ALMINE RECH

Antoni Tàpies

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Almine Rech-Brussels is pleased to present "Antoni Tàpies", a museum-quality selection of 22 paintings, created by Antoni Tàpies (1923-2012) during his last two decades. Indeed, over half of the works on view have been featured in museum and gallery exhibitions, and most are documented in related publications. This is his first solo exhibition in Belgium since 1985, when the Musée d'Art Moderne, Bruxelles (now Musée Modern Museum) organized a survey. This exhibition marks the co-representation of the Estate of Antoni Tàpies.

In 1955, Tàpies started working in a 15th Century farmhouse in the Montseny Mountains, 50km north of Barcelona. This building's thick, deteriorating walls likely inspired him to rough up his canvases, treating them more like walls to be graffitied, stained, scarred, nicked, and patched. He presented his first "wall paintings" at the 1956 Biennale di Venezia. From then on, many of his paintings resembled walls. After all, *Tapia* is Spanish for wall. Because of his thick impasto paintings that sometimes feature amorphous blobs, most historians tie his oeuvre to Tachisme, or Art Informel. Others find his linguistic system's inscrutability indicative of surrealist *l'écriture automatique*. Just as Willem de Kooning's "late" paintings from the 1980s shined a light onto his oeuvre, Tàpies' "late" paintings provide new insights, as this exhibition makes patently clear. In contrast to earlier impastoed surfaces that bar access, his "late" paintings exhibit a decidedly lighter touch, indicative of his artistic and spiritual struggle to wriggle free from matter.

Artist and author Sir Roland Penrose concluded that the "ultimate purpose [of Tàpies'] art is transcendental," that is to "shock [the viewer] in order to rescue him from the madness of inauthenticity and to lead him into self-discovery." Although Penrose never explained his use of "transcendental," Tàpies' late paintings appeal to values espoused by mid-19th Century New England transcendentalists, who advocated personal freedom and the role of subjective intuition to counter objective empiricism and skepticism. Like the earlier transcendentalists, Tàpies studied Eastern religions, was not a dualist, revered nature, and appreciated science. Consider paintings like *Sadharma-Pundarika*, whose title references the most famous Mahāyāna *sutrā* (Buddhist scriptures relayed by monks) and *Dharmakaya* (both on view here), which the Dalai Lama defines as the space of emptiness, where matter dissolves.

Although no books by Thoreau or Emerson are listed in Tapies' library catalogue, there are enough parallels to call him a "contemporary transcendentalist," who felt (like them) that much of reality remains hidden, inaccessible to human beings. And what better way to depict transcendence than to display ineffable symbols or to adhere odd objects, thus capturing the mystery of everyday castaways, such as *Collage de la fusta, Claus i corda, Cistella i 3,* and *Portes cobertes.* French art critic Michel Tapié observed, "[this] practice gives tension to the dialogue, always of the highest quality because of the very acceptance of the secret as a secret, a generator of the most effective structures of desire."

Tàpies' painting *Esgrafiat* (Catalan for "sgraffito") suggests that he eventually grew tired of covering everything up, and started revealing and unsealing, rather than merely concealing. In addition to his marking its surface with recurrent symbols like the "T" and black Greek cross, he added three eyes with which to see more clearly and raked the sand to reveal a barely legible peace sign hovering beneath. The profile in *Paisatge i tassa* features what look like eyes or thought bubbles, one of which reflects an overflowing cup, a sentiment mirrored by the empty tin-can eyes in *Sédas*, which is Catalan for "thirst." Suddenly, the envelopes in *Díptic dels sobres* [SM1] open up, while one imagines *Matèria ocre amb X* to be an oversized square envelope, sealed by several signatories. Unlike his earlier impastoed surfaces, these paintings typically display what lies beneath, and several even appear lyrical. Even *El Meu índex,* this exhibition's most vividly material painting reveals more than it conceals.

This exceptional exhibition thus offers viewers the opportunity to explore firsthand Tàpies' unconventional use of *sgraffito,* a technique traditionally associated with plaster walls and ceramics, whereby plaster or slip is scratched, leaving tracks of the color of the dried under-layer. Although his approach to *sgraffito* is unusual in an art context, it is familiar to everyday activities such as scribbling on the beach, finger painting, incising soft materials, smearing ink or smudging chalk, letting translucent fluids bleed, puncturing surfaces, or veiling with transparent fabrics. In fact, no fewer than five paintings here exhibit sand/mud scribbles, three are awash in varnish splashes, two feature scratched clay, while *Ou Blanc* hosts a massive plaster egg incised with impenetrable imagery. Every painting exhibits smears, streaks, and/or drips that set its tempo, a pause (much like a film still) in an otherwise ongoing, dynamic process.

Given this exhibition's emphasis on lyrical marks, what Tàpies termed "meta-poetry," this particular grouping could be said to interrogate his array of symbols and preference for gestural strokes. I imagine some viewers being tempted to decode these paintings (his letters, numbers, and symbols resemble Rebus puzzles), yet it is actually far more rewarding to consider each one a mental springboard or ambiguous touchstone meant to trigger ideas or aid free association. Tapié remarked, "[A]s communication it is unfathomable, secretive. It is not an enigma to be unraveled, for that would mean that once solved its content would be exhausted. It is a secret, existing as an end in itself, whose key is never revealed, maintaining with marvelous clarity a dynamic state of fecund freedom."

That said, it's worthwhile pointing out several recurring motifs visible here. *M i grafismes* features a giant letter M, which signified the will for 13 Century Catalan mathematician/mystic Ramon Llull, who devised *ars combinatorio,* a system for divining truth. The M reappears as a mouth (*Boca I punt vermell, Paisatge i tassa* and *Mirall de vernís)* or as mountains (*Sadharma-Pundarika* and *Paisatge i tassa).* Transcribing the texts of the four paintings whose letters are written backwards (potentially visible in a mirror) and/or inscribed in sand or clay proves a Sisyphean task. With its twelve pieces of hand-ripped tape concealing varnish blobs, *Colors Sublims* recalls either redacted texts or what Jacques Derrida termed *sous rature,* whereby words are crossed out to indicate language's inevitable inadequacy.

Tàpies rather envisioned his art facilitating "self-knowledge" by inspiring spectators to meditate upon his paintings, which he considered magical objects, "a kind of talisman with the power to heal by touch." Of course, he didn't literally imagine spectators touching his paintings the way they might fondle a relic, rosary, or cross. However, he purposely fused sight and touch, enabling spectators to easily imagine what it must be like to touch his paintings' surfaces. And this exhibition offers a wide range of surfaces to imagine touching from gritty, sandy surfaces to cold metallic surfaces, 3-D forms, stitched appliqués, flowing curtains, textured canvas, fabric swatches, varnish spills, greasy finger paints, scratched surfaces, crackled varnish, peeling paint, incised surfaces, woven canvases, protruding envelopes, clay surfaces, and plaster shapes.

Over five decades, Tàpies participated in nine Biennale di Venezia exhibitions (2005, 1993, 1982, 1978, 1977, 1958, 1956, 1954, 1952); winning the Unesco Prize and David Bright Award in 1958 and the Golden Lion for Painting in 1993, no doubt an unbeatable record. In 1998, Tàpies permanently installed his winning installation *Rinzen* (1992-1993), whose title means "sudden awakening" in Japanese, at MACBA. Not surprisingly, another notion of "transcendental" is "sudden illumination of the soul," or rinzen. *Llit*, on view here, likely refers to that installation, which features a massive bed, magically suspended in space. His art has been the subject of nearly 100 museum surveys in scores of countries on five continents.

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