

Exhibition February 21 – June 24, 2024
Sabatini Building, Floor 4

Antoni Tàpies

The Practice of Art



Gran pintura (Great Painting), 1958. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. © Comissió Tàpies, VEGAP, Madrid, 2024

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The Practice of Art is the largest retrospective to date on Antoni Tàpies (Barcelona, 1923–2012). Its title refers to the first compilation of his writings, published in 1970. Through a display of about two hundred pieces, some of them brought together for the occasion after being dispersed for decades, the show surveys the work of this Catalan artist who experimented with the expressive properties of matter and language without ever ceasing to reflect on representation and painting itself.

At the age of just eighteen, Tàpies suffered a severe lung illness that kept him convalescent throughout 1942 and 1943, when he devoted himself to copying drawings and paintings by artists like van Gogh and Picasso. The self-portraits produced by Tàpies at the start of his career veer away from academic drawing and evidence the influence of referents like Matisse or the aforementioned Picasso. Portraying themselves offers artists the chance to exercise the study of anatomy with the model closest at hand. Tàpies's early work also points to the introspective nature that was to characterize his production from then on. In this early phase, in which he was perceptibly influenced by artists like Joan Miró, Max Ernst, and Paul Klee, some of the themes and materials that were to structure Tàpies's artistic language started to take shape, such as self-referential symbols and calligraphies, perforations and incisions, landscapes, and the ambiguity of the body and sexuality.

In 1948, together with figures like the poet Joan Brossa, the theorist Arnau Puig, and other painters like Joan Ponç, he founded the Catalan avant-garde group Dau al Set, formed around the magazine of the same name, which played a key role in the artistic renewal of postwar Spain. For a little over three years, Tàpies's painting underwent an iconographic shift accentuated by fantastic and lyrical qualities of magical reminiscences. The use of geometric elements and the study of color soon aroused the artist's interest in matter, which became visible in enigmatic canvases with suggestively dynamic spaces.

Awarded a scholarship by the French Institute of Barcelona, Tàpies lived during 1950 and 1951 in Paris, where he met Picasso and came into contact with the international avant-gardes. The series of drawings *Historia natural* (Natural History), produced in the French capital, is a response to Max Ernst's 1926 portfolio of *frottages* with the same title. In comparison

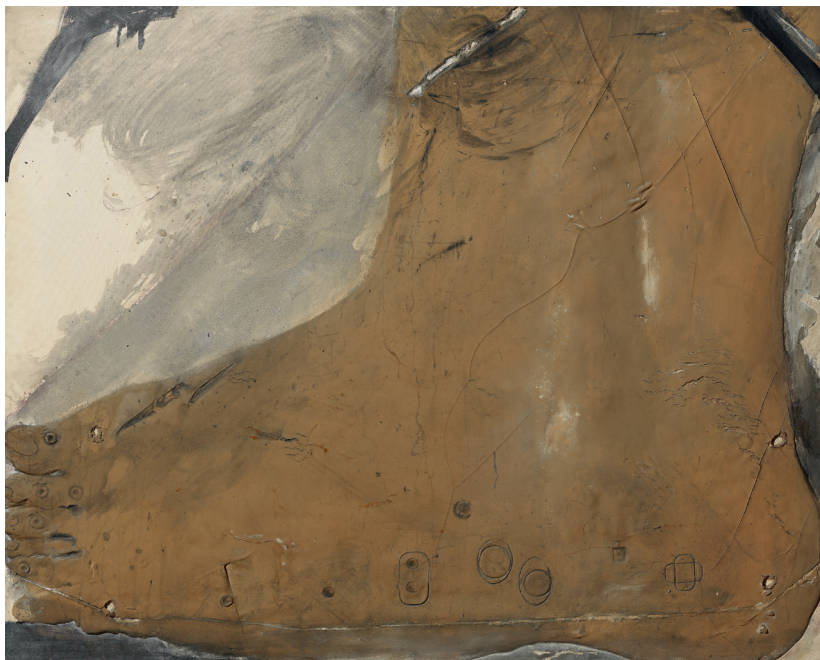


Composició (Composition), 1947. Colección MACBA. On long-term loan from the Generalitat de Catalunya. Colección Nacional de Arte. Antigua Colección Salvador Riera. © Comissió Tàpies, VEGAP, Madrid, 2024

with earlier works, a more searching political and literary character underlies this series, in which the artist tries to find an answer to his desire to understand the world and reflect on the human condition.

From 1953, a major watershed occurred in his career, which now moved toward an expression of matter that would transcend its apparent link to abstraction. This allowed him to subvert the traditional concept of the pictorial surface, incorporating dense textures similar to those of a partition or wall to which he applied incisions, marks, imprints, perforations, and so on. The material trace left by the passage of time

that is visible on all sorts of walls gives these paintings an almost geological “mural” appearance whose common denominators are degradation and deterioration. The critical reception of these works soon placed the artist in a prominent position among the national and international avant-garde. A series of monographic and group exhibitions, together with the award of several prizes, consolidated the general recognition of his work, which was shown at major art fairs like the Carnegie International, the Venice Biennale, the São Paulo Biennial, and the Documenta in Kassel, and at institutions such as the MoMA and the Guggenheim in New York.



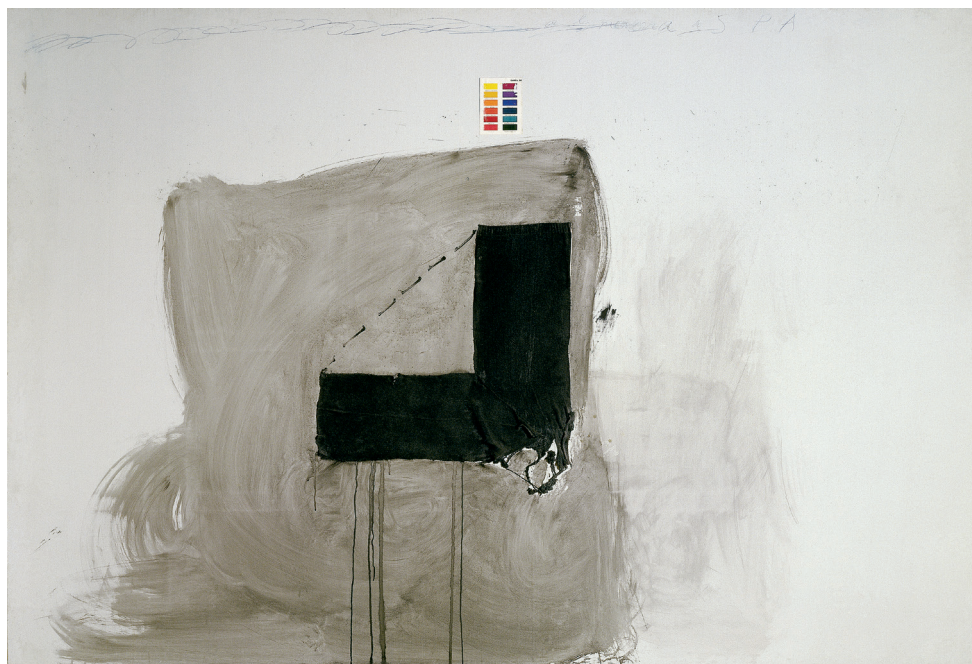
Matèria en forma de peu (Matter in the Form of a Foot), 1965. © Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona/VEGAP, Madrid, 2024. Photo: © Foto Gasull

Besides compiling a selection of Tàpies's paintings, *The Practice of Art* also stresses the importance of his works on paper and cardboard, which have perhaps not received the attention they merit in his production as a whole. According to the artist himself, drawing and *grattage* allowed him to undertake a painting free of brushwork that wrote and inscribed itself on the support.

Throughout the 1960s, Tàpies's production of matter paintings was given another twist by the incorporation of elements of exterior reality that responded to his concern to broaden the notion of realism. The action of adding recognizable objects, often used and banal, entailed an approximation to the real and concrete that indicated a step further in terms of representation. It was at this point that the question of the human

body acquired growing importance in his work, as became patent in the explicit representation of certain body parts. Tàpies explored visual ambiguity by shaping or deforming what is represented, though the matter still acquires the form of what it is associated with, as in *Matèria en forma de peu* (Matter in the Form of a Foot, 1965). The paintings do not “re-present” anything, because there is no separation between subject and object. Rather, the important thing is their becoming.

Tàpies's political commitment against Francoism gradually became more explicit. In 1966, for example, the artist was arrested after taking part in a clandestine meeting of students and intellectuals at the Capuchin convent of Sarrià (Barcelona), which had been convened to discuss the creation of



A la memòria de Salvador Puig Antich (In Memory of Salvador Puig Antich), 1974. © Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona/VEGAP, Madrid, 2024

the first democratic university students' union, and in 1970, he went to a clandestine assembly held at the monastery of Montserrat to protest against the so-called Burgos trials, in which opponents of General Franco's regime were being tried by a military court. His political implication against the dictatorship was personal and artistic. In the artist's own words, "the social and political situation of my country has always had a repercussion on my work. I think this has to do with the fact that I do not find the concept of art for art's sake valid. I have always maintained a utilitarian attitude to art." This is evidenced by works approached as if they were history paintings, like *A la memòria de Salvador Puig Antich* (In Memory of Salvador Puig Antich, 1974), a tribute to the young anarchist executed by the regime.

At the start of the 1980s, Tàpies's painting showed slight formal and conceptual changes that pointed to a refinement of the material weight, though without dispensing with an element as distinctive as the "wall." The formats gained in size and the brushstrokes spread across broader surfaces, making the scale contribute to the more sedate character of these works with scarcely any variations on the artist's recognizable repertoire. It was in this phase that the use of varnish came to the fore.

This material with its golden tonality brings together chance and unpredictability, and plays with transparency, disorder, the stain, and the formless. It fuses almost figurative forms that are then diluted in abstractions of disturbing ambiguity. His use of this material coincided with a growing



Celebració de la mel (Celebration of Honey), 1989. Private collection, Barcelona. © Comissió Tàpies, VEGAP, Madrid, 2024

interest in Asian art and culture. Works like *Celebració de la mel* (Celebration of Honey) are paradigmatic of both aspects.

In the last two decades of his life, the work of Antoni Tàpies became impregnated with a certain sense of melancholy. The artist was still widely respected, but there is a predominant feeling of despondency and continual references in his work to death, illness, and pain. Gaining awareness of the

proximity of death, Tàpies found ways of living with the certainty of the passage of time, but not to wallow in despair or self-pity. The paintings of those mature years do not lose the uneasy indeterminacy between figuration and its dissolution that runs through Tàpies's whole career, but rather evoke erasure and oblivion. They are recollections and experiences that form part of the memory of his specific gestural expressions.

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