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From the Atlantic to the Pacific: Maruja Mallo in Exile

Abstract

Maruja Mallo's life (1902-1995) and art represent one woman's odyssey from the European vanguards to political commitment during the Spanish Republic (1931-1939) and finally to a unique transcendent art form after her wrenching exile from Spain and her residence in Latin America from 1937 to 1965. In her early career she was a leader among the avant-garde painters when few Spanish women were recognized as creative artists. In Latin America, her work diverged radically from European avant-garde trends and from her ideologically oriented subject matter of the 1930s; Mallo not only reflects the impact of her discovery of the Pacific Ocean and her newfound "zest for life," but also clearly defines a new language that celebrates the female body and female sexuality. This essay traces Mallo's personal and artistic journey from Spain to Latin America and back.

Keywords

Maruja Mallo, art theory, art, Europe, Spanish Republic, transcendent, exile, Latin America, avant-garde, painters, ideology, female sexuality, journey

From the Atlantic to the Pacific: Maruja Mallo in Exile

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The trajectory of Maruja Mallo's life (1902-1995) and art is an example of one woman's odyssey from the European vanguards to political commitment during the Spanish Republic (1931-1939) and finally to a unique transcendent art form after her wrenching exile from Spain and her residence in Latin America from 1937 to 1965. In many ways her situation was always one of the outsider. In her early career she was a first-rate and stunningly original artist at a time when few Spanish women were recognized as creative artists. Later, in Latin America, she was an exotic and glamorous Spanish exile. Although we have little information about her personal life in Latin America, one can glean from statements to the press, from what is known of her lifestyle, and from the shifts in her painting themes and modes, the importance Latin America had for her as a woman artist in the mid-twentieth century. As the critic Juan Pérez de Ayala points out, Mallo was transformed by America; it produced in her a "vibrant creative explosion" (23). Pérez de Ayala cites comments she made when she returned to Spain in 1961: "I feel more complete since I have lived in America. . . . On this immense continent which offered me . . . the zest for life instead of the agony of death. It was an awakening that revealed new visions, surprises and concepts to me. An epiphany that pushed me like a great waterfall. . . ." (23). This essay traces Mallo's personal and artistic journey from Spain to Latin America and back.

Before the Spanish Civil War began in 1936, Mallo was integrated into the close-knit group of avant-garde artists and writers—including poets Federico García Lorca and Rafael Alberti, filmmaker

Luis Buñuel, and artist Salvador Dalí—that converged on Spain’s capital during the 1920s. She was one of the few women who participated in activities at the Residencia de Estudiantes (Student Residence), the Oxbridge-inspired institution where many male artists and writers lived and studied and where Spanish vanguard art was born.¹ She was a cerebral artist who stated that “Painting is a mental exercise,” and, like that of her male counterparts, her work reveals the influence of cubism, surrealism, and neo-realism. She was constantly praised by the major art critics for her brilliant skills and her audacious innovations in those early years. After her first exhibition at the Madrid offices of José Ortega y Gasset’s journal *Revista de Occidente* in 1928, she was lauded as a unique and innovative painter. The list of those who were influenced by her art and who “revered her”—according to her contemporary, the musician and artist Eugenio Granell—includes many writers who were prominent in the 1920s and 1930s, among them, the poets Rafael Alberti and Miguel Hernández (with both of whom she had important love affairs);² Ramón Gómez de la Serna, the high priest of the literary salon “El Pombo,” who called her “the painter of fourteen souls;” the writer and editor Ernesto Giménez Caballero; the poet Concha Méndez; and the avant-garde novelists Benjamín Jarnés and José Díaz Fernández.³ Although historians of Spanish avant-garde art locate the origins of the movement in the activities of Dalí, Buñuel, García Lorca, and another student at the Residencia, José Bello, Mallo’s artistic vision was an important catalyst in the Spanish avant-garde movement.⁴ She was an artistic dynamo in the company of the Dalí-Buñuel-Lorca trio.

Her fame was solidified after the 1928 exhibition, which included the series “Verbenas” (Festivals) and “Estampas” (Prints). The “Verbenas” are four large polychromatic oil paintings depicting the festivals—a popular theme of avant-garde art and literature—that take place on religious holidays, especially those celebrating the Virgin Mary. Mallo superimposed scenes of disproportionate size onto other unrelated scenes and juxtaposed the traditional elements of *verbenas* (ferris wheels and merry-go-rounds) with modern motifs (airplanes and cars) to create an effect of chaos and hilarity. By representing many sectors of Spanish society at play—the church, the bourgeoisie, and the military among them—she emphasizes how

religious events turned into ludicrous pagan festivities. The colored pencil drawings of the “Estampas” series embrace modern themes in the “Cinema Prints” and “Sports Prints,” the latter influenced by Mallo’s champion swimmer friend Concha Méndez, while the “Machines and Mannequins” prints reveal the decadence of nineteenth-century romanticism. By the time of the *Revista de Occidente* exhibition, Mallo and Alberti, who had met in 1925, were collaborating on various projects because of a common interest in painting, comic film, and puppet theater. By 1928, both were grappling with Surrealist themes that revealed their personal crises and their similar apocalyptic views of the world. Alberti was writing his book of verse *Sobre los ángeles* (About Angels), and Mallo had begun her surreal series “Cloacas y Campanarios” (Sewers and Bell Towers), which portrays the dantesque underbelly of the world and symbolizes the decomposition of Spanish society: the detritus of “found objects,” the garbage that lay in the streets, skeletons, scarecrows, and other ominous forms. Utilizing mixtures of oil paint—black, gray, white, earth colors—to simulate dust, mud, ash, these paintings were diametrically opposed to the wildly colored, witty, and worldly “Verbenas” series.⁵

Like so many of her counterparts in the 1930s, Mallo turned away from the “dehumanized” art of the avant-garde. Influenced by the Uruguayan painter and constructivist theoretician Joaquín Torres-García, she began to deploy a telluric and geometric visual language in her paintings of fruit, rocks, and agricultural structures that would crystallize in her early Latin American painting. She also initiated a series of ceramic disks with themes of bulls, fish, and other animals and plants. And she collaborated on several projects with Miguel Hernández in 1935. Mallo was beginning to design theater sets, and Hernández was writing poetry and drama. Hernández, who, in his relative innocence, was fiercely attracted to the more worldly painter, soon became disillusioned with the fickleness of love, but his experience with Mallo provoked him to write some of his best poetry, included in *El rayo que no cesa* (The Unending Lightning). Likewise, the painter, inspired by the pantheistic vision she and Hernández shared while camping in the countryside, began a series of paintings that reveals the impact of their relationship. Mallo described this period with Hernández in esoteric terms; he

was “full of cosmic conscience. . . . I understood his intuitive knowledge of the influence of the stars on the kingdoms of our planet” (Ortega, n.p.). Mallo insists on their likemindedness: “He intuited my uncontrollable impulse toward the visual representation of the ‘religion of work’: ‘Surprise of the Wheat,’ ‘The Song of the Wheat Spikes,’ that I was initiating at that time. . . .” (Ortega n.p.). Theirs was a magical cosmic vision that Mallo took with her when she went into exile in Argentina in 1937.

“Surprise of the Wheat,” Mallo’s last work executed in Spain in 1936, initiates a series of geometrical mural-like paintings. In the series she portrays a partial, massive female figure—cubist face, neck and hands—and expresses her homage to the immense wheat fields of Castile and to Hernández: “With ‘Surprise of the Wheat’ (May 1936) I announce—as a prologue to my work on the labourers of the sea and the land—a natural sympathy of material elements. Wheat, a universal grain, a symbol of the struggle, an earthly myth. A manifestation of the faith that arises from the severity and grace of the two Castiles, from my materialistic faith in the triumph of the fish, in the reign of the wheat spike” (Mallo, *Lo popular* 40). The female farmer, a blue-eyed, fair-haired icon, toasted golden by the sun, holds up in her right hand three grains of wheat, while from three fingers of the other hand three spikes of wheat are “growing.” Through her representation of the wheat goddess, Mallo spiritualizes the ubiquitous grain of Castile that feeds the masses. When she began the series, Mallo was at the height of her socially-committed period, as can be appreciated in her comment in an interview that, “The role of abstract art is to seize a new reality . . . because an artistic revolution is not sustained solely through formal conquests. Its revolutionary meaning lies in the construction of a new order and the contribution of a living mythology” (Azcoaga 37).

When the Spanish Civil War broke out in July of 1936, Mallo was in Vigo, in her native province of Galicia, vacationing with her companion at that time, the leftist union leader Alberto Fernández Mezquita; she had gone there to work for the Pedagogical Missions, one of the enterprises that the Republican government had initiated to educate the poor in rural areas. She began sketching the fishermen with their tackle and rigging in the port of Vigo and other fishing villages. While there, Mallo was caught in the crossfire of the incipi-

ent Civil War and witnessed the beginning of military insurgents' brutal assassinations of Republican and leftist activists. Frightened and devastated by what she perceived as the end of the Republic and the demise of freedom, it has been said that her first thought was to flee to Paris (Escribano). But Mallo received invitations to lecture in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, which she readily accepted. She fled to Portugal and was protected by the Chilean Nobel poet Gabriela Mistral, who was serving as Chile's ambassador in Lisbon. Amid dignitaries and tourists, Mallo sailed into Buenos Aires on February 9, 1937 on a steamship hailing from Southampton, England.

When Mallo went into exile, her male partners in the creation of Spanish avant-garde art, vanguardist parties, and surrealist happenings began to boycott her, occasioning her exclusion from the history of the Spanish avant-garde. Until recent years Mallo was rarely mentioned in Spanish texts on art and cultural history. She was remembered for her affairs and her otherwise scandalous behavior—such as winning a “blasphemy contest” and riding into a church on a bicycle during mass—rather than for her artistic work; she was often simply labeled a “mascot” or “muse” of the Generation of 27. Even though Mallo's work in Latin America in the 1940s and 1950s, influenced by her discovery of the Pacific Ocean and displaying a new language that celebrates the female body and female sexuality, diverges radically from European avant-garde trends and from her ideologically oriented subject matter of the 1930s, the respect her art was accorded in her early years in Spain continued in Argentina. During her first years there she was solicited to speak about her own art, as well as on the evolution of western art, and her work sold well. She was constantly praised in the press, and she became an integral member of the cultural and financial elite, which was intertwined in Argentina in the 1940s. Mallo even wrote a groundbreaking aesthetic treatise, *Lo popular en la plástica española a través de mi obra 1928-1936* (The Popular Element in Spanish Painting as Seen in My Work from 1928 to 1936) that added an intellectual dimension to her artistic fame and could be considered an artistic autobiography.

Mallo's life in Buenos Aires was full of contradictions. While she continued to produce art with a socialist message, simultaneously she associated with the highest strata of Argentine society.

She also began to register interesting gender references in her painting—androgynous figures and large mythical females—that may signal her newfound liberation from the male-dominated artistic world of Madrid. Mallo's first months in Buenos Aires were rife with frantic activity. She was interviewed in numerous newspapers and journals; she renewed old friendships and made a host of new friends. Mallo lectured in both Buenos Aires and nearby Montevideo. Her lectures were published in the press, and she became the darling of the Buenos Aires cultural elite. Although there are clear connections between her last work in Spain and the paintings she executed in Argentina, one also detects significant new directions. Shortly after arriving in Buenos Aires, she began "The Religion of Work" series, using some of the sketches she had made of Galician fishermen before she fled Spain. In the first painting from "Religion of Work," titled "Human Architecture" and completed in 1937, the head and torso of the now distinctly androgynous figure are draped in fishnet and lines, while the figure holds a large fish with both hands. The protagonist appears to be an ancient sea deity who offers up fruits from the ocean. "Message of the Sea" of 1938 is reminiscent of "Surprise of the Wheat" in its composition, but not in its theme. Like the 1936 work, it depicts the faces and upper torsos of two subjects with massive raised hands. But the faces in "Message" are ambiguous, angular, and somewhat androgynous. Also draped in fishnet and lines, each holds a small fish. While architectural and even anthropological-type figures are visible in her work and that of the members of the Vallecas School during the 1930s, perhaps Mallo's insistence in her Latin American phase on portraying women as physically strong, masculinized or gender-ambiguous figures is partially due to her need to assert her power as an artist and reinforce her own mental strength against the psychological ravages she suffered from the Civil War. Her last painting of this series, "The Song of the Wheat Spikes" from 1939, in which three women's heads and six hands are raised, returns to the theme of "Surprise of the Wheat." All three are enmeshed in wheat spikes, suggesting that they form part of a wheat field; they are joined to the land as cosmic goddesses.⁶

The "Religion of Work" paintings are large-scale mural pieces; in photographs of them displayed in Mallo's Buenos Aires apart-

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ment, the immense canvases dwarf her tiny figure. They present a socialist agenda celebrating life and work and the glories of laboring in the fields of Castile and on the Cantabrian Sea, the two areas that inspired “The Religion of Work.” In a lecture Mallo gave in Buenos Aires in 1937, she reaffirmed her ideas about art and political commitment initiated during the Republican years: “Nature, history and art are incessantly linked. Consciously or unconsciously, art is a form of propaganda. Revolutionary art is a weapon used by a conscious society against one that is in a state of chaos” (“Proceso histórico” 32). Also in 1937, she states that “[t]he destiny of painting is to be on a wall, on pottery, on a stage set, and not in a painting on an easel. Museums are the cemeteries of art” (Brugnetti, n.p.). As long as the Civil War lasted, Mallo perhaps held out a thread of hope for the Republic, which probably induced her to continue painting in a politically committed vein. Even in 1939, Mallo reiterated her political commitment: “I consider mural painting to be the painting of the future because of its collective expression” (“El Arte Popular” n. p.). “The Religion of Work” trilogy, however, was the last of her socialist mural paintings with revolutionary messages.

In the first years in exile, Mallo was clearly haunted by the war she had left behind. Although the painter refused to speak of her personal life and only answered questions about her work in interviews, in several instances one can perceive the pain she felt about the war. For instance, in the fall of 1937, in an apparently violent outburst when an interviewer asked her about her childhood, she responded: “Doesn’t it embarrass you to ask me such stupid questions? Asking me this when I have just escaped from death! Asking me such questions! When my eyes can still see those mutilated children, those murdered men, those women running and crying. I remember nothing, nothing can be remembered . . . except that my country is choking, choking on its own blood” (Piquet 38). In spite of the fact that Mallo was not actively engaged in the resistance against the insurgents in Spain, she revealed her anguish in her statements and her solidarity through some of her activities. For instance, she created the stage set for a play written by her friend, the Mexican consul Alfonso Reyes, entitled “*Cantata en la tumba de Federico Garcia Lorca*” (Cantata at the Tomb of FGL), to honor the poet who had been brutally assassinated by the military insurgents

at the start of the Civil War. It debuted in Buenos Aires on August 2, 1938. Soon after the War ended in 1939, however, Mallo seemed anxious to evade all memory of it. Perhaps, as she heard of the destruction of Republican Spain, the death or exodus of friends and family members, and the beginning of World War II, she could no longer cope with the immensity of the tragedies, such as the loss of her last Spanish lover, Alberto Fernández Mezquita. When Mallo fled Spain through Tuy, Galicia to Portugal, Fernández Mezquita also fled to Portugal, but he was deported back to Spain and sent to a concentration camp. Mallo never heard from him again and never learned of his fate (Vidal 61-62).

Several factors converged to help Mallo overcome these tragedies. She was engaged with a new kind of social setting, and she discovered the Pacific Ocean and Latin America's indigenous peoples. It is entirely possible that Mallo's new life in Latin America—her fame as an individual, as well as the startling, sensual landscapes and exotic faces she found there—freed her not only from the depressing Spanish political situation, but also from her past aesthetics. After all, Mallo had been prone to constantly renovating her styles and themes, and now she seized on this opportunity for further innovation and a new painterly language. Impressed and distracted by the elite circles that embraced her in Buenos Aires, she distanced herself from the horrors that had taken place in Spain and immersed herself in the high life of the Argentine elite. She began traveling incessantly in the 1940s, visiting New York and Paris, Brazil, Chile, Easter Island, Bolivia, Uruguay, and other parts of Argentina; her errant childhood had made her a perfect candidate for wanderlust. During these years, Mallo also frequented the most fashionable Atlantic coastal town of Uruguay, Punta del Este, where she had many aristocratic and wealthy friends; between 1941 and 1944, she summered there. The sky and the views reminded her of the Canary Islands, where she lived during one of her father's assignments and where she had painted her heralded "The Goat Woman" in 1927. She also spent a great deal of time in the Uruguayan capital, Montevideo. It was her most social period, and in photographs she appears to be happy with her "high-society" life. Mallo began to be photographed—when not at the beach—in a fur coat, her signature accessory from this point on. She stayed at the Mar de Plata home

of the doyenne of letters in Buenos Aires, Victoria Ocampo, who introduced her to many of the intellectuals in Buenos Aires and whose influence undoubtedly helped Mallo become a headliner in the capital's dailies. Mallo also frequented the Tortoni Café—where the port city's intellectuals (including several male exiles from Galicia) gathered; her association with the group was also instrumental in launching Mallo's fame in Buenos Aires.

After the first publication of *Lo popular en la plástica española a través de mi obra 1928-1936* in 1939, Mallo became even better known in Latin America. The press raved about Mallo's work and the book, which was written in the same surreal style as the poetry of so many of her contemporaries, especially the Lorca of *Poeta en Nueva York* (Poet in New York 1929) and the Vicente Aleixandre of *Espadas como labios* (Swords Like Lips 1932). When the new bilingual (English-Spanish) edition of *Lo popular* was published in 1942, Mallo gained more notoriety. This edition contains a preliminary study by Ramón Gómez de la Serna, 68 reproductions of her work and other materials written by or related to the painter. *Lo popular* is an exegetical text in which Mallo describes and analyzes her painting up to 1936. From her perspective as an exile in Latin America, Mallo insists on the social aspect of her early work. She clearly outlines how her painting reflects Spanish politics and culture in each of her pictorial phases until 1936. In retrospect and from the distance of her Latin American exile, Mallo understood her earlier pre-Civil War work in terms of cause and effect: that the retrograde idiosyncrasies of her land produced the political upheavals that ended in Civil War. For example, Mallo explains that she intended the first series "Verbenas" to show the clash between the masses and the church, and the transformation of religious festivities into secular festivals:

They are a pagan revelation and they express discord with the existent order. Popular art provides Spain with alternatives, the battle of two contrary and decisive trends: the monster and the tragedy against man and his power. . . . The masses use mythology and the saints as a pretext to enjoy themselves collectively. They do not venerate the clergy at all; rather they parody heavenly order and the demonic hierarchy. (*Lo popular* 8)

Mallo also describes the “Estampas,” especially the “Machines and Mannequins” group, as a parody of obsolescent nineteenth-century customs, “anachronistic figures, ladies and gentlemen in crisis, faded, protected by the aroma of mothballs and apothecaries’ prescriptions. . .” (*Lo popular* 11). In her Surrealist series “Sewers and Bell Towers,” she calls attention to the eve of the Spanish Republic and “retrospectively” predicts the downfall of the church by describing the paintings as “necrological panoramas” depicting “the sewers of the establishment” (*Lo popular* 26). She now envisions her later series of rural edifices, vegetables, and minerals as a return to representationalism and a new humanism inspired by her faith in the Republic and in social commitment: “This destructive outburst [she is referring to “Sewers and Bell Towers”] is transformed into an urge to build, a desire to achieve the reconstruction of that group of things that corresponds to materialism and a universal conscience, as well as the wish to find a new formal language in order to represent the reality with which we feel intimate solidarity” (*Lo popular* 35). *Lo popular* not only marks a reflective look on her past work but also signals a change in her artistic vision. From the early 1940s on, social themes no longer informed Mallo’s canvases, and she rarely spoke of Spain and the war to journalists.⁷ It was as though she had lost her sense of nation, and with it, her desire to portray her customarily ironic, yet poetic, vision of Spanish society. The war had eroded her resolve to celebrate or criticize her country in her painting; she had to tend to her own psychological needs and gain mental strength by dissolving her concept of nation, which included political ideology and aesthetic tendencies associated with the male-dominated war-torn nation she left behind.

As her exile in Latin America continued, she gradually replaced her socialist subject matter with a language that exalted the female body: feminine oceanic motifs and mythological female figures. She rarely painted male figures at all in the 1940s. Mallo’s painting now reflected her aesthetic reaction to the secrets of the aquatic life of the Pacific Ocean, the shores of Uruguay, and to the racial diversity of America. For example, in 1941 she began a series entitled “Cabezas de mujer” (Women’s Heads). Even more androgynous still than the “Religion of Work” females, these geometrically conceived heads evoke “exotic” peoples, clearly inspired in indigenous America. Al-

though the paintings are not large, the heads appear to be massive; most are profiles with voluptuous mouths and deep, dark coloring, and generally, expressionless faces. Her American painting, like her personality in this phase of her life, is elusive and enigmatic. She seems to have fused her thinking about herself and her art in the painting itself; when she wrote about art after *Lo popular*, she wrote about art history and not about her own aesthetics.

Mallo discovered the sensuality of the Pacific Ocean on her first trip to Santiago de Chile in January of 1939 at the invitation of the Alliance of Intellectuals there. During this visit she traveled to Valparaiso and spent time at the beaches, which marked a turning point in her career, as she later explained:

During my stay in Chile, from Santiago I went to visit the Pacific Coast. This extraordinary Chilean coast is full of surprises. . . . That violent Pacific Ocean bathes the beaches whose sands are colored stones; on these beaches palm trees sprout; the ocean hurls stones scorched by volcanoes, polished by the waters that mix with the enormous geraniums and spherical hydrangeas that flower along the beaches between the starfish and the giant seaweed. These scenes are surprising for those of us who live on the Atlantic coast. (n.a., "Maruja Mallo")

In 1941 Mallo began the "Naturalezas Vivas," or "Live Nature" paintings, the second most important series she painted in America.⁸ Here Mallo registers the full impact of her discovery of the Pacific Ocean that coincides with her celebration of the female body and sexuality. The "Live Nature" paintings are wild collage-like sea concoctions that celebrate female eroticism. Like cocktails from the ocean, they are geometrical compositions that hint at female genitalia. The genitalia motif, absent in Mallo's work done in Spain, is often visible in her Latin American paintings. (Interestingly, in her portrayal of the nude female body in "Two Women on a Beach" from 1928, the body is devoid of genitalia; the painting, nonetheless, discomfited Spanish male critics.) The "Live Nature" paintings combine seashells (especially conch), which are often associated with female genitalia in the Hispanic world, algae, starfish, anemones, jellyfish, semi-fantastical sea animals, flowers, especially roses and orchids, and other unrelated and imaginative elements, often symmetrically positioned.⁹ Most of them in fact are shells perched

upon other shells in what appears to be a geometrical balancing act, and which also suggest sexual penetration. While “The Religion of Work” series was done in earth tones of the land and grays of the ocean, the “Live Nature” paintings are brilliant explosions of color that seem to vibrate with movement. They reaffirm Mallo’s interest in mathematics and order and celebrate the natural elements of the ocean by transforming them through juxtaposition into erotic “plant-creatures” sprung from Mallo’s prodigious imagination. She had found the fantasy world she was seeking, as she describes gleefully in an interview in Chile in 1945: “I was amazed by your beaches. There were blue, gold and white ones. I looked at them and could not believe it. I rubbed my eyes fearing that the illusion would disappear, but the beaches were still there and they were real. And on top of that, the shells, wow! What a profusion of beauty, what a harmony of form, what a dazzling architecture of perfect geometry!” (Lombay, n.p).

Mallo completed the “Live Nature” series in 1943, while she was also surrounding herself with aquatic motifs and creating textiles and jewelry with the same themes, which she apparently sold very successfully. In one photo of the painter in her apartment in Buenos Aires, she is immersed in what I would term “malloesque totems,” gifts from the sea that seemed to provide her with vitality. In the photo, Mallo is bedecked in shell jewelry; she is wearing a dress with sea motifs of her own design, and she is occupied with the shells that are strewn about. She adorned herself and her studio apartment on the elegant Santa Fe Street in Buenos Aires with so many marine elements that one journalist said her home appeared to be an “oceanographic museum.” It was as though Mallo had assimilated the Pacific Ocean into her very being.

Mallo returned to Chile for inspiration in 1945, when she was commissioned to paint three giant murals for the entrance hall of the new Los Angeles movie theater in Buenos Aires. She arrived in Santiago and stayed first at the Ritz and then the equally posh Crillón, before she went on to Viña del Mar, where she showed some of her work at her hotel. She had contacted the poet Pablo Neruda, an old friend, and together they traveled to the Chilean coasts and to Easter Island. It seems that Mallo had met the Nobel poet in Paris during her stay there in the early 1930s and often visited his home, dubbed

“The Flower House,” when he was Consul in Madrid in 1935 and 1936. She frequented Neruda’s “fiestas salvajes,” as they were called, and it is likely that she met Miguel Hernández there.¹⁰ There are indications that the painter may have had an amorous relationship with Neruda in Spain. When she re-encountered him in 1945, he was still married to Delia del Carril, whom he had met in Madrid in 1935 while he was married to his first wife. 1945 was a significant year for the poet; he became a Chilean senator, won the National Literature Prize, and became a member of the Communist party.

In a lecture titled “El surrealismo a través de mi obra” (Surrealism as Seen in My Work) Mallo gave in Santander in 1981, she employs cabalistic language to describe their exotic (and erotic?) adventures, a language that became more exaggerated and inscrutable as she grew older:

And facing the Andean giant we levitated above the Aconcagua Mountains, finding ourselves facing the fascinating, immense desert of the Pacific Ocean, where submarine-like acrobats and ballerinas danced without any resistance from the gargantuan nature of the autochthonous flora and fauna of these paradises from which my three large murals at the “Los Angeles” theatre of Buenos Aires would emanate.

And faced with this unexpected meeting, Pablo Neruda and I decided to delve into the unprecedented aesthetics of monumentalization in the form of statues where they appear, hermetically practicing ancestral rites, enigmatic testimonies of the unknown past, Easter Island (Rapa Noy), eyes that contemplate the stars. And from the depths of the Pacific I felt the hyperesthetics of the substance of ether, of the inhabitants of the void. (Pérez de Ayala and Francisco Rivas 120)

Complete with dramatic make-up and heavy mascara, Mallo had herself photographed repeatedly on those beaches, regally dressed in seaweed.¹¹ Once again Mallo represents herself as an integral part of the sea life of the Pacific.

Upon her return to Buenos Aires, Mallo began the enormous Los Angeles Movie Theater murals for which she had been commissioned. The architects Abel López Chas and Federico Zemborain, who were trained in Europe in the tradition of Le Corbusier, had designed the theater. The three bi-dimensional, brilliantly colored murals combine the oceanic motifs and all-embracing ethnic representations she registered in earlier work of her American sojourn.

They are replete with human forms (of all races), semi-human beings, and marine life that together seem to be performing an aquatic ballet.¹² Evoking various types of androgynous figures, Mallo describes them as “aerodynamic and submarine bodies that participate more as airplanes than angels, more like submarines than mermaids” (“Cine Los Angeles” [Los Angeles Movie Theater] n.p). Voluptuous Asian-eyed mermaids, algae, fish, and other aquatic forms that are reminiscent of some of the themes from the “Live Nature” series populate the geometrically-conceived murals and give testimony to her mythified journey along the Pacific Ocean with Neruda. As Mallo had done during her “constructivist” and “Vallecas” phases in the 1930s when she created theater sets out of natural materials, she employed shells, colored stones, glass, and other miscellaneous elements to create a collage.

The press lauded her skill and imagination; the inauguration of the theater on September 27, 1945 attracted Spanish exile friends as well as figures from the literary world of Buenos Aires. Mallo’s murals were a complete success. She was clearly full of optimism at this time, far from the horrors of Spain and the rest of Europe, immersed in the splendid glories of the Chilean coast and her own overflowing creativity. These were her first genuine murals, yet they had neither the monolithic style nor the socialist themes typical of the “Religion of Work” series. Mallo had created a new reality, a new set of laws, in which life floated in shimmering glory, suspended in a sea of hope and vitality. It was a distinct form of revolution, but, unlike the revolution portrayed in her paintings of the late 1920s and in the 1930s, this one was neither destructive, nor constructive; rather, it reveals Mallo’s intense need for a fantastical and sensual world of her own creation.

Mallo had truly come into her own, and she was basking in the limelight that her success afforded her. She frequently traveled to show her work, always holding private exhibitions in her hotel rooms. Mallo was a genius at promoting her work. For example, she stayed at the best hotels, so that her paintings could be framed by the elegant decor. In 1946 she again showed her work at the seaside village of Viña del Mar and at the Copacabana Palace in Rio de Janeiro in 1947. Also in 1947, she boarded a ship for the long voyage to New York, exhibiting her paintings at the renowned Plaza Hotel

on Central Park. Mallo had great hopes for her private show in New York; she sold several paintings, but her tentative mural projects with the Rockefeller Foundation and with Metro Goldwyn Mayer in Los Angeles did not materialize.¹³

Mallo went back to New York in 1948 and showed with success at the now defunct Carstairs Gallery on the Upper East Side. She impressed New York critics, perhaps more because of her effusive personality and her imaginative improvisations in English than because of her painting. They quipped that “[a] kind of formal poetry exudes from her art, which can be diagnosed as a mild case of surrealism” (n. a., *Art News*). Implying that the waning movement was more like a disease than a style, they obviate the fact that Surrealism had lost its cachet in New York years before, when, during its heyday, the collectors Peggy Guggenheim, Pierre Matisse, and Julien Levy had promoted the movement. (Conversely, after her Paris show of 1950, the French critics praised Mallo for distancing herself from Surrealism.) On her return to Buenos Aires, her friend and perhaps lover, Francesco Egli Negrini, owner and editor of the magazine *Lyra* and a member of the port city’s elite, held a party in her honor. The press lauded her success in New York, considered by the *porteños* to be the most important city in the world. In a press picture, she is seated in intimate proximity to the handsome editor.

At this time Mallo’s name timidly began to appear in Spain. In fact, one of her paintings—a haunting black female face with a wide-eyed look of surprise entitled “The Human Deer”—was shown at the First Hispano-American Biennial of Art in Madrid in 1951. Some claim that she attended, but there is little evidence that such was the case.¹⁴ She was still painting in the late 1940s and early 1950s; the work included nude, genitally explicit, aquatic figures and ballet dancers, a series of rocks and one of masks, which again reveals Mallo’s interest in the indigenous faces of Latin America. After 1952, however, she began to lead a more secluded life. It is likely that her silence was caused by both personal and political problems. Some of her friends have suggested that after a long-time love relationship ended, she went into profound depression and stopped working. In addition, politics once again intervened in her life. Juan Perón, president of Argentina since 1946, began a campaign of repression against liberal intellectuals in the 1950s. Mallo’s friend,

Victoria Ocampo, was briefly imprisoned in 1953, when she was falsely accused of having been involved in a bombing at the Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires.¹⁵ No doubt Mallo's mind flashed back to the Spanish Civil War and the extreme punishment meted out to Republicans and leftists during and after the war. She once stated about Argentina: "It was a marvelous country. But Perón arrived and ruined everything" (Santa Cecilia n. p.). Although she occasionally exhibited her work in Uruguay and Buenos Aires in the 1950s, her art was no longer in vogue. In 1961 she returned to Spain and exhibited some of her work from the 1920s and 1930s at the Mediterranean Gallery in Madrid.

When she returned to Buenos Aires in 1962, she began planning for permanent relocation to Spain, but it took several more trips to her native land before she was finally prepared to resettle there in 1965. The Franco dictatorship had initiated its "apertura" in the 1960s, a move toward a more democratic society, but the country was still plagued by bouts of extreme repression. In 1965 Mallo took up residence in the Hotel Emperatriz in Madrid until she settled into an apartment in, ironically, the upscale Franco-sympathetic Salamanca District. Apparently still fearful of the regime because of her Republican past, Mallo kept a low profile during the final years of the dictatorship. She did work on some lithographs based on her "Mannequin" prints of the 1920s, but she was practically unknown in Madrid at this time.

Finally, in the mid 1970s, about the time Francisco Franco died, the Multitud Gallery in Madrid started to promote and recover the Spanish avant-garde, and Mallo's name began resonating in Spain. By the 1980s her fame was secure, in spite of the fact that her reputation as a libertine preceded her and somewhat obscured her role as one of the most important innovators of the avant-garde. The double standard was, after all, still alive and well in Spain. In addition, Mallo's increasingly erratic behavior did not enhance her credibility, and the gossip columnists thrived on anecdotes about her follies—her shocking and often incoherent remarks, her unconventional attire, and her bizarre make-up. Mallo collaborated on several projects and completed a series of paintings inspired by the space age of the 1970s, entitled "Los Moradores del Vacío" (The Inhabitants of the Void), but by the early 1980s, she became infirm and was

no longer productive.

In retrospect, Mallo's early work, inspired in the avant-garde and then in the socio-political agenda of the Second Republic—from the “Verbenas” to “Religion of Work”—is her most important. But the impact of the Pacific Ocean—her interest in the female body, the discovery of the racial diversity in America, her recovery from the ravages of war and her subsequent *joie de vivre*—are all reflected in her paintings from the 1940s and the early 1950s. María Escribano believes that Argentina did not provide the ambience Mallo needed to continue her brilliant trajectory and that perhaps she would have flourished more in Paris, had circumstances not directed her to Latin America (Escribano). It is difficult to believe, however, that she would have developed her artistic style and her career in a more satisfying way in Paris than she did in Latin America. Would Paris have embraced her, as did Buenos Aires and Montevideo? Would she have found the oceanic expansiveness and the erotic forms and mythic figures in the French capital that she did on the Chilean coast and in Latin America's indigenous types? And even if she had gone to Paris, in 1939 it too succumbed to the horrors of war and the massive exodus of its artists, which converted New York City into the most international art center in the world from the 1940s until today.

Mallo found her inspiration in the Pacific Ocean and in the “exoticism” of the peoples of the Southern Cone, and consolation among the intellectual elite and the aristocracy of Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay. Her “Live Nature” series, as well as her murals at the Los Angeles theater (sadly destroyed when the theater was torn down in the early 1980s) are a special tribute to those beaches, to the sea life that washed up on them, and to the psychological and sensual rebirth that they provided for Maruja Mallo during those long years of exile.

Notes

1 See Shirley Mangini, *Las modernas de Madrid* for other women artists, writers, and intellectuals active during the Spanish 1920s and 1930s, although not necessarily at the Residencia de Estudiantes.

2 For more on this subject, see Shirley Mangini, “Maruja Mallo: la pintora de catorce almas.”

3 Eugenio Carmona, who refers to Mallo as a “Trojan horse” because of her ability to surprise people with her talents and personality, speaks unequivocally of Mallo’s role among the Madrid avant-garde: “It seems clear that the creativity, vitality, and intelligence of the young Maruja Mallo left an extensive list of male intellectuals thunderstruck” (90).

4 There are important Latin American connections as well. Rafael Barradas, a Uruguayan “constructivist” painter of Spanish descent who, after traveling around Europe, moved to Barcelona in 1914. There he formed a close relationship with Rafael Torres-García, another influential Uruguayan painter and theorist. Barradas moved to Madrid in 1918. As Eugenio Carmona states in *Picasso, Miró, Dalí*: “Without Barradas, the history of Spanish modern art, at least the art before the Civil War, would have been different and very possibly would not have been better” (30). Barradas influenced many of the young painters in Madrid with his post-cubist “vibrationist” style, especially Dalí’s paintings of the early 1920s.

5 In 1930 Alberti married writer María Teresa León. In 1931, Mallo went off to Paris to show her work. Her paintings were a resounding success in the French capital, attracting the attention of Picasso and Miró and others, including the “pope” of the surrealist circle, André Breton, who purchased her “Scarecrow” from the series “Cesspools and Bell Towers,” which sold for an unprecedented 260,000 euros in 2003—more than triple the estimated price—when Breton’s vast collection of modern art was auctioned in Paris (www.gara.net/pf/P16042003/art59591.htm#printall. 13 Sept. 2003). Although she had offers to remain in Paris, by 1932 Mallo was anxious to return to Madrid, perhaps because she recognized the misogyny of the Surrealists, who viewed their female contemporaries as muses, but rarely recognized them as artists (see Brown, Caws, Chadwick, Gambrell, Hubert, and especially Suleiman). It also appears that Mallo was eager to return to the Spanish capital because she wanted to join the cultural and social movement initiated by intellectuals of the newly established democratic Republic.

6 Mallo always considered “The Song of the Wheat Spikes” to belong to Spain; although she showed the work in many of her international exhibitions, she never sold it. She carried the painting back to Spain with her when she returned to live there in 1965, and it belongs to the permanent collection of the Reina Sofia National Museum in Madrid.

7 Her sketches and two paintings of grapes, which were inspired by her wanderings through Castile in 1935 and 1936 with Miguel Hernández, are reminders of Spain in Mallo's work in the 1940s. According to art critic, María Escribano, who befriended the painter in 1975, Maruja and Miguel were sleeping in a haystack one night, and, when she awakened, the first thing she saw was a bunch of grapes. Mallo explained to Escribano that the grape vision came to her in Punta del Este, Uruguay, and that "the bunch of grapes symbolized Spain." It is also to be noted that one of the later "Naturaleza viva" (Live Nature) paintings, from 1943, is crowned by two bunches of grapes and a grape leaf, and the sketches for the series often include shells and grapes, which would appear to symbolize the fusion of life in Spain and America, but also could easily suggest female and male genitalia.

8 In Spanish, still life is *naturaleza muerta*; in this case an appropriate translation of *naturalezas vivas* could be "live life," but I prefer the literal translation of "live nature."

9 On her first trip to the coast of Uruguay in January of 1941, Mallo visited the gardens of Antonio Lussidi, which she describes as containing four thousand orchids (Esteban).

10 They were, literally, "wild" parties, in which the guests donned all sorts of animal skins that Neruda had collected while he was serving as a diplomat in Java. The parties consisted of poetry readings and much carrying on; guests quaffed a great deal of wine as well as Neruda's favorite drink, Chinchón anisette.

11 Neruda was also enamored of marine life—he lived on the coast, at Isla Negra—and both he and Mallo displayed marine life and artifacts around their homes. Neruda, who had been influenced by Mallo and the other artists from the Escuela de Vallecas in the 1930s, would later write in his book of poems, *Odas elementales*, in the 1950s, of their amblings in search of discarded objects. There is evidence that some of the poetry in *Residencia en la tierra* written in Spain also reflects his relationship with the Vallecas group.

12 In those years, she also did several other paintings that show dance movement. Both "Labios y atletas" (Lips and Athletes) and "Estrellas de mar" (Star Fish) are nude, anatomically correct, muscular bailerinas (oddly, several are males) that vibrate with motion.

13 Nevertheless, she did have other successes in New York. In 1948 she won

first prize in a show in New York for one of her “Head of Women” paintings — “Head of a Black Woman”.

14 Mallo’s brother, Emilio Gómez, mentioned that she returned to Spain for the first time in 1956, although Mallo scholars have not found evidence to confirm his statement (Interview with Emilio Gómez, Madrid, 14 June 2001).

15 According to María Antonia Pérez Rodríguez, who discussed some of the mysteries surrounding Mallo’s life in Buenos Aires at a conference on Mallo held in Viveiro in October of 2002, Ocampo had actually disassociated herself from Mallo by 1944, along with the other members of the Tortoni Café group; it had become clear that Mallo was cultivating the friendship of wealthy Peronistas, who were buying the furniture, clothing, and other items she designed (59-60; 66-67).

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