

Exhibition December 2, 2015 – February 29, 2016

Sabatini Building. Floor 4

Juan Giralt



Cruz fija (Fixed Cross), 2000. © Juan Giralt. VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

Juan Giralt (Madrid, 1940-2007) was a self-taught artist whose beginnings were inscribed within the informalism reigning in the Spanish art of the fifties. During a brief stay in the Netherlands at the end of that decade, he came into contact with the CoBrA group and started to define a more personal pictorial vocabulary that was susceptible to a new interpretation of figuration. From then on his work was characterized by a combination of languages and interests, and he became one of the leading figures in Madrid's New Figuration movement during the seventies and eighties. In his last years, he gradually reincorporated abstraction without wholly abandoning figurative elements, which remained present in his constant use of collage and the painted word.

The debate on figuration and abstraction, traditionally posited as a dilemma, was overcome by Giralt by means of an extremely personal synthesis of both languages, ultimately resulting in a negation of their difference. His work is also individualized by the use of media and formats that provide alternatives to so-called 'painting-painting', such as glass or methacrylate supports and, very especially, the use of paper and collage, which became the artist's hallmark. In the first he encountered both a means of investigating figurative gestural automatism and a more conventional instrument of preliminary study for painting, while in the second he found a tool to support the expressive and paradoxical tension between the factual and immediate and the imaginary, and between the palpably physical and the intangible. This interest in contrast led him to reveal the different phases of production of his work. Rather than concealing the creative process, he made it, and the crude and impure appearance it conveys, part of the work's essential content. In his own words, "I like painting that's heavily *battered*. Pictures that gradually cook like a stew on the canvas in a direct process seem to preserve the life and energy accumulated during the working sessions you've devoted to them. They have their own story, they lie, they hide things, they sometimes leave a peephole that allows you to guess what they were, they can presumptuously flaunt something that's

very evident at first sight, and yet their *raison d'être* lies in the elegance with which they hide a banal prior development."

Without aiming to be exhaustive, this exhibition is presented as a retrospective of Juan Giralt's work that emphasizes two especially fertile periods. The first is the decade of the seventies, represented by a selection of paintings and works on paper that sequentially illustrate his progressive abandonment of informalism. The other is his final period, from 1990 until his death in 2007.

After initially probing in various directions, his work connected in the seventies with the break with informalism, a programmatic development that defined a generation. There appeared in his work a new semi-figurative mode of representation full of organic elements and apparently incomplete or halved figures, partly childish and partly grotesque. The conventional terms of painting are inverted: color is the object of concerted study (the reverse of abstract painting in the strict sense), and space enters into a dialogue with the rupture of perspective proper to the Cubist tradition. Most of his drawings, in the meantime, serve a purpose contrary to their traditional use. They are an exercise in automatism that gives rise to scenes producing apparently chaotic connections, with figures that defy anthropomorphism



Sin título (Untitled), 1994. © Juan Giralt. VEGAP, Madrid, 2015

through a visibly visceral nature that combines the organic with the mechanical.

“Almost all my life as a painter, I’ve fought to shake off the successive prisons I’ve shut myself up in, either for lack of time or because I had too much of it.” The artist’s words serve to underline a new break in the late seventies, this time with New Figuration, which he had been associated with in a manner that was perhaps restrictive and over-hasty. He thus disappeared from zones of influence, occupying instead a position on the silent margins. It was now the decade of the eighties, and the rapid alteration of Spain’s art system generated a new market and curatorial scene that did not appear to absorb his production. After this interim, his return in the nineties had the character of a revival based on perseverance and the achievement of a fully mature pictorial tone. While this painting preserved traces of his earlier phases, it was significantly more assertive, and the new period is characterized by larger canvases,

surfaces divided into parallelepipeds, an intensive use of collage, and the appearance of the painted word. Decontextualized mechanisms relating to early modernism appear alongside anatomical diagrams suggesting a corporal softness expressed by bodily organs, vessels and tissues, while planes of color coexist with old illustrations of various kinds ranging from the religious to the educational, or with decorative patterns. Such elements, falling between the naive and the camp, are treated as found objects laden with memory and capable of activating unexpected unconscious associations. They maintain the heterodox and paradoxical intentions of his earlier painting, though with a higher degree of conviction and determination, and they constitute a definitive rejection of categorization within a single pictorial language. Antithesis and paradox, the organic and the visceral, and the invisible to the eye are combined with what presents itself most immediately and apparently reasonably to the gaze.

The hybrid and anti-dogmatic impulse that breathes life into Giralt’s painting is underscored by these words written in one of his notebooks: “I’m bothered by die-hard postures that leave no room for doubt. That’s why I like to profane the doctrines and theoretical creeds that are used to justify certain forms of painting.” Next to this is his concept of painting as a struggle: “I’m only satisfied by the pictures I’ve painted directly, where there’s been a struggle, with corrections and mistakes. That’s when it seems the painting has been alive, and that energy is trapped there and transmitted by it.

The painting breathes in a different way. The painting that’s been placed there by a hand that’s left its mark, lumpy or blurred or scraped.” Following Giralt’s own penchant for contradiction and antithesis, this exhibition allows that concept to be interpreted in two ways: either as relating to the precise moment of effort and physical contact with the materials, or as referring to his practice throughout a lifetime.

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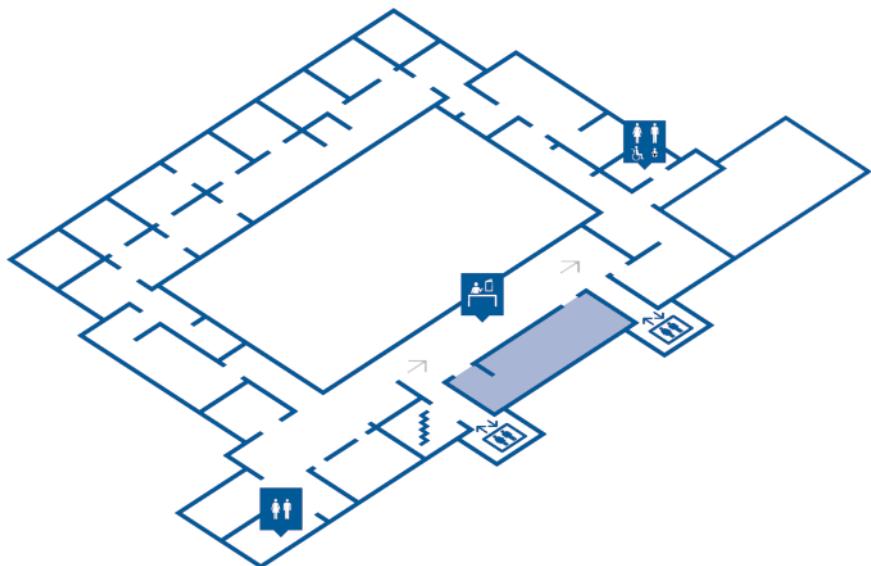
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Education program developed
with the sponsorship of
Fundación Banco Santander

