

Un cuadro, una silla

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A grown child

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In the popular conscience of art, the twentieth century was a time of exhilarating change, of total invention, of ruptures, of the permanent succession of complimentary and opposite aesthetic ideals. After the irruption of Cubism, a race seemed to take over the art world in search of the next invention, the next milestone, the next aesthetic revolution. The prototype of the modern artist is, therefore, one that looks only to the future, towards the rupture of inherited models. In its best sense, the avant-garde attitude invites artists and viewers to search for new means of expression; in its worse incarnation, this attitude seeks novelty for novelty's sake.

And yet the avant-garde bears a great contradiction, as I learnt with Francisco Calvo Serraller. In its search of aesthetic innovations that would end with Western artistic tradition, modern artists looked towards a gradually more distant past. On many occasions, what was most modern was fuelled by what was most archaic. Any art form foreign to classicism became a valid reference: African and Oceanic sculpture, medieval art, prehistoric wall paintings. This was not a merely aesthetic gesture. It was also a reaction against the positivism of nineteenth-century Europe, against an arrogant idea of progress. To look towards remote times and places was to say that Europe was no longer a source of inspiration, as Gauguin had suggested in his voluntary exile to Polynesia.

In the midst of this search of aesthetic values prior to the traditional canon, some took on an interior retreat to childhood. This was an important motivation for early Surrealists, for whom the art of children represented a pure form of art, uncontaminated by the moral, social and aesthetic values which corrupt true creative spirit. Picasso is also famously quoted as having said that he had learnt to draw like Raphael before he was twenty but that it had taken him his whole life to paint like a child. Through repetition, the celebration of childhood has become a tiresome cliché, which doesn't mean that it was not the force behind some of the greatest works of art of the twentieth century.

The journey to a more innocent version of oneself, freer of cultural burdens, was the lifelong mission of Jean Dubuffet (Le Havre, 1901 - Paris, 1985). Inspired by Hans Prinzhorn, a German psychiatrist who had studied the art of the mentally ill and had found it bore similarities with that of children, Dubuffet coined the term *Art Brut* in order to refer to an art that was against the cultivated art of museums and academies; the art, in short, that constituted the Western tradition. In his radical conviction that an art without inherited prejudices was truer or, at least, freer, Dubuffet was not happy to merely imitate

children or lunatics; he aimed to become a child himself, a madman, a brute that in the act of creation was able to put aside any aesthetic and intellectual background.

An impossible goal which, nonetheless, gave birth to an oeuvre of great eloquence, as a recent exhibition at Guillermo de Osma gallery demonstrated. The show brought together paintings and drawings spanning his entire career. A good deal of them presented childlike drawings from the 1940s. On observing the best of them, especially a series of small lithographs, one could not help but smile at the naïve traces of the figures and the deformations of their bodies. There was also a series of abstract paintings in which Dubuffet managed to imitate mineral textures through the use of oil paint. One of the canvases perfectly resembled an earthy or muddy surface, for which he probably employed organic materials as well as oil, in the same way that informalist painters like Jean Fautrier were doing at the time.

At first sight, it's difficult to appreciate any human intervention in these works; such is their degree of likeness to nature. If through his childish drawings Dubuffet aimed to return to a state prior to the full rationalisation of the world, in these paintings he travels to a time before civilization. The title of the muddy painting is greatly significant: *La vie sans l'homme* (*Life without man*).

Apart from the childlike and the natural, there is one last aesthetic resource Dubuffet exploited very originally: doodles. At Guillermo de Osma, the drawings and paintings from the marvellous series entitled *Hourloupe* stood out from the rest. Dubuffet claimed to have come up with this series –which would prove to be the most productive of his career– whilst in the banal act of doodling on a piece of paper while he was talking over the phone. As with certain abstract paintings, it is difficult to put a finger on what it is exactly that makes these doodles such powerful works of art. I dare suggest a good deal of their worth lies in their greatly-reduced range of colours. In the chromatic limitation of these vaguely organic forms, in the thick black lines that delimit them, I thought I saw an anarchic and nervous version of Mondrian.

There is something that calls my attention in the photographs of old Dubuffet, and it is that despite his hairless head and the wrinkles on his face he possesses an air of childlike liveliness and curiosity. One somehow senses that his embrace of an innocent and unprejudiced aesthetic, though impossible, was sincere. His greatly original work dismisses the possibility of mannerism. Dubuffet truly aimed to be an unlearned child. And yet despite this vocation one cannot but help seeing beneath those clumsily-traced drawings, beneath the doodles made with felt tip pens, the hand of a great painter. No matter how deliberate his intention to flee from high art may have been, one immediately places him alongside other grown children like Picasso, Klee or Miró.



Arborescence, c. 1970. Tapestry, 162 x 117.5 cm.
Private collection, Paris.

[Jean Dubuffet. Paintings and drawings.](#) Guillermo de Osma Gallery. Finished 17 July.