



Untitled, c. 1951-1952 | Mixed media | 26 x 47,5 cm | Guerrero Family Collection | © José Guerrero, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2015

agogy at the impact of pop art, Minimalism and Conceptual Art. Guerrero rose to the occasion and managed to reinvent himself without betraying himself or being cast adrift on the shipwreck of Abstract Expressionism. His return to Spain had probably been key to all this. As a result, the storms that had battered him calmed and he was finally able to put together the different pieces of his soul and, like his admired Picasso, lead a highly original “return to order” driven by his clear urge to create.

Yolanda Romero, curator of the exhibition



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José Guerrero

The Presence of Black, 1950-1966

Exhibition: 08.05. – 05.09.2015

Organised to commemorate the centenary of the birth of José Guerrero (Granada, 1914 – Barcelona, 1991), this exhibition is the first show devoted to the painter’s American years, which shaped his subsequent artistic path. It presents his first forays into abstraction in the form of prints and experimental portable frescos from the early 1950s (which reveal a painter with a keen interest in the possibilities for integrating painting in architecture); it continues with his wholesale assimilation into American Abstract Expressionism in the mid-1950s; and it concludes with his return to his homeland in 1965, when he reconnected with his Spanish roots. The show includes pieces never seen before in Spain from Spanish and North American private collections and museums.

Following its presentation in Granada in 2014, at the José Guerrero Centre and the Palacio de Carlos V at the Alhambra, and after being on at the Casa de las Alhajas in Madrid, the show ends its itinerary at the Fundació Suñol in Barcelona, a city which played a unique role in José Guerrero’s life and work. His major retrospective, at the Fundació Joan Miró in 1981, helped raise awareness of his work among the young generation of Spanish artists during the Spanish transition to democracy, who saw in him both a friend and a great painter. He presented his final pieces in the city in 1990, assisted by gallerist Carles Taché. And after his daughter Lisa moved to Barcelona with her family, he spent long periods here up until his death, in 1991.

BIOMORPHIC ABSTRACTION

José Guerrero arrived in the United States in November 1949, after marrying American journalist Roxane Whittier Pollock in Paris. He was armed with the skills he had acquired first at the Escuela de Artes y Oficios in Granada and then, after the Spanish Civil War, at the Escuela Superior de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. He had also gained valuable experience on a tour of postwar Europe, including firsthand experience of works by the leading avant-garde masters (Matisse, Picasso, Gris, Miró and Klee). He discovered the new capital of modern art, New York, at a time when Abstract Expressionism was all the rage. Despite everything he had learnt in the Old World, he was overwhelmed. In his own words:

I remember the shock of seeing the first Pollock exhibition and the ones that followed. I was burning up inside. This fire drove me on and on to paint ... Every time I saw those pieces, I stared at them so intensely that afterwards I had to go and look out of the window at the sky to find something familiar. This was new work, the like of which had never been seen before in Europe. I'd often say to Roxane: "I'll need five years to absorb this change in life, atmosphere and art."

In the previous years he had explored new plastic values, and his work—ever eager for modernity—had become stripped down to its bare figurative bones, hinting at an incipient abstraction. But there was still tension between these two strikingly different languages or ways of seeing the world. This tension seemed to seek some sort of resolution in *Lavanderas* [Washerwomen] (1950), which he saw as the start of his major transformation, right after his arrival in the United States. This promising work was followed by a series of decidedly abstract pieces made at Atelier 17, which William Hayter had moved to New York from Paris in 1940. In this studio, as well as honing his printmaking skills, Guerrero also tried out a formal vocabulary he might have seen previously in central Europe.

In the 1930s, artists such as Hans Arp, Willi Baumeister and, above all, Joan Miró (who spent several periods of time at Atelier 17) had popularised what would become known as Biomorphhic Abstraction. And, some years later, its poetics had a huge influence on the early work of artists labelled as Abstract Expressionists, including Baziotes, De Kooning and Rothko, among others. In this context, Guerrero drove his evolution towards abstraction to its final consequences, as can be seen in the series of prints selected for this exhibition, which were the very first pieces he exhibited (and sold) in the United States. He also painted several related paintings, such as those from the Wright Museum of Art at Beloit College and a number of mural-like pieces.

PAINTING AND ARCHITECTURE

Guerrero was keen to make a name for himself as a muralist, and for years he worked on a project exploring how to rethink the thousand-year-old tradition of frescos. This research, triggered by one of the masters who had influenced him most, Vázquez Díaz, is what he decided to work on in Paris once he had finished studying, and for which he won a grant from the French government. Once in New York, his interest was redoubled: Mexican muralism had had a major impact on American artists working for the Works Progress Administration, and almost all the great Abstract Expressionist painters went through a similar stage with architecture.

It is no surprise, then, that Guerrero was shaped by this all-pervading atmosphere in New York. His overriding ambition in this field, though, was to include new materials from the construction industry in his paintings, using asbestos roofing tiles, firebricks, concrete blocks, etc. This show is the first time that such an extensive set of these “portable frescos” has been on display since they were first exhibited. We see a *material* Guerrero emerging from his European roots shortly after arriving in New York.

FROM BIOFORMS TO GESTURE

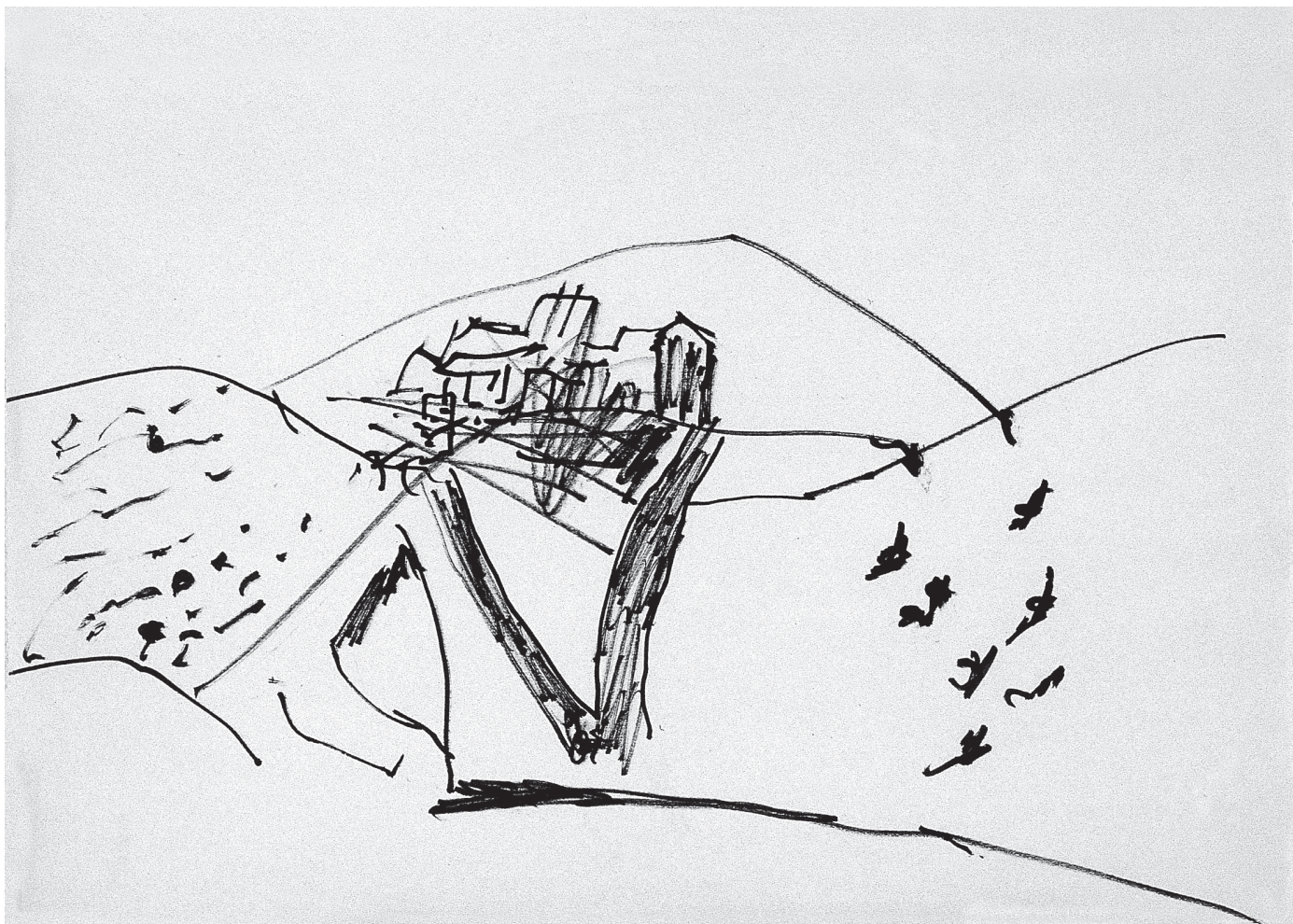
Biomorphic Abstraction, within whose parameters he had made his first American work (in the three aforementioned directions: printing, which he soon abandoned; mural work; and painting on canvas), didn't necessarily mean a complete absence of figuration altogether and Guerrero preferred to use it as an intermediate or transitional stage in the evolution of his work. He developed it from the early to mid-1950s. In 1954, Guerrero became friends with James Johnson Sweeney, who was very interested in the experimentation in Guerrero's portable frescos and acquired one—*Three Blues*—as director of the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum. Sweeney included this piece in several group exhibitions and helped organise Guerrero's first solo exhibition, alongside Joan Miró, at The Arts Club in Chicago. This exhibition presented a set of portable frescos and canvases, including some large-scale ones such as *Black Cries*—painted after the birth of his daughter Lisa—and for Guerrero it was the key to opening professional doors in America. Indeed, a few months later he began working with who would be his American gallerist until 1963: the prestigious Betty Parsons, who worked with Pollock, Rothko, Clifford Still and Barnett Newman, among others.

Guerrero gradually abandoned the focus on signs in Biomorphhic Abstraction to centre on what he saw as his closest interest: “Spaces, the tension in spaces ... breathing.” His early, organically evolved forms gradually vanished. According to Juan Manuel Bonet, Guerrero didn't evolve towards either Abstract Impressionism or Minimalism, the two prevailing trends, but remained true to the concepts of the first generation of Abstract Expressionists, “exploring the idea of lyricism and producing action, energetic art”. He also says that during these years Guerrero “saw things in scattered, stranded terms” which would converge in the 1958 exhibition *The Presence of Black*—a title that referred both to the painter's mood and the recurring presence of black in his life.

A few months before that exhibition, the Graham Foundation in Chicago awarded him and other artists such as Wilfredo Lam and Eduardo Chillida a grant to promote collaboration between artists and architects. The subsequent arguments left him exhausted and close to collapse. He suffered a breakdown that revealed a deep crisis and led him to undergo psychoanalysis. Some time later he visited Rothko's studio, which spurred him to abandon his experimentations with murals, in the late 1950s: “I asked him if he would like to work with architects, since his work was monumental. He said he wasn't that interested, because buildings get knocked down and changed, and the work would be destroyed, and he didn't want any kind of commitment. That conversation left one thing clear. I was working on a silicone fresco and a series using different materials, and I stopped work on it immediately.”

ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

In terms of his plastic evolution, the works in the period 1955–1958 progressively and decisively left organic and



Untitled (Viznar), 1965 | Ink on paper | 22 x 32 cm | Guerrero Family Collection | © José Guerrero, VEGAP, Barcelona, 2015

biomorphic traces behind to centre on more gestural painting. He fashioned paintings with forms that revealed his intense emotional activity when facing the canvas: his creative drive came from the unknown and the states of anxiety and doubt that assailed him. In 1956 he painted the monumental *Signs and Portents* still in biomorphic registers, condensing and taking what he had worked on over the previous years to its maximum expression. But other works from these years began to show clear signs of change that bordered increasingly on action painting. The aims are clear and the achievements, consistent. The titles reveal his attachment to a form of abstraction uncommitted to any trend: *Yellow and Brown* (1959), *Blues and Black* (1958), *Blue Variations* (c. 1962), etc. Guerrero was now asserting his own original style and gesture (provocative colours added to dramatic shapes where black was often centre stage) to express his emotional world on canvas.

MEMORY REDISCOVERED

However, around 1962–1963, shortly after finishing his psychoanalysis, there was a fresh twist: he suddenly produced a run of titles in Spanish, with figurative and emotional echoes of his home country: *Albaicin* (1962), *La chía* (1962), *Sacromonte* (1963), etc. This appeared to be a prelude or mental preparation for his return to Spain in 1965, where he stayed for a little over three years. Guerrero changed scene. His creative language remained relatively unchanged, but, as Juan Antonio Ramírez recalled, he did bring about a shift

in readings of his work by giving them a theme to match his new circumstances. His return to Spain twenty years after he had *escaped* in search of desperately needed fresh air was driven by both family and professional reasons (related to the New York school's flagging commercial pull in the face of a thriving Informalism in Spain). The Guerreros set up home between Frigiliana (where they acquired and renovated a farmhouse he would return to every summer), Cuenca (encouraged by Gustavo Torner and the atmosphere created around the Museo de Arte Abstracto Español) and Madrid.

On a summer trip around Andalusia he visited the Víznar ravine, where Federico García Lorca was murdered, and made a set of figurative sketches shown here together for the first time. Fruit of this intense (re)connection, Guerrero painted *La brecha de Víznar* [The Víznar Breach] (1966) and other monumental canvases evoking Lorca's work. Guerrero was always clear that *La brecha de Víznar* marked a turning point in his career: “I think it opened a new window ... I've always been fascinated with opening a window, a path, a breach.” The experience he got from this work, which was also the scene for an intense psychodrama and an experimental laboratory, opened the way for a new stage in his work. At this key moment, his skill in handling gesture and large planes, his sensibility for the vibrant edges of masses and transparencies and, in short, his mature diction were all put at the service of a new iconographic repertory to display his own memory.

This Spanish interlude marked a highly fulfilling stage before he returned to New York—calm in spirit and arms—to face the new art scene in his adopted city, which was