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# Fabulous Immediacies and Epic Trajectories: Joan Miró's Late Paintings

by **Tim Keane** on June 20, 2015

*Joan Miró in front of his painting, "Le Vol d'Oiseau par le Claire de Lune" (painted 1967) (photo c. 1970s. © Artists Rights Society, NY)*

How did postwar New York painting influence one of its foremost European progenitors?

This question is posed as a partial rationale for Nahmad Contemporary's current show *Joan Miró: Oiseux Dans L'Espace*, which features one of the Spanish painter's earliest abstractions alongside nine of his large-scale oil paintings from the '60s and '70s.

Speaking late in life about the influence of American painting, Miró said the new art "showed me the liberties we can take, and how far we can go, beyond the limits. In a sense, it freed me."

*Say what?* One of the most imaginative pioneers of 20th-century art needed to be further "freed" by the likes of Rothko, Pollock, Kline & company?

Judging from the works at Nahmad, it's more reasonable to claim that American painting stoked the aging Miró's innate and seasoned audacity. It also increased the dimensions of his paintings. American models may have inspired him to use dripping, staining and a wider openness in representing space, all of which augmented rather than altered a vision that is arguably one of the most distinctive – and by now one of the most familiar – in the history of Western art.

The Miró-America affair, it seems, began early. The American expatriate Ernest Hemingway purchased one of Miró's first mature works, "The Farm (1921-22), now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. And it was there in the international mélange of Paris in the 1920s that Miró shed his initial realism. He steeped himself in avant-garde poetry and aligned with the Surrealists.

While his works relied on automatic drawing, he surpassed Surrealists such as Salvador Dali and Francis Picabia when capturing the essential, dream-like condition of physical reality and its fabulous substructures.

Miró's imagery is in this sense purely *sur*-real. His paintings conjure microscopic, amoebic and cosmic forms, configurations which themselves constitute the startling and largely unseen realities that human beings contain and which contain human life. He frequently evokes the cellular sequences of human reproduction and the

astral dimensions of the universe. Sometimes his art abstractly diagrams both of these marvelous zones at once. His imagery is both primal and exacting. It gives the illusion of living on the canvas.

Unlike many other Surrealists, none of Miró's paintings can be interpreted through decoded symbolism or paraphrase. His fellow Spaniard, poet Federico García Lorca, summed up the painter's art as one that "comes from dream, from

the center of the soul, there where love is made flesh and incredible breezes of distant sounds blow." Lorca's poetic take points to how the painter constantly confounds our differentiation between interior and exterior space.

*Joan Miró, "Le Cheval de Cirque (Circus Horse)" (1927), oil on canvas (oil, gold and silver paint, Indian ink and white gesso on burlap), 24 x 19.8 inches (photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York)*

And like the American artists who were to follow in his wake, Miró was ruthlessly pragmatic when it came to using or discarding the innovations of his forerunners and peers. He claimed to have borrowed from Cubism so he could "kill perspective." Then he deliberately sought to "break the guitar" of Cubism through techniques that could be an AbEx how-to manual *avant la lettre* – an all-over compositional method featuring recurrent forms and motifs, calligraphic and ideogrammatic flourishes, open color fields and a skillfully achieved concord of bold flatness and subtle depths.

By mid-career, his work had galvanized the New York art world. The Museum of Modern Art held an exhibition of Miró in 1941, and the painter's breakthrough series of small works called "Constellations" were exhibited at Pierre Matisse's gallery in 1945. Miró's immediate influence on the American avant-garde is clearest in the work of his longtime friend, Alexander Calder, as well as the paintings of Arshile Gorky and Jackson Pollock. In 1948, Pope Clement Greenberg canonized Miró in a critical study.

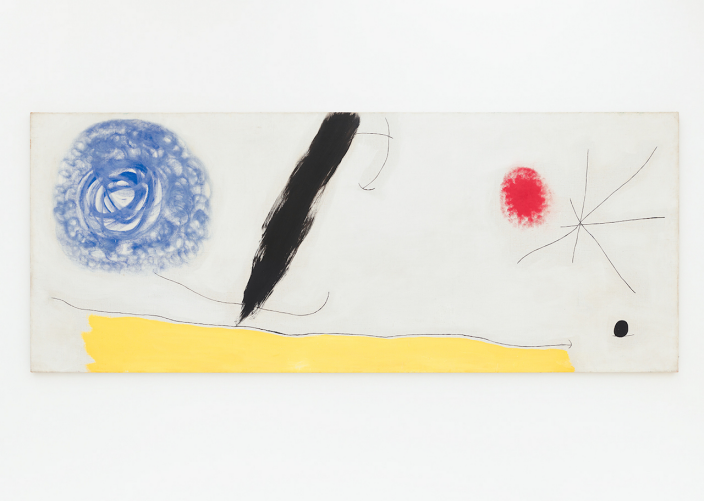
And the love was reciprocated by Miró. When he visited New York right after the war ended, the work he saw there hit him "like a punch in the chest." Working on commissions in the States through subsequent decades, he continued to pay close attention to developments in the New York painting scene.

These genealogies are interesting enough in themselves. But the paintings at Nahmad don't need historical justification. They stand by themselves as grand finales within a body of work that joined such life-affirming conditions as conception, birth, flight and daydreaming, to the more menacing dimensions of our world: the nomadic, the unknowable, and the chaotic.

"The Sorrowful March Guided by the Flamboyant Bird of the Desert" (1968) is a study that draws on themes of exile and wandering. It features a cryptic arrangement of parallel and convergent black curves, lines and circles against a white background. The conjoined circles dominating the lower plane suggest an ancient pathway from earth to sky. Each circle contains discreet internal imagery – green, yellow and red biomorphic spots, actual human footprints in black paint, and dense calligraphic squibs.

*Joan Miró, "La Marche pénible guidée par l'oiseau flamboyant du désert (The Sorrowful March Guided by the Flamboyant Bird of the desert)" (April 4, 1968), oil on canvas, 76.75 x 154 inches (photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York)*

Above that spherical chain an abstract red and black bird perches on a sloping black band surrounded by additional black strokes of paint – energetic, aggressive lines pointing nowhere and everywhere. A blue spherical cloud-like form in the upper plane suggests a kind of azure-colored sun. A splatter of red paint against one of the networks of black lines looks like blood shed by rifle fire. There's a kind of unfolding and ominous interplay between the animal and human domains and the unforgiving nature of unpeopled terrain.



*Joan Miró, "Oiseau éveillé par le cri de l'azur s'envolant sur la plaine qui respire (Bird Woken by the Cry of the Azure Flying Away Across the Breathing Plain)" (January 3, 1968), oil on canvas, 51.2 x 127.2 inches (photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York)*

"Bird Awoken by the Cry of Azure Flying Away Across the Breathing Plane" (1968) takes a far more spare, lyrical approach to its comparably spellbinding forms and colors. A bird-like trajectory is indicated by a thick, feathery stroke of black paint that dominates the center of the picture while blue, red and yellow geometric forms generate chromatic and formal counterpoints. Thinly traced lines bisect and extend in various directions, accentuating the simultaneous effects of vastness, floatation, and liberation.

"Bird in the Night" (1967) seems an indirect nod to painter Robert Motherwell, who wrote often about Miró, citing the Spaniard's art as one of "primeval energy in which everything is attracted to everything else, as visibly as lovers are." In this Motherwellian Miró, undulating red and black outlines loop into overlapping shapes while smaller calligraphic accompaniments and blots round out the four

corners of the picture. The painting's melancholic lines and map-like coursing correspond to "signs of an imaginary writing" that Miró once claimed he sought from painting.

"Figure with Three Strands of Hair, Birds, Constellations" (1976) is a direct product of Miró's longtime friendship with Alexander Calder, a connection that has yielded numerous exhibitions pairing these two artists, from the early 1960s and continuing to this day. "Figure" is a work Miró had agreed to produce in exchange for Calder's "*Quatre Ailes*"(1972), an outdoor sculpture housed at Miró's foundation in Barcelona. He completed "Figure" the year Calder died and two years later chose it as the work to give to the late artist's family. The work is a study in both joy and sorrow. Its interlocking, dynamic white bands linked to lively round forms allude

to Calder's famously kinetic sculptures and mobiles, while the black background and blood-red staining indicate prolonged pain and mourning.

*Joan Miró, "Le Vol de l'oiseau par le clair de lune (The Flight of the Bird by Moonlight)" (October 30, 1967), oil on canvas, 51.2 x 102.25 inches (photo by Tom Powel Imaging. Courtesy of Nahmad Contemporary, New York)*

The show's centerpiece is without a doubt "Flight of the Bird by Moonlight" (1967), an enthralling color field painting. Its predominant green expanse is symphonic in itself, throbbing in various tones and textures. A large, orange, moon-like orb is suspended within the green field. Much smaller round forms – blue, yellow, mauve, black, chalky white – orbit around the larger sphere. A black wing-like band streaks across the lower plane. The human desire for bird-flight is dramatized within the frightening recesses of a beautifully silent universe.

As helpless beings thrust into the world without our consent, space itself may be forever alien to us, but Miró's visionary work shows us that our explorations and imaginations can provide reason enough to treasure being here.

Joan Miró: Oiseux Dans L'Espace *continues at Nahmad Contemporary (980 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through July 18.*

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