

Introduction



Good afternoon Ladies and Gentlemen as mentioned I have kindly been asked to give a introduction to Spanish contemporary art.

Obviously this is hardly a subject that can be covered in 60 minutes so due to the very particular political circumstances that existed in Spain in the 20th century, which have had a major influence on the Spanish contemporary art scene. I will give a short overview of recent historical and political events, and then elaborate in more detail using 4 specific artists.



Spain is geographically diverse; it sprawls between the chilly fogs of the Atlantic to the North and West and the sunny Mediterranean to the South and East

It has attracted diverse peoples creating an eclectic, sometimes conflicting cultural situation and this situation still exists today

There are the Catalans confronting the Castillianas

The Balearic islanders in the mediterranean differing from the Canary Islanders in the Atlantic.

The Basques in the North, who speak a language unlike any other in Europe and the Andalucians in the South almost touching the African continent with a genetic and cultural heritage from 800 years of Arabic occupation, which together with Jewish and Christian cultures made up the rich Andalusian Culture.

Besides the geographical and cultural diversity there has also been dramatic changes in both political and economical cycles.

Spain during the 16-17centuries *reached a peak both political and economical when its empire became the foremost global power*. And King Phillip II said “The sun never sets on the Spanish Empire “

Though throughout its history it has constantly lurched from boom to crisis, today being no exception.

*The **Spanish Empire** (Spanish: Imperio Español) comprised territories and colonies administered by the [Spanish Crown](#) in [Europe](#), the [Americas](#), [Africa](#), [Asia](#) and [Oceania](#).*

However one of the greatest influences on Spanish Contemporary art was the Spanish Civil War in 1936 -39 and the following 4 decades of Dictatorship.

*The **Spanish Civil War**^[nb 2] was fought from July 17, 1936 to April 1, 1939 between the Republicans, who were loyal to the established Spanish republic, and the Nationalists, a rebel group led by General [Francisco Franco](#). The Nationalists prevailed and Franco would rule Spain for the next 36 years*

During this period Spain was cut off culturally and economically from the rest of Europe and indeed the rest of the world, this, besides having the effect of

reinforcing the Spanish inclination of cultural self reference created an environment unique in modern European history.

The main theme of my talk will be the effects nearly 40 years of dictatorship and the reaction once democracy was reestablished with the consequent opening once again to the world.

I will explore the work of 4 andalucian artists who each reflect aspects of contemporary art in Spain.

Each artist's work is an attempt to come to terms with the modern condition and each do so in different ways.

With the Spanish Civil War and the rise to power of the dictator Francisco Franco.

The resulting sum of the physical and psychological devastation it caused,
Along with the ideological repressions

A collapsed post-war economy

And the resulting Brain Drain of the best intellectuals to various parts of the world, restrained progress in all fields including the arts for various decades.

I am sure most people here have heard of the international famous artists such as Picasso, Miro, Dali. All these artists were at the height of their powers in the first half of the 20 century, during the dictatorship they were either living in exile or were silent.



Jose Garcia Ramos Un baile para el señor cura oil canvas 48 x 69 cm siglo 19c

The control of information and censorship had profound effects, the Fascist Government also encouraged a localized folklor imagery. Women also lost their fundamental rights and liberties and disappeared almost completely from the art scene



by José Caballero, *Reverencia por Lluís Rodó* (1939)

“Laureados de España” (1939) Jose Caballero(1916 – 91), *Falangist Soldier with the Angel of Victory*

The visual products of the Franco regime were pure propaganda. An example of a seemingly progressive illustration by Jose Caballero (1939) which shows a heroic National Catholic soldier crouching in the Surrealist ruins of the Marxist University of Madrid. The soldier is saluted by a Daliesque airborne

angel bearing tokens of Franco's quest for la Hispanidad, his crusade against whatever was deemed "anti-national, anti-rational and bolchevique.

Also with the end of the WWII, (1945), Europe self-righteously turned its back on the only Fascist regime to have survived. This blockade imposed by the victorious Allies threatened total economic disaster.

Spain was treated as an international pariah and the immediate future promised only material bankruptcy and spiritual collapse.

Of course this did not mean that Artists who remained in Spain didn't not react or did not criticize the regime, however to do so was exceeding dangerous *Tens of thousands of civilians on both sides were killed for their political or religious views, and after the War's conclusion in 1939, those associated with the losing Republicans were persecuted by the victorious Nationalists.*

Death totals remain debated. [Antony Beevor](#) writes in his history of the Civil War that Franco's ensuing 'white terror' resulted in the deaths of 200,000 people and that the 'red terror' killed 38,000.^[191] [Julius Ruiz](#) contends that, "Although the figures remain disputed, a minimum of 37,843 executions were carried out in the Republican zone with a maximum of 150,000 executions (including 50,000 after the war) in [Nationalist Spain](#)."^[192]

Abstract art became a way of expressing dissent.



Manuel Milares (1926-1972).

The dictatorship government, In an attempt to liberate the country from the cultural and economical disastrous period, wanted to prove to the world that Spain was not oppressive, but was fully in tune with the open minded cosmopolitan currents of the Free World.

This brought about the official acceptance of abstract painting in the 1950s.

Thus even the most oblique avant-garde imagery came to be politically accepted . Such paintings were so abstract that they could not convey any specific revolutionary ideas, even though in the mind of the creators it may have represented a shout of rebellion it was unable to denounce any injustice and was incapable of transmitting any subversive messages.

A sign of the rise of the culturally progressive “new Spain” was the Madrid – based El Paso group of painters formed in 1957 and includes Manuel Milares (1926-1972).



Antonio Saura (1930-), Crucifixion oil on canvas 130 x 162 cm 1959-63

This new Spanish painting made its first major impact on the international art scene in late 1957. A French critic wrote "....an art that at the very least remains in contact with a certain Iberian tradition characterized by a formal expressiveness which can be traced from Velazquez, El Greco, Goya and right up to Picasso"

The initiation of more open contact by the late 1960s resulted, as in the rest of the western world, in a return to a more readily legible imagery.



Antonio Lopez Lavabo 1967

Mainly by drawing upon the international visual currency of Pop art and Surrealism, younger, rising painters attempted to express the modern mood by creating new variations on native tradition.

One such neo-traditionalist is Antonio Lopez, whose work was first acclaimed in the late 1960s as a new Madrid Hyper-Realism.

Like a Baroque master, he is proficient in realistic painting. His principal subject matter was the shabby and alienated way of life of displaced Spaniards who have moved to Madrid to seek a precarious living.

The artists who came to maturity in Spain during the 1960 and 70 had all received a thoroughly propagandistic “National Catholic” education. The slogan “una, grande y libre” means that Spain with one will, doctrine and leader is great because of its spiritual empire and free from the control by “jewish-capitalist states”

The positive legacy of Franco’s “nationalistic art” is essentially spiritual; he gave maturing Spanish youth something concrete to revolt against. Progressive Spanish artists turned their back on this government sponsored national Social Realism with a defiantly international, anti-social and anti realistic style.



Equipo Cronica, Manuel Valdés (1942-) and Rafael Solbes (1940-1980)

The Equipo Cronica founded in 1964 was emblematic of the Spanish art scene in the 1970s. This team was the most blatant PoP manifestation in Spain. They celebrated the mass media in a typically postmodern manner: images portrayed as disembodied cultural signs. Together with its blatant art-historical – and Spanish- self-referentiality they recycled the canonic images of the Iberian artistic patrimony, Velazquez was one of their main subjects, but also included El Greco, Goya Dali Picasso.



Above all these pictorial polemics covertly criticized the Franco regime and its rejection of modern political realities.

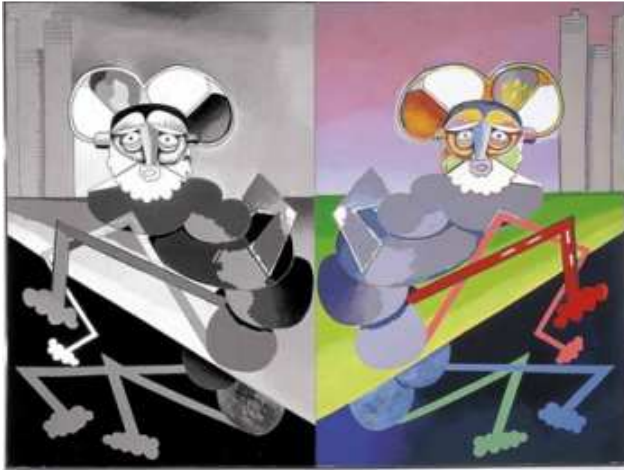
At the same time there was a radical shift as avant-garde artists discarded Picasso as their role model and adopted another historical role model:

Marcel Duchamp (1887- 1968)



This change in taste reveals a fundamental shift in modernist art-making: twentieth-century notions of creativity move from formal experiments to pure idea, leading to a questioning of the fundamental purposes of, and even the very need for art, In short , the change in focus from Picasso to Duchamp describes the move from orthodox modernism to postmodernism

With the death of the dictator Francisco Franco in 1975, and the restoration of democracy in 1977. Spain turned away from its tradition of introspection. In the economic boom of these times there was a renaissance of Spanish painting and art-collecting.



A significant Spanish movement from the mid 1970s was the New Madrid figuration and this is gradually being recognized as a significant turning point in Spanish Contemporary Art reflecting the transition to democracy, many of the artists from this group **are** now well established and still practicing This very loose collection of artists, none of which actually went to art school and all except one came from Andalusia all met in Madrid. it was a group that had lived up to this time under a dictatorship and their reaction against authority is very evident.

It is important to note that they also were rebelling against the traditional avant-garde and the rules that were imposed in art at that time, which were restrictive and said what you could do and what you couldn't do, what was contemporary and what wasn't.

Which implied that to be modern one had to be fashionable which they regarded as another form of dictatorship.

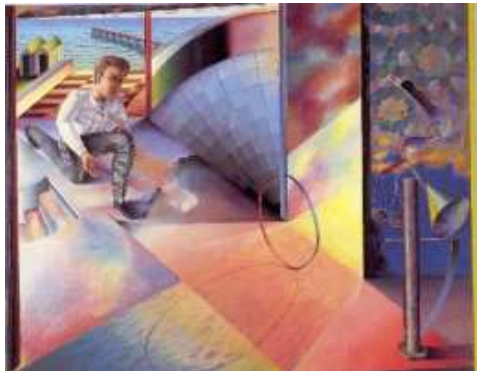
Amongst the artists that can be said to belong to this group are Gordillo (1934),



Manolo Quejido *La Mayor* 2004 180x180 acrylic canvas



Carlos Alcolea – *Swimming Pool* oil on canvas 126x170cm 1970



Gullermo. Pérez Villalta –

In ictu oculi - 1979 - acrílico s. lienzo - 140 x 180 cms

And of course one of the artists that I will introduce to you today Chema Cobo.

This group really reflected a change of Chip, they started once again being interested in painting for paintings sake.

Traditionally pre modern Spanish art was a form of communication chronicling historic and day to day events,



Diego Velázquez, The Surrender of Breda (Las Lanzas) 1634

its intention was to convey significant messages in easily read, visual media to simple people, also to chronicle events visually much as a newspaper photographer might today.

Today with increasing over exposure to information and images , contemporary artists draw on the uncertainty and instability of our age and give us fragments as Chema Cobo says



“I get the urge to paint the unpaintable, irreproducible things, like reflections that are so unstable and ungraspable like the reality that photography claims to reproduce, or the reality that film claims to reproduce, or the reality that we try to reproduce of ourselves”