasting art, the artist refers us to some experience larger than the individual personality. In this moment of political correctness, this is not a popular position to take. But if we know art history, we know that the art that lasts is free from the theoretical concerns, which replace iconography as subject matter for those whose visual perceptions are less acute than their ability to recognize trademarks and fashion statements. Art as direct and as they say in America as “in your face” as Josune Amunarriz’s views from outer space are neither pacifying nor tranquilizing. They picture an unfamiliar territory. The decision to finally acknowledge the laws at least of gravity is not a compromise but a promising sense of engagement with a world that is both real and present.

The artist’s unwillingness to belong to any school and a temperamental necessity to rebel have carried her a long way. Engaging with the direction that art has taken in its aspiration to autonomy does not necessarily mean joining any group or movement. On the contrary, the new direction in Amunarriz’s work brings us back not to theory and recipe. On the contrary, it makes us recall Goya’s admonition in his final address before the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando upon his retirement as an academician that “there are no rules in art”.