

Mario Naves, "Melding The Modern And The Mythic"

The Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres-García (1874-1949) is an artist whose work has not been much in evidence in New York in recent years. For those of us who have been brought to a standstill by the cursory picture found in group shows here and there, the fact that Torres-García's work has been consigned to the storage racks of our cultural institutions is frustrating. Almost as frustrating is the mini-retrospective of his works-on-paper currently at Cecilia De Torres Ltd. This is not to say that the exhibition, which serves as a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the artist's death, contains negligible works of art. Quite the contrary: There is much to delight the eye in this handsome and heartfelt show. It is frustrating in that the exhibition whets our appetite for a more comprehensive overview of Torres-García's oeuvre. For what is in evidence there is an art that is simultaneously modern and, if not quite antimodern, then deeply nostalgic for the primordial. That it is so without overt contradiction makes Torres-García all the more intriguing. Although Torres-García was born in Uruguay, where he died, his formative years as an artist were spent abroad in a, to put it mildly, discontinuous manner. Following the trajectory of the drawings included in the exhibition, one sees him traveling from Barcelona, New York, Paris, Montevideo and Madrid. (He spent two years in Italy as well, a sojourn not documented in this exhibition.) In Barcelona, he assisted Antonio Gaudí, and in New York he enjoyed the patronage of Isabelle Whitney. In 1926, Torres-García settled in Paris and met up with a veritable who's who of Modernism: Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Hans Arp and Sophie Tauber-Arp, Jean Hélion, Julio Gonzalez (a friend from Barcelona) and, most significantly, Piet Mondrian. Torres-García's signature pictographs owe much of their organizing structure to the rigorous neo-plasticism of the Dutch master. Torres-García's constructivism; however, was less pure than that of Mondrian and given to a pancultural symbolism. A wide variety of artistic and cultural motifs—from African masks to Greek amphoras, from the art of Northwest Coast Native Americans to the Eiffel Tower—informs his pictorial vocabulary. Torres-García's compositional armatures serve as cubbies within which abbreviated, linear symbols are stacked and packed. That architectonic framework takes on the character of a beehive—efficient, busy and dense. The artist's iconography is concise and snappy, reflecting his love of the high-end cartoons he discovered while living in New York. Although those emblems carry specific correlatives—in *Tradición* (1936), one sees Torres-García graphing out his artistic philosophy—one doesn't necessarily have to read each piece as a kind of cosmological rebus. His pictures, by turn whimsical and stoic, add up as art even if we remain unsure of their ultimate meaning. Torres-García's universalist diagrams, with their melding of the modern and the mythic, bring to mind the stirrings of the New York School. A small pencil drawing, ca. 1937-38, could well be the blueprint for Adolph Gottlieb's series of pictographs. Of course, there was always something a bit phony about Gottlieb's primitivist longings and there was, one gathers, a modicum of self-delusion to Torres-García as well. Here, after all, was a worldly and sophisticated man who claimed to be "a primitive." His paintings, however, transmute such incongruity into an earthy and engaging vision. "The artist," wrote Torres-García. "is a moral being." Such an axiom may seem naive to us today, but that says more about our own been-there, done-that culture than it does about Torres-García's encompassing and humanistic art. Here is a Modernist in need of rediscovery. Joaquín Torres-García: 1874-1949 is at Cecilia de Torres Ltd., 140 Greene Street, until July 31.

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