

CONVERSATION ABOUT MANOLO MILLARES

**ELVIRETA ESCOBIO AND
ALFONSO DE LA TORRE**

LLUCIÀ HOMS – MADRID, 20/1/2017

On the AVE train heading to Madrid I reviewed the multitude of notes I have been taking over the last few weeks while reading here and there to form a concrete idea of the person behind the artist. I tried to put them in an order that would enable me to guide the conversation to the most interesting topics for revealing an intimate and personal view of the exchange with Elvireta Escobio, the woman who shared her life with Millares from age 14, thus complementing the more theoretical, more critical approach provided by the curators in the publication you hold in your hands.

Once in Madrid I met with Cristina Mayoral, who was waiting for me at the Atocha station. Together we made our way to Elvireta's home, where we were also met by Coro, one of her two daughters, and Alfonso de la Torre, a scholar with in-depth knowledge of Millares' artistic career and personal life.

My role in the work was not unlike that of a mere host, a guide who should use some skill to ensure the conversation between Elvireta and Alfonso flowed and thereby gradually draw out reflections, ideas, memories and emotions. I was not expected to outline either theories or new perspectives on the artist because they were the main figures.

We received a warm welcome and they immediately expressed excitement to begin talking. The house is beautiful, with high ceilings and filtered light. The works of Millares on the walls stand out in full force. Elvireta is soft spoken and she relies on Alfonso to verify that the dates she gives correspond to reality. Several times she repeats, "He is my memory. I know what has happened in my life but not when." Alfonso listens and lets her speak. Then, when it is his turn, he is capable of simultaneously clarifying the date and widening the focus to place the artist in his context. You can see that he is well versed in the subject.

It was a pleasure to listen to them together. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Llucià Homs: Let's start with the Canary Islands, a key element in Millares work, islands which, as an archipelago, often give the sensation of being threatened by the sea. Where what happens is strictly local and one is out of step with everything else. How did being from an island affect Manolo's beginnings?

Elvireta Millares: Islands have something that binds them to one another, but there is a huge difference between, say, the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands. The Canary Islands are geographically and in every other way very, very far away. Evidence of this is that Manolo didn't leave them until he was in his 20s, for the International Congress of Abstract Art at Santander in 1953... We got married in 1953 and then in 1955, 1956, we left for good. So the isolation was considerable; there was a connection to art through Eduardo Westerdahl and some outliers. But they were very removed from everything. He had a strong relationship with Barcelona: painters and writers, because it was a necessity – there wasn't any other way to connect. And Manolo didn't like to travel very much. He got a bit panicky.

L: In his first works a view on the ancestral emerges, like reference to incisions in rocks, the mummies of the beginning and this special weakness for archaeology...

E: Yes, archaeology... his passion for archaeology. He has a collection there [*she points to shelves full of small figures that you can't make much of from a distance*], and one of his daughters is an archaeologist. And the first Canarian pictographs, which are of Guanche symbols on the rocks in the ravines. This always held an enormous appeal. It was his way of holding on.

Alfonso de la Torre: He was always in modernity, in any case, because ultimately, when you look at his path, what you see is that he was always an artist permanently connected to the world despite the isolation of the Canary Islands. And many Canarian artists did the same as he, connecting this ancestral place that looks to the past as a launching pad towards the future. It is a driving gaze rather than a melancholic one filled with entropy. When he approaches modernity, he will do so through this gaze he cast over Las Balos, symbols, this sort of Mironian constellation...

E: And all of this was gradually creating the inescapable need for us to leave. Where to wasn't as important as where from, because it was a very complicated isolation.

A: Yes, after a difficult childhood, with the problems of the Spanish Civil War, the exile to Lanzarote, the constant changes in residence recounted in his memoirs. There were always constant changes.

L: Being very young – he would have been ten – what was his experience with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War? How did he experience it, and how was this rift then reflected in his work? Because on some level the family had very particular ideas and was politically active: his father, a university professor, left off – or was removed from – giving classes at some point; his uncle¹ as well...

E: A very leftist family.

Cristina Mayoral: Very intellectual, no?

E: Very well-known, and with a significant intellectual tradition going back generations. And he was a very tormented person... Manolo was always a very tormented person.

A: But he lived with joy, with the ignorance of childhood joy. He recounts this in his memoirs: the exile on Lanzarote, where he was let free for the first time, without family supervision. And he made his first drawings.

E: That moment in Lanzarote was very healthy, yes. It didn't last very long, but it was very positive...

A: Then in 1965, when his father died, he made the *Mutilados de paz* (Mutilated Peace) portfolio dedicated to him, the "first peace cripple I knew", which is like the aftermath of all

¹ Agustín Millares Carló

this pain, in the figure of this father who was weak, he says, but who had been moral, who had been honourable.

L: There is a transference of family values regarding dignity and regarding the artist's social standing. This father who displays dignity despite not being able to fight any more.

E: Yes, his father was a very, very weak person... many children, there was no money in that house; a bad childhood, very painful. Afterwards I met Manolo; I was 14 and he was 21, and we became sweethearts. We got married 7 years later.

A: Manolo says that he owes his love of poetry to his father, that he had inculcated him with his view of poetry. I recently finished writing a piece on Manolo that said: "An honest painter and no more." Sometimes we go back and forth about what Manolo was like, but Manolo always championed that, integrity.

E: Yes, I was touched by this naiveté of taking things so seriously. It is very difficult to live with someone who takes life so seriously. It's not that he didn't have a sense of humour, but certain things could not be mentioned... However, Manolo was very affectionate with his daughters, much more so than me in the sense that he got down on the ground and played with them.

L: Certain family values, this dignity and integrity, a cultural calling and a special sensibility for poetry. How did he experience the relationship with his family? On the one hand you have the drama of the work and at the same time this tenderness you notice in some of the photos we have seen. What was your relationship like?

E: Manolo and me? Well, very, very intimate because there were many things Manolo didn't get involved with, for example the relationship with art dealers since it strained him a lot. I think I protected him from this unpleasant part, for instance going to Juana Mordó's gallery because she owed us money. Meanwhile, he was in his studio working. We divided things up. I knew that all of this was very upsetting for him... and I did it. Just like when I signed manifestoes against the existence of political prisoners. He was somewhat fearful of police coming to the house because when he was a child there had been home intrusions like that. The police came in and searched everything and some of his brothers were sent to prison. That thought horrified him.

L: On the one hand, his work has a strong wrenching component; at the same time, he was extremely tender. Blackness, but the light at the end of the tunnel; brokenness and conversely the love that holds everything together... Is there an ambivalent element between the personal, the situation he was experiencing and the work?

E: Well, everything is a contradiction, as with every human being. He was shy, and yet in some ways he had a strong personality, let's say... [*She laughs and shoots a knowing look at her daughter Coro, who is participating in the conversation.*] My daughter here didn't experience it because she was a year or so old when he died.

Coro Millares: I heard something about it... [*They both laugh in unison.*]

A: His painting was never indulgent, and while we can admit that there is a lyric of exclamation and excess, he sometimes said: "Say firm things, hard things, and that's it." With no further

self-indulgence. Although José-Augusto França spoke of “the triumph of white”, I think that this back and forth between the first hessians and the last does not exist. It is true that at the end there is a little more room for poetry, even if only in the titles of *La búsqueda de la dimensión perdida* (The Search for the Lost Dimension), of *Los hoyos infinitos de misterio* (The Infinite Hollows of Mystery). But on the basis of what we call mature Millares you always have to talk about one thing: Millares developed his artistic career in 15 years. His mature life as a painter goes from 1957 to 1972. And this time is fleeting, fleeting. He died at 46!

E: Sometimes I think: But why was he so hard on himself? It’s as if he had the presentiment that he was going to die young and didn’t have time.

A: Yesterday I was reading José Ayllón’s book, the first important monograph on Millares from 1962. Ayllón says: “This man so preoccupied with death.” In 1962 he was a very young man. In Millares there are no fissures in either his painting or words... In Millares there is a clear objective and no time for distraction.

E: As if pursuing a very, very fixed target. And speaking of the last white paintings, I don’t find them less dramatic than the black ones. Everything is already calcined in them. It is by no means sunshine or light and wonder.

L: Let’s go a little deeper into the work: into the dramatic, the hessian canvases, the skin, into this element of trace, of scar. I find the works with holes very surprising, where you see the open wound. It very much takes me back to Miguel Hernández, specifically to the poem “He Came with Three Wounds”. The idea of gutting, the sanguinary, the brutal. What is it like to live next to a person who works with such visceral subjects?

E: I think that this moved him over to the problem of the real third dimension. This hole you are talking about is created when the flatness of the canvases is broken. It was a very traumatic encounter for him and from then on he never abandoned it. The paintings always have the pockmarks from firing squad executions on the walls, which still existed at that time. When we went through the Casa de Campo, you could see the blasts from machine guns. All of the holes had a changed meaning. Things are not always clear but when you look at them from different perspectives you see that there is a relationship.

L: And this desperation that his works sometimes convey, was it also conveyed in the personal, in the way in which he lived his life?

E: He had moments of depression, but he came out of them and it was never a destructive depression; the idea of death horrified him. He always asked us not to tell him the day he had an illness, because at that moment he would die. And that’s how it went; we never told him that he had a brain tumour, not even after his operation. We made up stories, like that his head had been struck. Even though he painted a lot, sometimes he would go a month without painting. I told him: “It’s fine if you never go back to painting. Since I love what you write, I don’t care what you do.”

A: When you see him painting in the films, Alberto Portera’s and the one from 1970, you see him engaged in an act that looks like an exorcism. Because when he paints he almost seems to go into a trance. It’s a kind of dissociation.

E: Like when sewing.

A: That is the culminating moment, when he becomes the hessian. In all of his painting there is constant mention of the body. The homunculus is one of the recurring themes running through his painting. The first homunculus is called *El fusilado* (The Executed Man), making clear that air of social victim that represents them. They are fallen figures.

L: That's why I referred to Miguel Hernández and "He Came with Three Wounds".

A: He paid tribute to Miguel Hernández in a triptych he dedicated to him.

A: Yes, he illustrated *Los poemas de amor* (Love Poems). There is constant mention of the body, the fallen body, the flayed body, to the whole world of the *vanitas*. Even when he is seen painting, in some of the actions he undertakes there is actually an act of murder with...

E: ... the knives.

A: And then the paroxysm of this act of trance is over, and he washes his hands. In one of these scenes he even jabs himself without meaning to. Then the picture, the blood, the painting, the knife...

E: Yes. I remember when he hurt himself; the camera was there. [*She is a bit stirred.*]

L: Let's move on to politics. At the beginning we were talking about the war, about how he experienced it in his youth, his relationship with his family, a family of cultured liberal Republicans. This dignity he lived with, this coherence, and then this moral desolation he finds around him. How did he experience the political situation in Madrid in the 1950s?

E: Well, like many people on the left did. It was a terrible situation of repression.

L: But with dejection? With rebellion?

E: Rebellion, I think with rebellion. But at the same time he was hamstrung because he couldn't express himself. There is a series of satirical drawings that he used to express himself. We had them in a folder hanging from the window of the bathroom overlooking the inner courtyard so the police wouldn't find them if they came. They are the drawings of priests. The Reina Sofía has eight or nine. [*They laugh timidly.*]

A: Drawings of priests engaged in all kinds of obscenities, in short, with large phalluses.

E: All very well endowed. [*They laugh openly, heartily.*]

A: In his correspondence with Antonio Pérez they were referred to as the drawings of "horses". "Have you made any more horse drawings?"

L: How did he experience censorship? Apart from these drawings that he hid... Was it something that worried him?

A: His preoccupations went beyond the limited scope of Spanish political turmoil, which, ultimately, as Antonio Saura said, was a life "of thistle and ashes, of sombre years". The subjects his paintings spoke of went beyond the narrowness of political difficulties. In any case,

I think his great vindication is the *Artefactos para la paz* (Artefacts for Peace). This was his great moment, in 1964, when the regime was celebrating 25 years of peace and he counter-commemorated it with these artefacts, a sort of sculptural creation. He told the critic Enrico Crispolti that they were neither paintings nor sculptures. They are as reminiscent of a tank as of a great beast, and they represent a form of counter-commemoration.

L: There was a moment, however, when the regime used avant-garde artists to show a certain openness at the international level. How did he experience this moment?

E: Yes, Luis González Robles took advantage of the El Paso group. I think the two sides took advantage of one another, with the clear intention of internationalizing the El Paso painters. Manolo signed a contract with Daniel Cordier and with Matisse in the United States. That was a great leap.

A: What brings us together today is Manolo's connection to Barcelona. The city allowed four artists from the El Paso group to go to North America with Pierre Matisse, whom Joan Miró was advising. The painters would not hold up were it not for their value beyond the regime's support. If you look today at the names included in the MoMA and Guggenheim exhibitions in the 1960s, we don't even know who some of them are. That is, only those with artistic value have stood the test of time.

E: Nor were all of the painters at that time left-wing. In El Paso itself there were those who were not leftists. I think the most important were Saura and Manolo.

L: This leads me to the present, with regard to how you can interpret the pieces, for instance the walls. In this moment of confrontation between Israel and Palestine, or between the United States and Mexico... What stance would Millares take today in the face of the problems society is undergoing, the great social debates?

E: I don't like to think about what could have been. I don't know...

A: Often when I am asked about the world today, I think a lot about what Manolo said when he wrote: "Man in crisis, the human being in crisis, the border..." I ask myself, and these artists of the 1950s who had discovered the concentration camps, who faced the nuclear threat as if a nuclear bomb was going to fall on them the following day, who in Spain lacked the freedom to access literature and film... ? That – that was a complicated world. I really like something you said to me [*referring to Elvireta*]: "We had hope; we were hopeful that there would be a better world."

E: Manolo more than me. I was touched by the faith Manolo had, seeing him sacrifice himself and fight... I am much more of a nihilist.

A: Since the subject of Manolo is always deep and painful, and to talk about his painting is to refer once more to the pain and to man running up against a wall, I will repeat a hopeful sentence by Manolo in *Papeles de Son Armadans* that says: "It doesn't matter that man has been broken if from him emerge silts of roses and renewing principles like fists." Everything has been a disaster but there is hope.

L: In 1955 you came to Madrid and found a society without freedoms and much poverty, which in no way could have failed to concern you.

E: We came, burning our bridges there. Here we already had friends: José Luis Fernández del Amo, the painters Rivera, Saura, and there was a connection. There was also one in Barcelona, but here it fell into place more easily. As I said before, it wasn't as important where we were going as that we left there. The El Paso group and the Escuela de Madrid were created at this time, and Tomás Seral opened his gallery.

A: Yes, of course. Fernando Fe, Buchholz, Clan... Clan was the first gallery in Madrid to exhibit Manolo. Those were times of bookstore galleries.

E: There was a lot, a lot to fight against.

L: The arrival of modernity in Madrid was not at all easy. It wasn't in Barcelona either.

A: There was a greater modern tradition in Barcelona. *Modernista* Barcelona, Picasso, Gaudí, etc. There was nothing in Madrid. All that existed were some attempts at a modernity that always revisited figuration. The model of the moment was Galería Buchholz doing something called the "Young Madrid School". It created a sort of new Cubism, a modern representation without great alterations to its order. Modernity practically did not arise until the arrival of El Paso and the exhibitions of the Ateneo de Madrid.

L: From Madrid to Barcelona. Millares exhibited in the El Jardín gallery in 1951 and with René Metras in 1966. Fifty years have passed since this exhibition and it is now that the Mayoral gallery is returning to Millares' involvement with Barcelona with a critical and rigorous work. When you arrived in Barcelona, what differences did you find in comparison with Madrid?

E: I don't know, because in Madrid we had our fingers in a lot more pies. We went to Barcelona for specific reasons: it was René Metras, it was Miró, it was Joan Prats, it was the Gaspar... We had a fantastic nucleus. Pomés was a very good friend; Gustavo Gili was a close friend as well. I don't know how to explain it... Barcelona was marvellous.

A: Following some digging we were able to do, I have wound up at the conclusion that his relationship with Barcelona was more important than his relationship with Madrid, at least at the beginning. And this was for several reasons. Firstly because through *Planas de Poesía* Manolo was already in contact with Barcelona in the early 1950s. The nexus was Eduardo Westerdahl, who during a conversation with Santos Torroella showed him Manolo's stuff. From their correspondence we know that Plácido Fleitas must have taken him some of his drawings. And in 1951 he had his first solo exhibition on the peninsula at El Jardín. In 1959 he was included in the "Cuatro pintores de El Paso" (Four Painters from El Paso) exhibition at Sala Gaspar. All of this is what has led me to think about the "Catalan Manolo". There is a lovely photo by Pomés where Manolo looks at the camera audaciously: it's 1959 and he commands the situation.

L: What was his relationship with cultural Barcelona like?

A: The true relationship was with Santos Torroella and Cirlot in terms of visits, although later the relationship with Cirlot deteriorated; they saw each other at less frequent intervals.

E: I remember Cirlot better. For me he was like a medieval knight, with the swords and that seriousness that characterized him. The first time we met, he said: "I like you so much I would buy you." Like a true medieval character. [*She herself laughs.*]

A: The other great moment was when Miró went to Sala Gaspar, to these young guys' opening, and took photographs with the four from El Paso in front of one of Manolo's paintings. It was Miró who recommended these four artists to Pierre Matisse. [*Speaking directly to Elvireta.*] This relationship with Miró will always remain in your lives through dedications, letters...

E: Yes.

A: Another interesting figure who appeared in the story is Joan Brossa. He told Manolo he had gone to the exhibition and said: "there the fire of life rages dry". Interestingly, in 1951 Manolo published what he called his "friends without faces", whom he had yet to meet, and most of them are Catalans.

E: Yes.

A: In one of the photographs the artists appear on the Rambla de Catalunya on their way to the El Paso exhibition at Metras on Carrer del Consell de Cent. [*Coro very fittingly pulls out the photograph being referred to from a folder and shows it to us delicately.*] They were coming from the Joan Prats hat shop, where they had been trying on hats. The photograph shows artists Canogar and Saura with Pomés; René Metras is also there.

E: Miró was a wonderful character! How he went out of his way with those young men who didn't mean anything to him. And how he supported Manolo when he received the telegram from Pierre Matisse. At first we thought it was a joke but then we learned that Matisse wanted to come to Spain to see Manolo's work at Miró's suggestion.

L: That is where Manolo's internationalization began in part.

A: Without a doubt.

L: The international period was brief but intense; there was an exhibition in a cultural capital practically every year. On one side are the galleries that began to articulate a certain international market, and on the other are the Venice and São Paulo biennales and above all the Hispano-American Art Biennial. How did all of this happen?

A: I must stress that this happened over hardly a decade. The internationalization of Manolo's work began in 1957 with the São Paulo Art Biennial, very important because it called attention to Manolo in North America. Why did they notice him? Because there was a pavilion dedicated to Jackson Pollock that was visited by all of the directors of the MoMA and patrons like Philip Johnson, Nelson Rockefeller, James Johnson Sweeney and Alfred Barr. The MoMA bought one of these hessians, Philip Johnson bought another and Rockefeller another. It is very hard to find an artist from this period who had a piece in these museums prior to the 1960s. It should be added that in 1959 Frank O'Hara, poet and curator at MoMA, visited Spain to prepare the exhibition "New Spanish Painting" at the museum. That was another important turning point. At that time they crossed the Atlantic to visit artists in their studios, as did Pierre Matisse, who travelled cities looking for works.

At that moment Elvireta asked us if we would like a drink. We had been talking for over an hour and she brought us a port wine with delicious salty almonds that she had toasted herself. She raised her glass and proposed a toast to "Catalan Millares".

The last remarks were about the recent revaluation of Millares' work on the market, the result of the indisputable quality of his painting and the universality of its subjects, the human being. Something we all agree on.

We left thanking them for the time spent and the dedication to have shared the most intimate details about an admired artist with us. We commented with Cristina that it would certainly be a precious memory. Now in the street, crossing Plaza de Santa Ana, the day was cold. But the sun shone.

Llucìa Homs

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