

Carlos Puente

Shadows of Spain

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183-185 Bermondsey Street London SE1 3UW

abps@project-space.london 0203 441 5152

Sobre la toalla / On the towel

Acrylic / canvas on wood



Huevo mimético / Mimetic egg

Acrylic / canvas on wood



Sopa en mi cabeza. I / Soup in my head. I

Acrylic / canvas



Sin palabras / Without words

Acrylic / canvas



Dos gatos y Catauro / Two cats and Catauro

Acrylic / canvas



Catauro y la luna / Catauro and the moon

Acrylic / canvas



Catauro y el filósofo / Catauro and the philosopher

Acrylic / canvas



Catauro y Eva / Catauro and Eve

Acrylic / canvas



Roca / Rock

Acrylic / canvas



Desdoble / Doubleness

Acrylic / canvas



Paseando sonrisas / Walking smiles

Acrylic / canvas on wood



Ballena de humo / Smoke Whale

Acrylic / canvas



El desayuno campreste de Catauro / Catauro's breakfast on the grass

Acrylic / canvas



Deseo cometa / Wish comet

Acrylic / canvas



SHADOWS OF SPAIN

The tradition of a European avant-garde survives
in the distinctive work of Carlos Puente

MIKE VON JOEL

Post-war Spain was a culturally complex nation. Bitter with its memories of the Civil War – itself a legacy of the little known Carlist Wars of the 19th century⁽¹⁾ – and divided by the regime of Francisco Franco. With Western politics focused on the USSR and its satellite states, Franco felt secure with his nationalist (anti-communist) stance. When the painter, Carlos Puente de Ambrosio, was born in Santander in 1950, the society he entered was in a state of flux.

The symbiotic relationship between writers and artists was as prevalent in Spain as in France, a country whose influence on Spanish culture dated from the first Bourbon king, Philip V, in the 18th century. Amongst radical creatifs, the 1936 murder of poet Federico García Lorca by the Fascists was still fresh, symbolic and raw, yet the regime was now actively embracing the arts it found acceptable. For example, in 1950, Spain returned to the Venice Biennale after an eight-year hiatus (showing sculptor Carlos Ferreira de la Torre). And one of Spain's most celebrated artists, Antoni Tàpies, has been quoted as saying: 'Painting during the Franco regime was less difficult than painting in Nazi Germany or Fascist Italy, because they thought that

Modern Art wasn't important and didn't actually influence daily life'.

Nevertheless, the dictatorship was unimpressed with the counter culture of Europe and America in the 1960s and repressive measures were taken to discipline the youth of Spain. Art schools, as a traditional hotbed of revolutionary ideas both cultural and political, were thus subject to surveillance. So after studying at the Escuela de Artes Aplicadas e Santander in 1969, Carlos Puente made the traditional migration to Paris, which had a long association with artists from Spain, Picasso and Dali being perhaps the most legendary. As it turned out, it was to be Italy that would subsequently inspire and succour the young Puente and he was to flourish in the environments of Celle Ligure and Milan, not least under the auspices of the Galleria San Carlo,⁽²⁾ which specialises in works by the CoBra group. These painters, Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Corneille⁽³⁾, Asger Jorn and Roberto Matta, together with their decided opinions on the content and nature of painting, helped focus the young Spaniard and continue to inform his work and philosophy. It is a banner he carries without embarrassment to this day.

As the mood in European art changes, the spotlight is now on mid-generation artists with a solid and definable career, the very antithesis of concept-based rock'n'roll sensationalism. It is easy to be seduced into thinking that great works of art and their collectors are exclusively those that feature in the multi-million dollar auction sales. These excesses are certainly part of the picture but actually represent a small section of the whole. The core of the art business is made up of serious artists with a lifelong commitment to their work, supported by savvy collectors for whom authenticity and veracity outweigh the fads and fashionable foibles of a commodity market obsessed with investment and return. Carlos Puente is one of those artists.

CARLOS PUENTE ... IN CONVERSATION

Despite travelling the world, Picasso always felt his 'Spanish-ness' was central to his art. You returned to Spain, to near the city of your birth, in 2001 – why did you do that, is Spain important to your sense of 'self' and to your art?

I have returned to Spain and I live in a small village in the mountains of Cantabria, in northern Spain, about 100 km from the city where I was born, Santander. It was a personal decision to get out of the maelstrom of big cities like Milan where I lived the last few years. I do not know if Spain is important in my work, I do not think too much about it, but certainly within the unconscious there is a part of Spain. I feel – culturally – European. I was born in Santander, I have lived in Paris, in the south of Spain, in Madrid, in the Basque Country, in Bordeaux, in Italy... in the north and south. It's all a sum of

several experiences, landscapes, lights, but surely your childhood is always with you. In a moment, when I was a child, I wanted to be a bullfighter, maybe that is 'Spanish-ness'...

As a young man in Franco's Spain, how did you survive before your work was recognised and people paid for your pictures?

My memories of the franquismo are 20 watt light bulbs and blackness, blackness, blackness – and a fixed idea: search for the light. My origins are proletarian and so I have done everything to get ahead. I was an immigrant in Paris at 18 years old: a collector of plums, caretaker of dogs and cats, worker in a tannery – a failure – and back to Spain. I have worked as a pigeon trainer, as a bank employee, in a factory of milk products – and launched a ceramics atelier. Finally, all this work and experience gradually began to bear fruit and allow me to express more through creative acts. So for 32 years I have made a living by the simple and pure practice of creativity. There is something magical when people respond to my work – and then reward me by buying it.

Is art truly an international language, or is it necessarily always parochial or nationalistic?

For me the language of art must be international, my stance has always been against localism and nationalism. But it is difficult to escape from the mother culture. I left my homeland at 18 years old, looking for connections with other worlds – air, light and freedom. I really did feel a prisoner of poverty, blackness, without a horizon... I survived by my involvement with art, with beauty...

You have been associated with the artists of the CoBrA Group even though they are of a previous generation. Do you agree with this comparison and – if so – what is it about those artists you feel an empathy with?

Yes, I have met Corneille, I've been at his home, in his study. I've cooked a paella for him. He was exceptional, a good person. I do like this group, I like almost everyone who has participated in the CoBrA movement. Appel, Alechinsky, Jorn and Corneille are my favourites. For a time I had the same dealer as Corneille in Milan, Galleria San Carlo, who specialise in CoBrA art, so I know the work of these people in detail.

It took a long time for Spain to embrace contemporary art, despite Picasso and the death of Franco. As things improved in Spain you chose to remain in Italy. How did you find the Italian art world compared with that of Spain?

It was a moment of take-off – of freedom – in Spain. The rebirth of cultural life. It was necessary to create a whole new infrastructure in Spain: there was almost no art market, there was no collecting of contemporary art. When I was offered exhibition opportunities in Italy I did not think twice, it was an adventure. I am very grateful to my friends who made a sort of syndicate to help me financially. Italy was a different world, it was full of galleries, art fairs, art magazines. It was full of activity, where the restriction on artists was less than in Spain. Italians appreciated artists!

Your career has been essentially located in Europe. Did you ever contemplate New York, or London?

I've never been resistant to new places. I made a small incursion into New York and I have worked with a gallery in Chicago, a fair in Miami – but nothing definite. When you have a contract with a gallery there exists a certain discipline, there are commercial pressures. I have not done anything in Britain, but I really like some British painters. I admire Bacon, Hockney, Alan Davie, Joe Tilson, Kitaj, Allen Jones, Clive Barker, and I find British Pop Art very interesting. I do not know the reasons why I have not done anything in London, I would like to. I hope in the future a gallery might be interested to collaborate.

Explain your creative process – do you work on more than one picture at a time? Work on 'themes'? Work from drawings or directly from an idea?

My work starts with a vital feeling, with an idea, diving into the unconscious, digging in the dark. For me it is important to work on a series, a number of artworks simultaneously with interrelationships between the various pieces. Later, I like each individual picture or sculpture to develop its own space and its own individual ability to express the emotions I am feeling. I work on several things at once, 30 or more pieces, several materials: fabric, paper, wood, ceramic... It is a cycle. It is intense work where I get lost, I can't leave it for later, I must finish it while the energy and the desire dominate the process. For me art is in the act of making, working hard, loneliness, complete days without leaving the studio – listening to music, jazz or opera, the radio is my only company – until the work is finished. Then comes another cycle – of doing nothing, looking at the stars and watching the grass

grow. Just waiting for a work cycle to begin. My art comes from my heart, sex, life...

Is it possible to explain the iconography you have devised and include in your pictures? Do they have a consistent meaning or do you adapt and create icons for a given situation?

Since art school I have tried to create my own iconography, trying to be a little different. Through a natural training process, by copying and mimicking, it took me some time to become myself, maybe it made me a sniper. At that time in Spain [the 1970s] it was all about Tàpies, Chillida, Saura, all about dark tones. I liked colour. I was seduced by artistic directions not at all popular, almost unknown, in Spain. I felt disconnected from the artistic trends of my contemporaries. Little by little I created the body of my iconography and over the years, by repetition, it has been refined. My alphabet is simple and direct, easy to understand, with pure colours and forms, primary colours. I am looking for simplicity, trying to connect with Arcadia – childhood – before the layers of ‘learning’. It is a language that comes from the unconscious, and represent love, sex, food, anger, sleep... in short: Life!

There have been catastrophic changes to the perception of art and the practice of being an artist – specifically a painter – in recent times. What is your opinion of these market-led developments and the intrusion of business and marketability in the current art world?

In my opinion the fault is of the creators of the art: the artists. They have given way to agents of the ‘culture industry’. We have lost our freedom, our

romanticism, and we have allowed ourselves to be engulfed by the machinery. It is a sad fact, but on many occasions when there is a big promotion for an exhibition, the first names we see are the curator, the critic, the sponsor...

When one passes 60 years old it is inevitable that the notion of a limited time span becomes a reality. Very many artists experience a sense of futility or depression. What are your views on Life, Death and Legacy – and the meaning of existence?

Time is limited when one has a closed life project, with very defined goals and with very specific desires. But if one has a project open 360 degrees, with no goals and no concrete desires, there are no limits. Just Life flowing, looking for beauty, enjoying and suffering with the whole body and being aware of it. To think about legacy is to be transcendent, it is not myself who decides the legacy, others decide what is my particular legacy. My work is to make, to create, to invent. From the first day of our life, Death is on the same road, she is our invisible companion – but faithful – we always end with her. Life is a banquet (festive-erotic-culinary) nothing more and nothing less, Eros and Thanatos.

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NOTES

1. The Carlist Wars in Spain (1833 to 1876) were the last major European civil wars in which contenders fought to establish their claim to a throne.
2. Galleria San Carlo Milano. via Alessandro Manzoni 46. 20121 Milan, Italy. Founded 1981 by Gian Carlo de Magistris, and dedicated to the European avant-garde, especially CoBrA.
3. Corneille (1922-2010) born Guillaume Cornelis van Beverloo to Dutch parents in Liège, Belgium.

CARLOS PUENTE

Carlos Puente was born in Santander (Spain) in 1950 and studied at the School of Applied Arts in Madrid and Santander. In 1976, he established his own studio devoted to painting, sculpture and ceramics. He held his first exhibition in 1978. Since 1989, Puente has lived and worked for extended periods in Italy (Milan and Genoa) and held numerous exhibitions in Europe, participating in several international shows.

1979

Caja de Ahorros de (Santander, ESPAÑA)
Ttopara (Fuenterrabía, ESPAÑA)

1980

C.A.P. (Beasain, ESPAÑA)
C.A.P. (San Sebastián, ESPAÑA)

1982

Arte (San Sebastián, ESPAÑA)

1983

C.A.P. (Beasain, ESPAÑA)

1986

Gaspar (Rentería, ESPAÑA)

1987

Garca (Santander, ESPAÑA)

1988

Altamira (Gijón, ESPAÑA)

1989

B.V. Cultura (Huelva, ESPAÑA)
C.L.P. (Pamplona, ESPAÑA)

C.R. Sala de Cultura (Burgos, ESPAÑA)
Cloître (Bayonne, FRANCE)
Ttopara (Fuenterrabía, ESPAÑA)

1990

Amazuela (Santander, ESPAÑA)
Barbasán (Zaragoza, ESPAÑA)
Caja Laboral Popular (Pamplona, ESPAÑA)
Cromantica (Ceriale, ITALIA)
Il Melograno (Genova, ITALIA)
Inter Arte (Valencia, ESPAÑA)
Museo de la Rioja (Logroño, ESPAÑA)

1991

Amazuela (Santander, ESPAÑA)
Menhir (La Spezia, ITALIA)
Punto A (Ibiza, ESPAÑA)
San Giorgio (Mestre, ITALIA)

1992

ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Fundación Marcelino Botín (Santander, ESPAÑA)
Ricci e Bottero (Torino, ITALIA)
San Román (San Román de Escalante, ESPAÑA)

1993

Art Jonction (Cannes, FRANCE)
ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Decouvertes (Paris, FRANCIA)
ExpoArte (Bari, ITALIA)
Le Tamerici (Milano, ITALIA)
Lineart (Gent, BELGIQUE)
Lola Gassin (Nice, FRANCE)
Orti Sauli (Genova, ITALIA)
Varga Darlet (Bordeaux, FRANCE)

1994

Art Jonction (Cannes, FRANCE)
ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Decouvertes (Paris, FRANCE)
ExpoArte (Bari, ITALIA)
Rino Costa (Cásale Monferrato, ITALIA)
Varga Darlet (Bordeaux, FRANCE)

1995

Orti Sauli (Genova, ITALIA)
Point Rouge (Paris, FRANCE)
Varga Darlet (Bordeaux, FRANCE)

1996

ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Artissima (Torino, ITALIA)

La Maison de la Qualité (Bordeaux, FRANCE)
Studio Beniamino (San Remo, ITALIA)

1997

ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
ArtePadova (Padova, ITALIA)
Bat (Madrid, ESPAÑA)
Brezia (Cosenza, ITALIA)
Chateau Les Bouysses (FRANCE)
Lineart (Gent, BELGIQUE)
Miart (Milano, ITALIA)
Ristori (Albenga, ITALIA)
SAGA (Paris, FRANCE)
San Carlo (Milano, ITALIA)

1998

Art Jonction (Cannes, FRANCE)
ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Miart (Milano, ITALIA)
Orti Sauli (Genova, ITALIA)
Palazzo Vecchio (Firenze, ITALIA)
Punto Arte (Modena, ITALIA)

1999

ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
L'Ariete (Bologna, ITALIA)
Lineart (Gent, BELGIQUE)
Miart (Milano, ITALIA)

2000

ARCO (Madrid, ESPAÑA)
ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Brezia (Cosenza, ITALIA)
Colon XVI (Bilbao, ESPAÑA)
Miart (Milano, ITALIA)
San Carlo (Milano, ITALIA)

2001

33 Canal (New York)

Accademia Tadini (Lovere, ITALIA)
Anna Osemont (Albissola, ITALIA)
ARCO (Madrid, ESPAÑA)
ArteFiera (Bologna, ITALIA)
Filisetti (Crema, ITALIA)
Miart (Milano, ITALIA)
Museo d'Arte Carlo Levi (ITALIA)
Punto Arte (Modena, ITALIA)

2002

20020202 Mosaico Ravenati (Luxembourg)
Palazzo Comunale (Celle Ligure, ITALIA)
Sergio et Thao Mandelli (Milano, ITALIA)

2003

Exconvento delle Scuole Pie (Brindisi, ITALIA)
Kilangui (Mougins, FRANCE)
Sergio et Thao Mandelli (Milano, ITALIA)

2004

Alexandra Maartin (Nice, FRANCE)
Sergio et Thao Mandelli (Milano, ITALIA)

2005

Ulisse Bogliasco (Genova, ITALIA)

2006

Biennale Int. di Grafica (Francavilla, ITALIA)

2007

Pabellón de los Mixtos (Pamplona, ESPAÑA)
Palacio Jáuregui (Tolosa, ESPAÑA)

2008

Art Foire (Genève, SUISSE)
Operarti (Matera, ITALIA)

2009

Martínez Glera (Logroño, ESPAÑA)
Rectoverso (Luxembourg)

2010

Del Sol St. (Santander, ESPAÑA)
Kutxa (San Sebastián, ESPAÑA)

2011

Maison des Consuls (Saint Céré, FRANCE)

2013

Ligue des Droits de l'Homme (LUXEMBOURG)

2015

La Galerie Simoncini (LUXEMBOURG)
Bierger-Center – Ville de Luxembourg (LUXEMBOURG)

2016

Art Bermondsey Project Space (London, ENGLAND)



183-185 Bermondsey Street London SE1 3UW

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abps@project-space.london 0203 441 5152