

Resurgent Light

Juana Francés & Maria Helena Vieira da Silva

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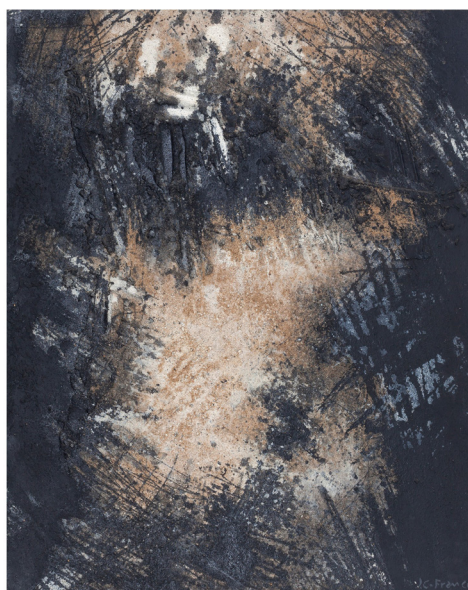
Mayoral presents an exhibition on Juana Francés and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva, two women who both experienced forms of exile and displacement and broke numerous codes for “women-artists”. Curated by Elena Sorokina, this exhibition brings together a selection of works created by the artists between 1958 and 1961.

As far apart in their pictorial language as they may be, both Juana Francés and Maria Helena Vieira da Silva have been inscribed into art history under the umbrella of *Art Informel* in postwar Europe. While Vieira da Silva has received a rich critical reception, Francés’ work is only now being discovered in France. This staged encounter of two women artists, both born in the Iberian Peninsula in countries which confronted patriarchal dictatorships, allows pertinent questions to emerge.

Mayoral invited Elena Sorokina, a curator and expert in contemporary art who previously collaborated with the gallery for a solo show of work by Manolo Millares (2017), to continue the important task of contextualizing and re-evaluating canonical readings of postwar artists by teasing out these questions. Sorokina extended the invitation to Pierre Légise-Costa, a writer, specialist in Iberian literature and personal friend of Vieira da Silva, whom she asked to contribute a text on each artist.



Maria Helena Vieira da Silva
Untitled
(1955)
Oil on canvas
60 × 73 cm



Juana Francés
Untitled
(1958)
Oil and mixed
media on canvas
100 × 81 cm

Both artists experienced forms of exile and displacement and broke numerous codes for ‘women-artists’

Born respectively in Lisbon in 1908 and Alicante in 1924, the lives of both Vieira da Silva and Francés were affected by the political direction their countries took. While the first left, the latter stayed.

Vieira da Silva moved to Paris in 1928 where she lived and worked for the rest of her life, except during the Second World War when she fled to Rio de Janeiro with her husband, the artist Árpád Szenes. Stripped of their nationalities because of their resistance to autocratic regimes, the couple were eventually granted French citizenship in 1956.

Francés chose to be a painter at a time when General Franco's patriarchal dictatorship decreed that women required the authorization of a male relative to work at all and were expected to give up their jobs completely when they married. Francés went so far as to travel to Paris whilst a student and became the only female founding member of the Spanish avant-garde group, El Paso.

Their respective geographies and social circumstances were unanchored and shifting and Sorokina argues that we are only just beginning to understand how they negotiated related questions of embodiment within the preconceptions of their time. The artists themselves resisted categorization as much as their work resists it today, she reasons. Two women. Two exceptions.

Their complex, layered compositions and dense spaces configure and rearticulate many of the major preoccupations in postwar art

"Both Francés and Vieira da Silva see the body as 'situation' rather than 'object,'" Sorokina contends, "the tactility of their spaces is more important than previously assumed."

Francés uses concrete, 'realist' titles, in which the word 'tierra' often appears. 'Tierra' is rich in significance; it can mean land, earth, ground, soil, dust and the world in general. She regularly combined many of those exact materials with her oil paints, gesturally displacing her

medium using water which she sprayed above a canvas outstretched on the floor. She was clear that her abstraction resulted from an "intimate necessity to express her world" and described her paintings as self-portraits¹. Her work was often read through the lens of the established male-gendered normativity, however. Her friend Francisco Farreras said, with the intention of praising her: "Nothing could make one think that behind that expressive visual strength, those powerful compositions created with paint and sand, there existed an eminently female presence"².

While the question of tactility is less obvious in Vieira da Silva's meticulously constructed expanding, dissolving and pulsating space-surfaces, they can nevertheless be seen through the lens of *situated knowledges*. They appear as marvellous movements of the embodied eye in the world which break apart the false 'objectivity' of universal systems of perspective as established in the canonical version of art history³.

The resurgent Iberian light

In his essay, Pierre Léglise-Costa observes how light resurges again and again in the work of both artists. In Vieira da Silva's work, he notes that pools of light and the opening of space which aspires to the infinite begin to illuminate the quasi-abstract geometrical precision of her compositions from the late 1950s. Meanwhile, in Juana Francés' work, one cannot help but be struck by the force of the brushstrokes that penetrate like a shard of light and pierce the depths of the complex, almost three-dimensional pictorial matter.

1. Juana Francés: *Informalism Was Also Female* [exh. cat.], Barcelona: Mayoral, 2020, p. 30 / 2. *Ibid.*, p. 47 / 3. Marsha Meskimmon. *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*. London: Routledge, 2003

Elena Sorokina is a curator and art historian. She is co-curator of the Armenian Pavilion at the upcoming Venice Biennial in 2022. Her next project "Forms of Fragility" opens at Rudolfinum, Prague, in October 2022. Sorokina was curatorial advisor of documenta 14 in Athens/Kassel. In 2020, she curated "Crystal Clear: Travels in Sustainable Exhibition Making" at Pera Museum Istanbul and previously worked with at BOZAR and WIELS (Brussels); Centre Pompidou and Musée d'Art Moderne (Paris); SMBA/Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and other institutions.

Pierre Léglise-Costa is an art historian, linguist and translator specialised in Portuguese speaking countries. He has worked as a professor at the Université de Paris VIII, Dartmouth College US and Sciences Po in Paris. Among his major curatorial projects are "Univers Pessoa" at Europalia Bruxelles, and several exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou, Paris and the Gulbenkian Foundation Lisbon. He is the

director of the Portuguese collection at Editions Métailié Paris, having published over forty books by major writers in the Portuguese language. He also the author of numerous books in the Portuguese language art and culture.

Mayoral. Gallery specialised in postwar art founded in Barcelona in 1989. In November 2019, Mayoral opened a second gallery in Paris. The gallery articulates an exhibition programme focused on Informalism and postwar art, both Catalan and Spanish, with artists such as Tàpies, Chillida, Millares, Saura, Guerrero, Zóbel, Canogar, Rivera and Francés. At the same time, the gallery also exhibits the work of key twentieth-century avant-garde artists such as Miró and Picasso. The gallery participates in art fairs such as Art Basel Miami Beach, Art Basel Hong Kong, TEFAF Maastricht, TEFAF New York, Art Paris, Art Cologne and ARCOmadrid.