

Reading Miró: Exploring the Politics of *Failure*

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Arguably, the outcome of the Spanish Civil War constituted one of the monumental political failures for progressive politics, and possibly, for art in the twentieth century. It signaled the abrupt and brutal termination of a pro-worker, pro-peasant regime that to varying degrees, allowed many flowers to bloom, and many schools of thought contend (to paraphrase Mao Zedong) – along with the various pro-Soviet communist parties, democratic socialists, Trotskyists, and Christian Democrats, the anarchist movement also, however briefly, managed to wave its black flag triumphantly for the first time in European history. The Second Spanish Republic was also accommodating to the aspirations for autonomy and cultural reemergence for the various national entities within the former Spanish monarchy, particularly Catalonia.

As in other pre-revolutionary societies before and since, the arts flourished, and signified the long-quashed aspirations of millions for a new society based in an equitable division of the goods and resources of society, of real freedom and the liberation of the human spirit. The tragedy of the Second Republic's internal strife, manipulated by the Soviet Union, opened the doors to the marching armies of Franco, aided and abetted by Hitler and Mussolini. The hopes of progressive people around the world rode with Spain. When the governments of Europe and the US watched from the sidelines, their peoples responded. Thousands of young men and women traveled from all over the Americas and Europe to fight alongside the Republicans in the International Brigades. Spain was a beacon for artists, poets and writers, such as Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, and US artists

Ralph Fasanella, Joseph Vogel, and Irving Norman joined the Brigades as combatants. Others, such as Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Paul Robeson, and Langston Hughes came to Spain as press correspondents or as witnesses to report the truth to the world. Sculptor Henry Moore and painter Robert Motherwell raised material aid in their home countries for the Republican movement. There was an abiding sense among intellectuals and organized working people around the world that something very important for humanity was at stake in Spain. What remains utterly remarkable, even with the benefit of historical hindsight and the knowledge of the events leading to World War II, is the near-global reach of the solidarity with the Spanish Republic and the willingness of these thousands of men and women to travel to Spain and fight and die for this cause.

In the desperate struggle to save Spain, arts and artists themselves revealed a capacity for complex and nuanced criticism of the existing society while taking imaginative risks to envision new societies never before seen, describing them in a visual language of their own invention. Joan Miró and the Spanish Surrealists of his generation were at the forefront of this astonishing movement.

But the end came quickly. The defeat of the Spanish Republic in 1939 ushered in the cataclysm of World War II, crushing many millions of lives and dreams in its wake. One could say that Franco's military uprising beginning in his remote Canary Islands outpost set in motion a conflagration that reached its depths in the Holocaust, ending finally with the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The political reading of the reasons for the “failure” of the Spanish Republic is more often than not a trial of the villains. And there were many: It was Germany and Italy supplying arms, soldiers, material aid and an air force; it was the treachery of France, Great Britain and the non-intervention pact; it was the Stalin and the Soviet Union, manipulating the struggle from Moscow; it was the anarchists and Trotskyists who couldn’t wait to stage their revolution, undermining the Popular Front; it was the nationalist Catalonians for whom autonomy was paramount over national unity; it was the Catholic Church and its embrace of fascism. The enemies are painted (literally and figuratively) in very broad, bold strokes, with very little nuance. Wars have that effect. Enemies have to be identified and defeated. The outcomes matter too much. For the survivors – the bleeding, the battered, the defeated, in particular, blame has to be assigned.

Such was the context that framed the entry of the Surrealism movement into politics and its hasty, disorganized retreat. Social Realism was made for this task; Surrealism was not.

Andre Breton’s Surrealist Manifesto of 1924 promulgated a vision of the Surrealist movement as integrating absolute individual artistic and aesthetic freedom and imagination with collective political action.

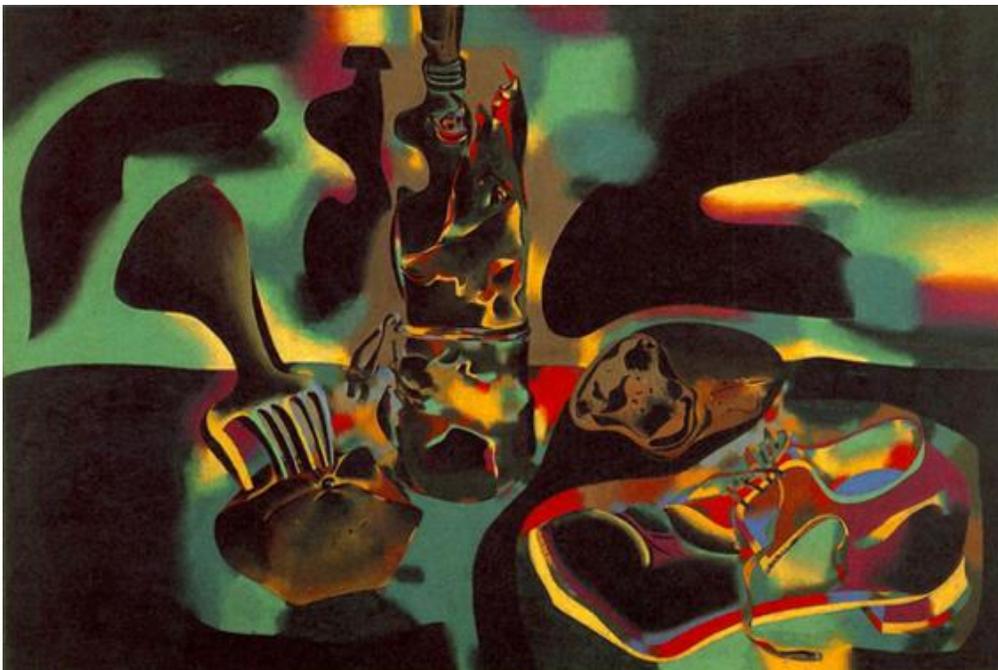
Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

“destroy everything that exists in painting.” “Assassinate painting”.

Robin Greeley sees a more profound exploration in this work: Miró trying to author a visual vocabulary, a revolutionary art form. The creation of the work was part and parcel of his protest. T

Still Life with Old Shoe: Miró's Guernica?

“On January 24, 1937 the Catalan artist Joan Miró, prevented by civil war from returning to his homeland, set up in the gallery of his Paris dealer, Pierre Loeb, a still life on which he worked every day for a month. The painting was finished on May 29 of that difficult year. It consists of an apple, into which a lethal, six-tined fork has been stuck; a gin bottle shrouded in torn newspaper, untied. The apple is brown, so perhaps rotten; the bread is dried; the shoe, we learn from the title, ‘Still Life with Old Shoe,’ is worn. Each object relates to a heavy shadow, represented by black free-forms that came to be emblems of modern art... It is possible to read the shadow cast by the gin bottle as a weeping silhouette, but is also impossible to read too much into the painting, wanting it to be deep. The shoe is painted in yellows and greens, reds and bright blues – footwear for a one-legged harlequin. James Thrall Soby compared the work – polemical, memorial, ostensibly lamentational – with Picasso’s *Guernica*, to which it was allegedly intended as an artistic response.”



Still Life with Old Shoe was well underway in Paris, when on April 26, the Condor Legion bombarded the Basque town of Guernica, setting the city on fire and killing 1600. Soon thereafter, from May 3 - 8 in Miró's city of Barcelona, intense fighting broke out between the radical communists and anarchists of the POUM and anarcho-syndicalist trade-union CNT on one side, and the socialists and communists (UGT and PSUC) that were closer to the Soviet Union on the other following the forced takeover of the CNT/UGT controlled telephone exchange by the Catalonian councilor of public order, Rodriquez Salas. The Communists of the PSE were attempting to wrest control of the Republican struggle away from the anarchists and radical communists, even while Madrid was under aerial bombardment by the fascists. Many anarchists were arrested and killed by the pro-Soviet forces. (George Orwell, a member of the Trotskyist POUM was in Barcelona and was forced to go into hiding and escape the city. He later described these events and the betrayal of the Republic by the pro-Soviet parties in *Homage to Catalonia*.) The fighting in May leaves 500 dead and over 1500 wounded. The POUM is blamed.

Miró may have only had rumors, correspondence and scattered newspaper articles to go on, but the pall of the internecine conflict must have weighed heavily upon him, even in Paris. It was a tragically ominous time for an "International Catalan". The Nationalist forces of Franco may have stabbed the fork into the apple, but the fruit was already rotten, the bread dried out. Miró's return to realism is a wrenching one, as if the visceral intrusion of the real, the photographic/pornographic real made no room for the flight of

imagination. Where was the imagination to go? The newspaper, wrapped around the bottle recalls the drawing study for the *Head of a Catalan Peasant* with an article in French, describing the celebration of the 6th anniversary of Fascism in Rome. This was his drawing medium, and simultaneous conveyor of the disastrous news of the time, now tied around an alcoholic means of escape. The voluptuous forms of the bottle are now obscured, wrapped in this waste paper. And what of this shoe? It is a shoe of a peasant or worker, clearly worn. And where is its mate? Single shoes are symbolic of incompleteness, or uselessness. Either the mate is missing or lost, or the leg of the owner has been amputated. Single, lost shoes are found in wreckage or the sifted rubble of bombed-out buildings. They are oftentimes the only remaining evidence of the death of their owners.



“Eyes Wide Open” An installation of 3000 pairs of combat boots, representing the US soldiers killed in Iraq. Photo: Tim Blunk, Puffin Cultural Forum.

The colors of *Still Life with Old Shoe* are themselves at war with one another across the canvas. The exaggerated chiarusco shadows retreat infinitely into the black background.

Miró has returned to realism, but on his own terms, and the effect is “savage”. The academic classical form of the mimetic still life is overturned through the choice of subject matter – the rotten fruit, the bread, an old peasant boot, and the implied action of the fork plunged/plunging into the fruit. It is an abandoned table. The state of the objects implies flight, with a final violent action (the stabbing of the fruit) as the peasant has fled his home, sans shoes. It is a still life (or better, a *stilled*-life, as in death or abandonment?) of a refugee’s former home, just as peasants from the north of Spain had fled to the Republican-controlled zones.

The Catalan peasant from the “assassination of painting” period has fled. Here is his scarred table. He is barefoot. The world is on fire.

“‘Still Life with Old Shoe’ ought to have stood darkly against the ambient gaiety [of the Guggenheim Miró retrospective (TAB)] like the Ancient Mariner at the wedding feast. Instead it looked like part of the carnival, as if the wedding guests had refused to accept the spell of the old loon’s tale, had decked the mariner out with silk and ribbons and made him part of the dance. The external knowledge of the circumstances in which the painting was made, however, fought against this spontaneous assimilation, and demanded that one reflect on the fact that one was traversing a total life in art... Ought the contradiction between what we know about this painting and the overall sense of hedonistic celebration call the latter into question? After all, that is the exactly the contradiction between the meaning of the painting and its surface. Or is this particular painting a failure, Miró not being up to expressing that level of intention?”

Arthur Danto seems to seize upon a curious curatorial decision in the Guggenheim show to criticize this work as a “war painting,” as Miró’s (failed) *Guernica*. There could, perhaps be no more of an absurd context for the work, than a Guggenheim exhibition (funded by Ford Motor Company – the Ford family notorious for their support for Hitler, Franco and fascism prior to World War II). As a renowned critic and progressive (he has reigned as the art critic in-residence at the liberal *Nation* magazine for 30 years) Danto surely comprehends the historical context of this piece within Miró’s life, and must have known the difference in context and intention between this work and *The Reaper* installed at the Spanish Pavilion. Yet he imposes a criterion of ‘readability’ on this piece that, like the Guggenheim itself, abstracts the work outside of time, place and the context of Miró’s own artistic process. For someone of Danto’s own political history and proclivities, his essay betrays a surprisingly superficial reading of the painting. *Still Life with Old Shoe* was not a commission, nor was it an intentional response to *Guernica*. It was a return to realism from the “assassination of painting” period, but it retains the automatism of the Surrealist language. Interestingly, it was not Miró who defined *Still Life with Old Shoe* as his *Guernica*. Miró’s own comments about the piece in 1953 demonstrate that he was not about the business of crafting an anti-fascist or anti-war allegory.

“Despite the fact that while working on the painting I was thinking only about solving formal problems and getting back in touch with a reality that I was inevitably led to by current events, I later realized that without my knowing it this picture contained tragic symbols of the period – the tragedy of a miserable crust of bread and an old shoe, an apple pierced by a cruel fork and a bottle that, like a burning house, spread its flames across the entire surface of the canvas. All this, as I said, without the slightest conscious thought, and entirely devoid of any narrative or literary

intentions, confining my self solely to the eternal and human laws of art.”
(Greeley, p. 46.)

This was an “automatic” outpouring of the soul of a Catalan Surrealist in exile, watching from afar as his beloved homeland was being destroyed from within as well as without. As such, it also maintains a Surrealist integrity in its visual vocabulary as well as its absence of intention.

Miró and Public, Political Action

In sharp contrast to *Still Life with Old Shoe*, the postcard, *Aidez L'Espagne*, is a clear example of art at the service of politics, part of the collective art production championed by the Surrealists, and largely avoided by Miró. The reading is unmistakable, even for a



mass audience unaccustomed to interpreting Cubist or surrealist works: the powerful arm of the peasant with fist in the air, a field of bright blue, the text, the black earth. The solid, ebullient figure of the peasant shares nothing with the linearity and reduction of *Head of Catalan Peasant* series from the “assassination of painting” period. It is very similar in most aspects to *The Reaper*, the mural Miró produced for the Spanish Pavilion, although the

proportions are more “correct” and more powerful. The expression is buoyant with joy and confidence. The only slightly controversial element for the Popular Frontists would have been the colors of the peasant’s garb – the bold red and yellow of the Catalan flag. It is worth noting that even in this most consciously executed piece of Republican support propaganda, Miró still places his *Catalanisme* at the fore.

It is also probably not an over-reading of the fierce political associations with colors in that period to observe that the sun shines Communist red in the blue sky, but the earth the peasant walks upon is Anarchist black. In this fundraising piece was Miró trying to create a work that any sympathizer with the Republic could buy and find their colors represented? Quite likely. He may also have been making a point that the Spanish Republic had no future without actual harmony between all of the “colors” represented therein. In desperate times, Miró was quite capable of pulling off a work that largely cut against his grain as an artist. From a contemporary design point of view, with the strength of the forms and actual color harmony, this work of political poster art is about as good as it gets. Yet it pales in complexity and importance when compared to the *Still Life with Old Shoe*, or *Woman in Revolt*.

The Politics of Private Anguish

“As I have suggested, Miró conformed to these dictates by separating the grand public nature of *The Reaper* (and *Aidez L’Espagne*) from the intensity of his private anguish. This split allowed him room to negotiate a workable response with which to address both the defensive nationalism imposed by the representational dictates of the Spanish Pavilion (which posited fixed distinctions between Spain and the enemy despite the fact

that in real terms such distinctions were by no means clear) and a more flexible national identity able to question and alter its own boundaries in response to social pressures.” (Greeley, p. 41)

In 1938, working in Paris in the workshop of his friend, the Polish painter, Louis Marcoussis, Miró produced a powerful series of eight small-scale etchings known as the *Black and Red Series*, described by Grace Glueck in her 1998 review of the Museum of Modern Art’s new show, "Miró's Black and Red Series: A New Acquisition in Context" for the *New York Times*:

“The large drama of the series belies the works’ small size. In stark black and bloody red on white grounds, the deal – in Miró’s own eloquent language of signs and symbols – with the forces of war and oppression. The series begins with a lyrical overture in black and white, an inspired doodling of biomorphic squiggles in vertical format that include a spidery black sun, a pair of dancing insectoid creatures, a snail-like whorl and various linear elements. The second print, a horizontal, is somewhat closer to realism. It depicts a distressed family of three fragile figures (Miró, his wife and daughter?) in a confused landscape, menaced by an ogre’s head, a hair-raising icon of Franco with a long phallic nose and what seem to be horns for ears.

The copperplates from the first two etchings were combined to create the remaining compositions. In the third, Miró printed two images from the first copperplate, one reversed atop the other, one in red, one in black. The resulting work is far more complex; in the rest of the series the horizontal and vertical planes are manipulated to create a bewildering web of biomorphic forms that speak of horror and mutilation in a tone not too distant from that of Goya’s “Disasters of War” almost 200 years earlier”

By 1938, when Miró was making these prints, the Spanish Republican movement was already crumbling. The month of March saw heavy bombing of Barcelona by the Loyalists. By April, Franco’s army reached the Mediterranean coast, north of Valencia and Republican Spain was split in two. The Battle of the Ebro raged through the summer and fall, and in defeat, the Republican army began to collapse. In December, the Loyalist

invasion of Catalonia began; they took Barcelona in January of 1939, leading to massive evacuation of refugees to France.



Black and Red Series, 2nd print.



Black and Red Series, 3rd print

The reading of this series surely leads one through a “bewildering web of biomorphic forms that speak of horror and mutilation” and the comparison to Goya is apt. However, an understanding of the time in which this series was executed would also force one to a deeper examination of the color scheme (again, Anarchist black and Communist red), the process of reversal, as well as the sequence of the production. The ogre and menacing

insect-beings threatening the terrified family in the first two etchings may very well have been Franco, the Loyalists, war. But what occurs in the subsequent prints, when the colors are reversed and the plates printed upside down? The obvious political reading has to give way to a more nuanced examination. The anarchist/pro-Soviet communist struggle had played itself out in Catalonia by the time these prints were made, with devastating results. As Orwell would later argue in his great *Homage to Catalonia*, the enemies within were more primary in the defeat of the Spanish Republic than Franco and the Loyalists. I maintain, however, that this is what was revealed to Miró in the production of this series; the sequence is everything. It is as if he presents first the received view on the Left in the first two prints (and this may have been an *automatic* starting point on his part.) But as he produces the first prints, his own process leads him to the more profound and important revelations that are seen in the subsequent prints, overladen with ogres of a different sort, families mired in tragedy and chaos from enemies all around. This process is what makes Miró, even in this “savage period” a Surrealist, and why his work does not lend itself to the first-glance apprehension of meaning in a *Guernica*. Surrealism, as a movement uniting individual aesthetic/cultural freedom with collective political action, does not lend itself to propaganda or to exigent political answers. This is also what makes it so important.

The Politics of Failure

“It is instructive to think of *The Farm* together with *Still Life with Old Shoe*. The latter is a failure, not so much as a painting but as a painting about war, for its subject never penetrates the work save by the external imposition of a symbolic interpretation. “In some sense,” Jacques Dupin claims in his catalogue essay, “this unique and fantastic painting stands as

Miró's *Guernica*." Dupin curated the show, and he is an enthusiast. But as Miró's *Guernica*, the painting fails. Miró was certainly sickened by the war in Spain, but he was not finally a political person: Art was the substance of his life and hence of his art, which is most genuine and best when, as *The Farm*, it is about its own processes."

Strolling through the Guggenheim on a sunny day in May, Arthur Danto was clearly yearning for a work that could be read by schoolchildren on a field trip to the United Nations. Danto's abstraction of this work outside of the context of Surrealism, the context of the Spanish Civil War, or outside the context of Miró's own process creates a context of "failure".

For Miró, the sequence in his work was crucial, almost akin to panels in a narrative cartoon, or frames in a film. His lines, his forms, his figures, such as the Catalan peasant, move from one canvas or print to the next. They carry with them their own context that continually mutates and evolves. The reading of a work such as *Still Life with Old Shoe* defies this kind of decontextualization or static examination. Miró's involvement in the Surrealist enterprise was defined not merely by his embrace of the process, of automatism, of externalizing the imagination in the shortest possible route to paper or canvas. In the end, Miró was "finally, a political person", and Art was the primary substance and process of his politics.

As Robin Greeley eloquently argues in the conclusion of her book, Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War:

"Superficially, *The Reaper* did not "succeed." Neither, as I have argued, did most of the works discussed here; to have placed any of them as the concluding image of the book would have been to posit "failure" as the ultimate outcome of both art and history. Yet from another point of view,

each and every one has fulfilled the solemn charge of art to offer insight into the vagaries of human action and experience. Indeed, much of Surrealism's project involved searching out concrete modes of mediating between sets of personally held political beliefs and the (political) intentions of works of art... Thus, that Miró found it within himself as a Surrealist to produce a variety of complex responses to the Spanish Civil War is, I am convinced, extremely important. It points up how, through Surrealism, he was able to link the many levels on which he constructed nationalism and imagined their relevance for an audience – an issue, needless, to say, of particular sensitivity during this period. It points to the way in which surrealist aesthetic production allowed him to do this with unusual flexibility, in a period which was ever more violently opposed to nuance, ambivalence, ambiguity, and complexity. This, it seems to me, is an achievement that should not be underrated.” (Greeley, p. 192).

Surrealism and the project of ethics, refusal. Miró

“If the interplay of lines and colors does not expose the inner drama of the creator, then it is nothing more than bourgeois entertainment. The forms expressed by an individual who is part of society must reveal the movement of a soul trying to escape the reality of the present, which is particularly ignoble today in order to approach new realities, of offer other men the possibility of rising above the present. In order to discover a livable world – how much rottenness must be swept away!... On the other hand, a revolution interested only in comfort will end in the same disgrace as the one the bourgeoisie has plunged us into. To offer the masses no more than material satisfactions is to annihilate our last hope, our last chance of salvation.” (Miró, as quoted in Greeley, p. 47.)

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