

Joan Hernández Pijuan

Obras del 1980 – 2005

Opening, 1st September 2022, 5 – 8 pm
Exhibition, 2nd September – 19th November 2022

Is it possible to paint silence? Or the feel of wide-open space? In his life's work, the Catalan artist Joan Hernández Pijuan (1931-2005) set himself this task – one that seems unlikely to be mastered: he wanted to paint the unpaintable. He succeeded in creating images that enthuse and inspire – bold and reduced, and yet full of poetry.

Though his paintings appear abstract, Joan Hernández Pijuan never saw himself as an abstract artist. Nor did he want to associate himself with any particular artistic trend or movement. "I always try to paint as if every picture were my first," he once said of his working method, which was characterized by an open, unbiased view.

The starting point of his artistic work was the landscape of his native Catalonia. Pijuan had a studio in the small rural hamlet of Folquer, about 150 kilometres west of Barcelona. On long walks he roamed the broad plains around Folquer, where the landscape is barren and monotonous. But for Joan Hernández Pijuan, it nonetheless provided the ideal setting to reflect on how to translate the seemingly boundless space of the landscape into the limited area of a picture.

In order to process the slow voyages of discovery his eyes were undertaking out in the real world, Joan Hernández Pijuan worked with a variety of techniques. His images were often created using several layers of paint, his palette picking up the tones of the harsh natural world around him: the matt ochre tones of the dry earth and the sienna red of the sun-soaked rocks in the distance, the delicate greens of the springtime vegetation, and the pulsating white of the heat. In some of his works, the impasto colours have been thickly applied with a spatula, creating relief-like surfaces that almost seem to be moving. Often the top layers of paint are semi-transparent, allowing deeper layers to be seen, an effect that mirrors the way Pijuan absorbed the landscape on his long walks. Thus the vast expanse becomes a sequence of images superimposed one upon the other, each step forward creating a new image. A landscape does not stay the same. It changes. Not only in the rhythm of the walker's steps, but also in the changing seasons, in the constant cycle of growth and decay.

Ian Davenport

Mirrors and Light

Opening, 2nd June 2022, 6 – 8 pm
Exhibition, 3rd June – 16th July 2022

Using the handle of his brush, Joan Hernández Pijuan would scratch lines and structures into the still wet layers of paint, thus managing to combine painting with drawing. With this bold gesture, he confidently sidestepped all the disputes over paradigms in art history, century-long debates about which technique represents the pinnacle of artistic expression: drawing or painting. In his early images, Pijuan made use of drawn elements very sparingly. One of his motifs is the frequently seen set of borders that run along the edge of an image like a frame. Pijuan thus created a kind of picture within a picture – or a window that opens upon a landscape. In his later paintings, he was more inspired by the language of shapes that the landscape “speaks,” turning fields, villages and olive groves into abstract squares, rhombi and circles. From these forms he added airy woven patterns that stretched across the entire pictorial space.

In addition to his paintings, in which he combined oil painting and incised drawing, Joan Hernández Pijuan also created sketches on paper. Pijuan was not only interested in the quick, decisive work done with the strokes of a charcoal pencil, but also in the different properties that the paper itself can have, as the medium bearing the image. On his travels he collected different kinds of paper, which back in his studio he would cover with impressions of landscapes and spaces. These paper samples from all over the world thus became part of his artistic cosmos.

Joan Hernández Pijuan ranks as one of the most important contemporary Catalan artists. During his lifetime he received numerous awards for his work, which was shown in renowned galleries all over the world. Three times he was an invited guest at the Biennale di Venezia: in 1960 and 1970 as the representative of Spain, and in 2005 as a guest in a special show in the Italian pavilion. And he also had time to teach art to others, at the University of Barcelona and to students at the Escuela Superior de Belles Arts de Sant Jordi in Barcelona, his alma mater many years before.

Alice Henkes

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