ALMINE RECH

Antoni Tàpies
The Practice of Art

Sep 15, 2023 — Jan 7, 2024 | BOZAR - Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels, Belgium

As part of the Spanish Presidency of the Council of the EU and on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012), Bozar presents the most important Tàpies retrospective in almost 20 years.

The exhibition, organised by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, in collaboration with Bozar and the Fundació Antoni Tàpies, offers a comprehensive overview of Tàpies' work, comprising more than 120 paintings, drawings and sculptures.

After his self-portraits and works influenced by Surrealism and Dadaism, the exhibition displays Tàpies' first “matierist” paintings, produced in the 1950s, which incorporate raw materials, marks and signs. But beyond the artist’s experimentation with form and material, which continued throughout his career, the visitor can also penetrate the mystical, philosophical and political dimensions of the Tàpies universe.

Manuel Borja-Villel is the curator of this first Tàpies retrospective in Belgium in almost 40 years. This exhibition, which opens the Tàpies Year ("Any Tàpies"), has its European premiere at Bozar and will then travel to Madrid, at the Reina Sofía Museum, and to Barcelona, at the Fundació Antoni Tàpies.

In the autumn of 2023, Bozar is devoting a major retrospective to Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012), a key figure in post-war modern art.

The exhibition begins with Tàpies' early drawings and self-portraits and continues with the “matter paintings” of the 1950s and the objects and assemblages of the 1960s and 1970s.

This was followed by the varnish paintings of the 1980s, which he had begun a few years earlier during the early days of democracy in Spain. The exhibition also presents works from the 1990s, during which Tàpies continued his formal and material experimentation that had always been at the heart of his practice.

Often associated with “matierism” or “informal art”, Tàpies' artistic practice was based on gesture and the use of modest and unconventional materials on canvas. He used sand, string, dust, hair or straw, suggesting that beauty can be found in the small, unexpected and everyday.

“Sometimes my work pays tribute to insignificant objects: paper, cardboard, rubbish...”, Tàpies explained. The artist's hand intervened, according to the critic Jacques Dupin, to “gather them up and save them from abandonment, fatigue, being torn, from the ravages of man and of time.”1

Tàpies managed to create an infinite number of textures and reliefs on his pictorial supports, which he also called “walls” (in reference to his family name. Tàpies means “walls” in Catalan). He also incorporated new materials, such as latex, emulsion and tar, applied in thick layers, which he scratched, slashed and hollowed out. Thus the painting became a “battlefield” where hand-to-hand contact with the material is palpable and makes the work three-dimensional. In these thick pastes, Tàpies inscribed and incised graphic and symbolic signs: triangles, circles, crosses that evoke archaeological, mystical or historical references.

For the artist, these walls are like “talismans”, with great evocative power: “Everything unfolds in a much wider field than the one delimited by the format or the material content of the painting. The latter is, in fact, merely a support that leads the viewer to the infinitely wider game of a thousand and one visions, of a thousand and one feelings [...] The ‘subject’ can therefore be in the painting or simply in the viewer's head.”2

Therefore, his work is not only a study of matter but also explores the perception of reality and human nature.

At the same time, Tàpies' art is intimately linked to the history and politics of his country, which was affected by the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and Franco's regime.

“If I paint the way I paint, first of all it’s because I am Catalan. But, like so many others, I am affected by the political drama of Spain as a whole”, wrote Tàpies. “In my painting I want to inscribe all my country’s difficulties, even if I cause displeasure: suffering, painful experiences, prison, a gesture of revolt. Art must live the truth.”3

The centenary of Tàpies invites us to take stock of an oeuvre that resists decryption. The

intellectual halo that surrounds it is permeated with discourses on the history of science, the mysticism of Eastern religions and political philosophy.

A self-taught artist of the post-war period, Tàpies reflected on the human condition, his own historical context and artistic practice, in particular the limits and contradictions of painting.

His prolific oeuvre is scattered throughout the world.

1 Antoni Tàpies, La pratique de l’art, Gallimard, 1971, p. 91.
2 Ibid, p. 208.
3 Ibid, p. 85-87.