

MIGUEL MARINA (1915-1989). THE IMPOSSIBLE RETURN

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*In memory of all Basque Republican exiles,
whose absence impoverished Spain and enriched the world.¹*

Translated by Constance Marina

The 20th century will go down in history as the century of exile, from the White Russians who fled the Bolshevik Revolution to today's Syrian Refugees displaced by the internal violence in that country. But it was the Spanish Civil War that produced the first great diaspora of the last century and it had a profound effect not only on Spain, but also on those countries that took in Spaniards seeking refuge from Franco's repression.² One of the unique aspects of the Republican exile, apart from the huge number of those affected, was its exceptional duration. Franco ruled with an iron fist from his victory in 1939 to his death 36 years later, in 1975, surviving many who had hoped to return to a democratic Spain.

In the second decade of the 21st century, after so many wars and the death and massive displacement of millions of people, one may ask why we return with so much insistence to the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. After all, it was a minor war fought on the margins of Europe, and it would remain in the shadow of the bloody Second World War, which was of a brutality never before imaginable. But nevertheless, in 1936, Madrid was "the capital of the world," with much more at stake there than simply who would control the country.³

Perhaps Albert Camus expressed it best:

"It was in Spain [the author writes] where my generation learned that one can be right and be defeated, that might can destroy the soul, and that at times courage goes unrewarded. This, no doubt, explains why so many people in the world consider the Spanish drama a personal tragedy."⁴

¹ A preliminary version of this article titled "Miguel Marina, pintor: comunión secular de la memoria" was published in Carolina Erdocia Castillejo (dir.), *Artea eta Erbestea (1936-1960)/Arte y Exilio (1936-1960)*, Donostia-San Sebastián : Hamaika Bide, 2015, p.143-149.

² Bartolomé Bennassar, *La Guerre d'Espagne et ses lendemains*, Paris: Tempus Perrin, 2006.

³ Barolomé Bennassar, *Histoire des Espagnols*, volume 2 – XVIII^e-XX siècles, Paris: Tempus Perrin, 2011.

⁴ Quoted in Manuel Rivas, "El golpe," in *El País*, May 15, 2010.

In the following article, I aim to bring to light the work of the Basque painter: Miguel Marina (1915-1989), who remains unjustly unrecognized and who died in exile.⁵ I intend to present his story as one of the thousands of stories that capture the tragedy and dignity of the Republican exile and the transformation of that loss into artistic expression.⁶

An Adventure Novel

The life of Miguel Marina (fig. 1) is worthy of an adventure novel.⁷ He was born in Bilbao in 1915. When war broke out in 1936, he was named an infantry captain in the Republican army.⁸ He spent the whole war on the Northern front before his exile to France after the fall of the Republic. Setting off from Bayonne, he crossed the Atlantic in a small boat, accompanied by eight other Basque refugees to land eventually in Venezuela,⁹ where he stayed one year, making his living as a professional soccer player. Under surveillance by the Venezuelan Government as a “subversive,” he decided to set off in another small boat for Miami, accompanied by a French friend. A hurricane landed them on the coast of the Dominican Republic, where Marina lived for three years under Trujillo’s dictatorship. In order to escape from the island, he took a job as a stoker on a Yugoslavian merchant ship that was bringing supplies to Great Britain during the Second World War. On one of the trips, he abandoned ship in New York where he lived as an undocumented immigrant.

⁵ His work and travel were presented for the first time in the international colloquium *Artes y exilio (1939-1960)*, cited in footnote 1, but also in the exhibition titled *Miguel Marina* presented in the distinguished Colegio de Abogados in Bilbao in 2015 and in the Museo Vasco of Bayonne in 2016. That exhibition was supplemented by a catalogue in three languages edited by the Basque Government: Anthony Geist, *Miguel Marina*, Vitoria-Gasteiz: Basque Government, 2015. Formerly, the artist and his work had appeared in the September 1968, issue of *The Center Magazine*, a publication of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions.

⁶ Regarding this theme, see the minutes of the colloquium edited in 2015: C. Erdocia Castillejo (ed.), *op. cit.*

⁷ The bibliographic data are known thanks to the relationship that the author of this article had with the Marina family in California. They are supplemented by the Web page www.miguelmarinaart.com, in which his family includes sound files, and also by research in the archives of the Fundación Sabino Arana in Bilbao.

⁸ Archivo del Nacionalismo Vasco, Fundación Sabino Arana, Bilbao.

⁹ This adventure was recounted in the Vizcayan newspaper *Deia, noticias de Vizcaya* in 1982 and Marina also recounts it in a sound file: José de Abasolo Mendivil, “Peligrosa Singladura,” in *Deia*, 1982; “Miguel Marina describes his Atlantic Voyage,” in *miguelmarinapaintings* [online], interview by Madeline and Constance Marina, sound file, 8 min 58 s, undated, put on line in 2013. Link: <https://soundcloud.com/miguelmarinapaintings-1>

There he met Madeline, who would become his wife, and there two years later his daughter, Constance (fig. 2), was born. It was in New York where Marina began to paint seriously, working first as a student of the Spanish painter, Julio de Diego, and later as assistant to José Vela Zanetti, also a refugee, in the creation of the gigantic mural in the United Nations building, *Mankind's Struggle for Lasting Peace* (fig.3).

Without documents, and as such unable to earn a living in New York, Marina accepted an offer to manage a banana plantation in Guayaquil, Ecuador. Nevertheless, shortly after his arrival there, he realized that he had been duped. Madeline and Constance were able to return to the United States, but as Marina had no documentation, he stayed behind. He headed towards Mexico, thinking that from there he would be able to enter the United States. He related that while he was crossing from Guatemala into Mexico on foot, he found himself in the middle of the jungle where he came across a bar with the sign: *Here is where the brave die*. "My God [he thought], have I come so far to die like this?"¹⁰ After traversing Mexico on foot, he wound up in jail in Tijuana, which borders on California, where he remained for three months for being an undocumented immigrant. When out of jail, he came to the conclusion that the only way to be together with his wife and daughter, was to return to Spain. But the Bilbao of 1956 was not the same city he had left twenty years earlier and he realized that they had to leave. Once again, Madeline and Constance were able to return to New York but it took two years before Miguel was granted a visa.

In 1958, when the family moved to California where Madeline had a job in Montecito with the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Miguel would finally devote himself entirely to painting. It was precisely there in Santa Barbara where, as an adolescent, I met Miguel who was a family friend and neighbor. To him I owe my first images of Spain, as much for his saints with *txapelas* and *porrones* that filled the green maritime landscapes of his paintings as for the stories he told of the mountains and seashore of Euskadi and the songs he sang with his marvelous voice. He was part of an extraordinary community of bohemians, artists, writers and what Gramsci called "organic intellectuals,"¹¹ that included my parents. In these pages, I attempt to correct in some small way a historic injustice and make Miguel Marina's work known, being equally unknown in his country of origin and in his country of refuge.

As a painter, Marina was largely self-taught. And therein lies the source of a great part of his originality. He painted on blocks of wood, bricks rescued from the debris of buildings under construction and, with less frequency, on canvas.

¹⁰ "Miguel Marina describes his Atlantic Voyage," in *miguelmarinapaintings* [online], interview by Madeline and Constance Marina, sound file, 8 min 58 s, undated, put online in 2013. Link: <https://soundcloud.com/miguelmarinapaintings-1>

¹¹ - See for example the complete edition in French: Antonio Gramsci, *Cahiers de prison*, 5 volumes, Paris: Gallimard, 1983.

While I distinguish preliminarily three distinct periods in his work, the three have certain characteristics in common: the use of strong primary colors reminiscent of Gothic stained glass windows; elongated human figures, especially their hands and faces that evoke both Byzantine and Romanesque figures by directly facing the observer; religious themes, above all the Crucifixion and the Last Supper; images of the landscape of the Basque Country, more frequent in his last period; and a lyricism and profound emotion that pervade all his paintings.

Many of these characteristics appear in Marina's work dating from the 60s, as in this *Station of the Cross VI*, of 1960 (fig. 4). The stylized figures beside Christ look directly at us, with their hands raised or crossed in reverence, but the space they occupy is flat, with nothing to indicate time or place. The blue background is empty and the ground is decorated with little flowers. Apart from that, there is very little context.

As the decade progresses, however, Marina begins to fill in the blank spaces as in this *Iberian Christ*, of 1964 (fig. 5). Note the architectural detail of the tile roof above Christ's head, typical of the houses of the Basque Country in Marina's memory. From this point onwards, the tile roof will constitute an element that acts as a frame for a great number of his paintings.

We will see also, throughout this decade, a gradual proliferation of the emblematic landscapes of Marina's memory: seashores with moored boats, houses cascading towards the sea, saints with Basque berets, traditional wine pitchers, dishes filled with sardines and cod, with all of these elements acquiring a symbolic or totemic importance in his work.¹²

See, for example, this *Adam and Eve* of 1967 (fig. 6). In Marina's iconography, there is a proliferation of bridges that unite or link two opposite banks that are joined and separated at once while suspended over water. Interestingly, this painting of *Adam and Eve* is one of the few paintings that show a bridge with two arches reminiscent of the San Antón Bridge of Bilbao (fig. 7). The juxtaposition of a bridge from the center of Bilbao with the bucolic scene of Adam and Eve suggests that in Marina's memory Bilbao is a kind of Garden of Eden. It is a Lost Paradise, as all paradises are, and exists in memory to be recovered only in fragments.

A turning point in Marina's work seemed to take place towards the end of the Sixties in relation to an incident that occurred at that time. On January 17th, 1966, a B-52 bomber of the United States Air Force exploded while refueling

¹² The symbolic aspect of Marina's work is explored by Víctor Fuentes in April, 2016: Víctor Fuentes, "Miguel Marina: un alma del exilio volcada en la pintura," in *Puente Atlántico del siglo XXI, boletín interdisciplinario de la Asociación de Licenciados y Doctores Españoles en Estados Unidos* (ALDEEU), April, 2016, p. 103 on.

over the fishing village of Palomares on the coast of Almería. Of its load of four hydrogen bombs, three fell on the ground and one in the sea, contaminating two square kilometers of agricultural land.¹³

Marina's indignation found its expression in a series of drawings and oil paintings titled simply, *Palomares*, which was exhibited in the Esther Bear Gallery in Santa Barbara in 1968.¹⁴ Aesthetically they are radically different from his earlier work, as if the Byzantine saints were no longer a match for the threat of a nuclear catastrophe.

There is a strong surrealist influence in this series, and it reminds me especially of Picasso's *The Dream and Lie of Francisco Franco*, a series of engravings that the painter from Málaga produced in 1936 and 1937 as his indignant reaction to the military revolt headed by Franco against the Spanish Republic.¹⁵

Marina's *Palomares* series is more geometrical than Picasso's engravings (and in this sense also reminiscent of *Guernica*), but the phallic image and grotesque figures create a kind of visual chaos that evokes the nuclear disaster narrowly avoided in Palomares. (fig.8 & 9).

After *Palomares*, we can distinguish a second period in Marina's work that continues for approximately another decade. The elongated Byzantine figures continue to visually anchor the paintings at the same time that the primary colors grow even more vivid. Religious themes continue to dominate but the blank spaces begin to fill up with figures, which the art critic for the local newspaper, *The Santa Barbara News Press*, Richard Ames, called Marina's *horror vacui*.¹⁶ This fear of the void fills his paintings with swarms of floating angels, vegetation, traditional wine pitchers, earthenware dishes of sardines, little houses and hills. They acquire a greater sense of perspective as they lose the flat background of his early work. Compare, for example, this *Annunciation* of 1970 (fig.10) with the same theme painted eleven years later, in 1981 (fig.11).

¹³ Randall C. Maydew, *America's Lost H-Bomb: Palomares, Spain, 1966*, Manhattan: Sunflower University Press, 1997; Raphael Minder, "An Air Force bomber Crash Leaves Scars in Spain," in *The New York Times*, June 21st, 2016 (On line version: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/21/world/Europe/spain-palomares-hydrogen-bombs.html?ref=world>)

¹⁴ A few of the *Palomares* drawings, together with some paintings of the *Stations of the Cross* series were shown posthumously in the exhibition *The Spanish Nexus: Spanish Artists in New York, 1930-1960*, shown at the Instituto Cervantes in New York City from November 17, 2009, to January 10, 2010.

¹⁵ Marie-Laure Bernadac, Paule du Bouchet, *Picasso. Le sage y le fou*, Paris: Gallimard, 2007.

¹⁶ "Fear of the Void." See Richard Ames, in *Santa Barbara News Press*

Esther Bear retired, closing her gallery in 1977,¹⁷ and from that time up until his death in 1989, Marina would not show his work again. Nevertheless, it is in this final period that for the most part he created his finest work as it became more intensely personal and lyrical. He abandoned religious themes so as to explore the landscape of memory, recreating images of the Basque Country. In a certain sense, it portrays a double nostalgia, one both formal and thematic. On the one hand, the Romanesque and Byzantine echoes formally evoke an artistic past that is recoverable only by evoking a bygone style. On the other hand, the landscape reconstructs thematically a vital past that is intuited from these scenes and images. It is precisely in this juxtaposition where the visual and emotional power of Marina's work lies.

We conclude with some examples.

The Pilgrimage, of 1980, represents the celebration of a saint in the countryside (fig.12).

The mysterious *Woman in Green*, of 1982, anchors the painting while other elements seem to move towards her in the bottom part of the painting (fig.13).

Memory of Cataluña doubtlessly refers to Marina's deployment at the Catalanian front after the fall of Bilbao. Nevertheless, we see here a representation of peace and plenty (fig.14).

With *This is My Country*, in 1987, Marina focuses more deeply on his memories of his Basque homeland (fig.15).

In this same year, he paints *The Outskirts of Bilbao*, with a church on the riverbank, hills rising in the distance, and a table replete with food and wine on the left, thus inviting us to a secular communion with memory. The presence of food and wine in the paintings of his final period function as an icon or emblem of plenty, a community and secular communion that persist in his memory and are depicted in bold colors. The color blue, in particular, seems to tinge these paintings with nostalgia (fig.16).

In the last year of his life, Marina painted an homage to his native province, *Vizcaya I* (fig.17). I'm inclined to identify the smallest figure on the bridge, a man contemplating the images below in a secular communion with memory, as Marina himself. In one of the last entries in his diary, Marina wrote:

¹⁷ Esther Bear Gallery. Records 1954-1977, Archives of American Art, The Smithsonian Institution. Constance Marina, "Miguel Marina. Extended Biography," in miguelmarinaart [online], undated. Link: <http://miguelmarinaart.com/biography-extended-english.html>

“I remember Spain more with each passing day, and at the same time, I want to forget about her. I’ve lived more than 40 years with a foot astride each ocean, and nevertheless my memory always returns to the sweet and green mountains of the Basque Country [...]. Soon I’ll turn 74 years old and I’ll never return to my beloved Basque Country; that’s why my paintings, like a gigantic mirage, are memories of my beloved land.”¹⁸

I should like to end with an image from the last painting that Marina finished before his death, *Bigarrena* (fig.18). He represents in it the boat of the same name in which he crossed the Atlantic with eight companions, bringing him to the exile in which he would spend the rest of his life. The names of his shipmates are written on the painting, ending with his own: “Miguel Marina, stowaway.”

¹⁸ Miguel Marina, *Diary*, 1989, private archive.