

Pepa Caballero, an emerging abstract painter in the 1970s

This intimate exhibition of works of the painter Pepa Caballero (Granada 1943-Málaga 2012), completes the retrospective exhibition opened in December 2024 in the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo in Seville, curated by Isabel Garnelo and Carmen Cortés entitled *Constelaciones abstractas*. While the CAAC exhibition centred on the painter's work from the 1980s, when Caballero was already considered a mature artist with an incomparable formal elegance, the Isabel Hurley gallery has gathered the Granada painter's less familiar pieces, some of which have barely been studied; paintings in which Pepa Caballero moved from the figurative, the space travelled during her formal schooling in the 60s, towards the abstraction of the 70s.

She entered abstraction stating that this was not a departure but an arrival¹. She considered that abstraction was a goal with no return and did so, opening many avenues in three series that run through the decade. On occasions she entangles herself in experimental works that turn out to be blind alleys and do not, of their volition, generate new avenues. At other times she launches on unique, very daring pieces, both in composition as in colour, that demonstrate a freshness, tinged with a ferociousness. And there are series that do develop an idea.

In the 70s, unlike her earlier work, Pepa Caballero moved among languages subject to doubts, hits and misses, as well as experiments in form and also *cooking*. And she did this without betraying herself and without diminishment. As one can see in the exhibit, the artist did not place herself in any acceptable way in any type of specific abstraction during these first steps. Occasionally she took refuge in resources of informalist abstraction, and at other moments leaned towards choosing to paint organic shapes, with abundant circular-like examples while also painting where the geometric parameters ruled. It is interesting to see how she dares in one painting —there may be more but we may never know— to experiment with a zero degree of painting; the work is divided in two horizontal colour parts —red and black— close to minimalism. This is a minimalism that makes use of hessian or burlap, the poor but versatile material of Spanish informalism. Thus, in the 70s Caballero was an experimental and unorthodox painter.

Pepa was born in Granada in the 50s and studied at the city's Art school before going to the Santa Isabel de Hungría Fine Arts School in Sevilla during the following decade.² It should come as no surprise that her first steps were dependent on a conservative academic training in the 60s based on figurative painting. As her friend María Lara (born in Loja Granada 1940) said "we had very good teachers like Pérez de Aguilera or Manuel Gutierrez".³ Our artist had, therefore to overcome these discourses which, in her earlier years, had led her through the genre of landscape in search of her personal journey. This refining of forms that we can observe happening quickly and radically led her to the early 70s and abstraction.

Her shift and its chronology is common to many Spanish artists of her generation. The difference between these discourses and those of neighbouring countries was a consequence of life under a national catholic dictatorship that kept the country firmly closed down. The advanced art studies taught in Seville in the second half of the 60s were as persistent as the

1 Pepe Caballero stated literally "One does not depart from abstract painting. One arrives there". Vid. Luis Ordoñez, *Pepa Caballero. La verdad de cada I*, CCTV, 2008. Video documentary on line.
https://www.google.com/search?q=pepa+caballero+video&rlz=1C1VDKB_esES1000ES1000&oq=pepa+caballero+video&gs_lcrp=EgZjaHJvbWUyBggAEEUYOTIJCAEQIRgKGKABMgkIAhAhGAoYoAHSAQg1MDIzajBqN6gCALACAA&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:b9c8cc6b,vid:aUAOWCcZYVM,st:0 [Última entrada el 18/1/2025].

2 One of her best friends at the time, María Lara told me how between June and September of 1964 they both sat for both the entrance exams, the drawing of a statue, and the whole course exam. Caballero and María Lara shared flats in Estepona and Fuengirola from the end of the 60s until 1973 where Lara was a privileged witness to the creation of these first series. Telephone interview conducted with María Lara on 20/11/24.

3 Ibid.

drought in their gaze back at the academic formalism of the 19th century. To be fair it was not very different from the formation in San Fernando in Madrid: it was water of a duck's back because since the 19th century Spain suffered from an impoverished artistic system, starved of nourishment although with some enlightened rescuers, one in Cordoba, or the heroic galleries like Juana Mordó. It was not surprising that the most recalcitrant minds and comrades in experiments and free thinking would decide to escape from the conservative proposals in search of a context that offered greater possibilities of creative richness and a dialogue between peers.

The early decades of the 20th century were witness to an excentric art movement whose members were obliged to leave the country in order to fulfill their goals. Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró and Julio González were representative of this. The first Spanish vanguard art movement produced in the country that could consider itself on an equal footing with the contemporary art produced in France or the United States was the informalism of the 40s. This would arrive too late for José Guerrero who, just after the Civil war ended, would settle in New York and become part of the second group of North American abstract expressionist painters. The dispute with his teacher Gabriel Morcillo at the Granada School of Art where he was studying before he left his homeland is well-known.⁴ When Guerrero returned to Spain at the beginning of the 60s, he did so because the pop art movement had taken the lead in the United States. According to Manuel Fraga this particularity of the Spanish makes us different, meaning better. Guerrero would continue painting, exhibiting and selling his abstract art because in Spain informalism prevailed during the 60s.⁵ The long shadow cast by informalism in Spain is, if possible, even more relevant in the case of Pepa Caballero because she never left Andalusia. We shall try to discover what she did while she stayed since we cannot guess her reasons for doing so.

During the 60s while she was studying, Pepa was painting from realist landscapes to allegorical figurative works with surrealist overtones. There are also undated pieces of neo-deco with allegories of the life of a fisherman that might be coincidental with the work produced by the *Estampa Popular* movement. The images, and the abstracts to a greater degree for their semantic ambiguity, may have been manipulated by the government in that environment of strong censorship but they may well have also been messengers of emancipation like those that can be seen, for example, in the work of the pop feminist Mari Chordà, Angela García Codoñer and Isabel Oliver. Although, unfortunately I have seen very little of her figurative work in the 60s a detailed analysis may offer future keys. This is the point of departure.

However, disregarding the artist's student work, the exhibit commences with a figurative painting. This is an apparently three-dimensional diptych that can be presented as a free-standing figure by the use of hinges that join both parts. It shows a nude female figure being pushed backwards by a giant white ball. Painted in 1970 as a grisaille, this piece connects with the following series *Grises* —the black, white and grey palette— and use of acrylics as well as the white ball in the centre around which the work is composed. The ball renders the nude female figure incapable of movement, an iconography that María Lara considers coherent because "Pepe was very feminist although she was not an active member of the movement. She believed deeply in equality and cared little about the difficulties of being a woman in a man's world".⁶ I mentioned on another occasion that "Whether this be a metaphor of a creation that imbibes from the essentialist feminism common in the 70s or more literally is about the imponderables that pushed women backwards and prevented their advancement, the ball appears in the *Grises* series as a punctum in the Barthesian sense as the element round which everything turns".⁷ I believe that this painting represents the change in Caballero's direction, towards the abstraction that followed, with the elimination of any figurative element which, as I understand it, she considered extraneous, reducing her work to a symbolic element, the meaning of which we may sense but that essentially is unknown to us.

4 Artists in Pepa Caballero's circle also left their homes; María Lara left to make her way in Madrid in the 70s. She had made a first attempt after finishing her studies in 1969 at the San Fernando School of Fine Arts in Madrid.

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6 Interview with María Lara. Op.Cit

7 Isabel Tejeda "Un esbozo sobre los inicios artísticos de Pepa Caballero. Los años 60 y 70", in *Pepa Caballero. Constelaciones abstractas*, Seville, CAAC, 2025..

In some of these pieces Pepa Caballero will continue to compound the idea and format of the still-life by placing the ball in a line that could represent a table, a horizontal containing space. Sometimes there are two spheres, at others there is just one isolated shape. Soon, however, this last figurative reference disappears. The ball appears suspended in time, breaking out as if the canvas were "giving birth". Caballero used shadows, an Renaissance artifice of pictoric illusionism, as an rhetorical element to support this figurative movement. Here, once again I must stress the Granada painter's heterodoxy or, to put it another way, the freedom she felt and how she made use of the different precepts learned during her formative years.

The next series in the exhibition—in reds and blues— belong in the linguistic sphere of abstraction. However, in some cases we can still recognise vestiges that appear to represent organic shapes that penetrate and are penetrated and which to me seem to have a sexual significance. These pieces are dated in 1972 and it is curious that she continued to limit her palette of colours: at first grey, black and white; later the grey became blue-grey in some paintings of night landscapes. From 1973 she launched ruthlessly on red, the colour which would dominate her work for the rest of the decade.

It is interesting to see that she was so comfortable with red, always accompanied by black, the palette that extends across Spanish informalism. I also examined her use of the hessian, less as a support for the paint but as a superimposed element, some times stuck on and at others apparently sewn on. Hessian or burlap is a poor material, easily recognisable in the European informalism from Millares to Burri which Pepa Caballero used very differently, in some cases creating a minimalist work out of poor, recycled materials.⁸

In other acrylics, and envisaging her work in the 80s, she worked with a certain impure geometry, once again making use of shadows, folding the shapes as if they were malleable. The pieces have a very flat, washed effect, with very diluted colours making them almost transparent. I continue to believe that the choice of this rigorous palette of colours is that of works created in the 50s in Spain that aimed to preserve the abstract art legacy of the Spanish School of painting.

This series in red is rich in variations and new directions: experimenting with superimposing planes by glazing, working with organic elements or, on the contrary, moving along the path towards geometrics. These works of Pepa Caballero of the 1970s were pure experimentation, creative liberty and self knowledge of the plastic arts.⁹

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⁸ Isabel Garnelo told me that the sacking material came from Caballero's parents' grocery store.

⁹ The *Grupo Palmo* was founded in 1978 in Malaga by Caballero and other colleagues. This heterogenous collective, until its disappearance a decade later, served to share, cooperate, organise exhibits or edit portfolios of graphic works; small actions that transformed and artistically stimulated the local scene.

