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ANTONIO SAURA

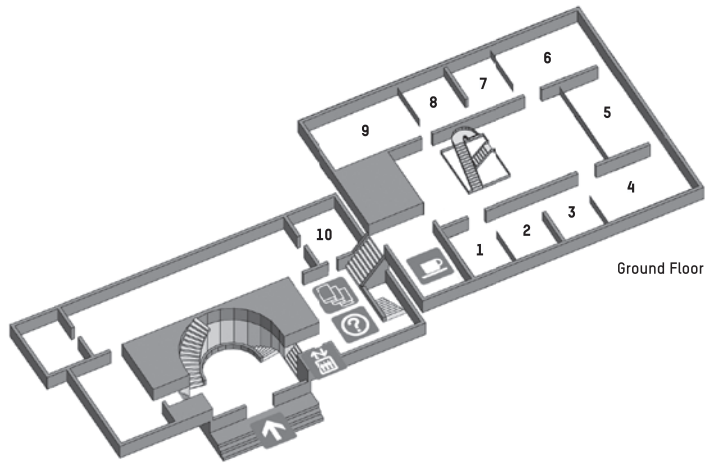
T H E R E T R O S P E C T I V E

06.07. – 11.11.2012

KUNST
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EXHIBITION GUIDE

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1 Introduction

Antonio Saura was born in 1930 in Huesca, Spain, and died in Cuenca in 1998. He was undoubtedly one of the leading artists of the 20th century and among the most influential protagonists of Spanish painting in his epoch.

Influenced by Yves Tanguy and Joan Miró, Saura was an autodidact when beginning his artistic career. In search of "a true landscape of the unconscious," he produced his first surrealist works from 1950 onwards. Shortly before his break with the surrealists in 1955, Saura experimented with various techniques (grattages, rayograms etc.) and thereby opened up new avenues for his work. From 1956, Saura began to develop an extremely individual expressive and gestural style in the themed series *Women 7* and *Self-Portraits*. Then, in 1957, he founded the artists' group "El Paso" together with Manuel Millarès, Rafael Congar, and further kindred spirits. Around the same time, inspired by Diego Velázquez' painting of *The Crucified Christ*, he painted his first *Crucifixions*. Largely from 1959 onwards, the artist engaged on a large-format series addressing the subjects of shrouds, portraits, nudes, crowds of people, themes he constantly recurred to in his later work. In the ensuing period he executed the *Portraits* and *Vertical Women* series. Additionally he explored the medium of sculpture using iron and illustrated literary works. In the series *Goya's Dog* and in the portraits of *Dora Maar*, which he painted from 1983 onwards, Saura investigated pivotal works by Goya and Picasso. Furthermore, Saura left behind a remarkable literary legacy.

First Works: Prolegomena

The Retrospective, organized collaboratively by the Kunstmuseum Bern, the Foundation *antonio saura archives* in Geneva, and the Museum Wiesbaden, comprises 200 works and addresses all the phases of the famous Spaniard's artistic career.

Saura created his first renowned artwork in 1947. Sick with tuberculosis he was forced to remain in bed. In Spain's ominous atmosphere after the Second World War, he suffered under the repressions of the political climate of the Franco dictatorship and under his isolation as an invalid. He greatly admired Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso, and Joan Miró who, in his eyes, were "shining examples of liberal invention." As he set out, he sought his artistic path in the dreamlike world of surrealism. His small-format *Constellations* were influenced by Miró and inspired by his study of astronomy. The young artist's interest in these works is a formal one concerned with the issue of filling empty space. In 1949 by painting on light-sensitive glass plates that he exposed to sunlight, Saura explored the artistic potential of totally abstract *Rayograms* – Man Ray coined the term for this technique. In this way Saura produced "phantasmagoric and translucent figures that hover over an infinite abyss." Created in 1953 during his sojourn in Paris, the series *Mandragora* reminds us of Georgia O'Keefe's or Hans Arp's biomorphic shapes. The root of the mandrake (mandragora) provoked the idea behind the compositions of the *Rayograms* because of its resemblance to the human body. In 1955, Saura broke with surrealism and, with the series *Phenomena* and *Castellana*, produced works in which he combined automatism with new techniques. This unfettered his style of painting, enabling him to "finally paint with a wild and passionate joy." Thus he was able to pursue an "expressionistic approach" of which he reported that he had always dreamed and had foreseen for his future as an artist.

2 “Real Landscapes of the Unconscious” and *Grattages*

In 1950 Saura discovered the theoretical aspects of surrealism through perusing André Breton’s seminal treatise *Surrealism and Painting*, which was originally published in 1928. He met Breton personally during his second stay in Paris from 1953 to 1955. Predominantly in 1950, Saura invented the imagery and forms of his imaginary and poetically surrealist landscapes. Some of them reveal a strong affinity to the work of Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí. Saura describes his landscapes as “a world in three steps: Manifestation of emptiness as a stage, provocation of chance as rape and motivation, and visual reification of the formless.” His goal thereby was to depict the “real landscape of the unconscious” – a landscape that was to be no less than absolute emptiness in which waste products of the dark of night hover.

Shortly before Saura abandoned surrealism he executed the *Grattages* series (1954–1955). These expressive and abstract paintings were made at the end of his “experimental phase” with the help of a rubber tool normally used for cleaning windows. At this point in his career, he had finally done away with the ideological, formal, and pictorial regulations he had imposed on himself in order to fulfill surrealist standards. At long last he found his own individual language in art and self-image as a painter. He now felt self-assured about his means of expression and his command of space: “Now I am beginning to paint.”

3/4 *Women I / Women II*

Saura’s images of women represent oracles. When first confronted by a naked female model, his vision of her was that of an oracle to be interpreted. Her appearance automatically triggered in his mind “an image of an elongated conch shell of Triton.” In this connection Saura wrote that “in the distant time of the myths nature was seen as a gigantic and fertile female body.”

In his depictions of women, Saura developed the topos of the depersonalization of an erotic vis-à-vis or the transformation of the model into a sexual fetish. He did not view women as harmonious bodies of undulating contours. Instead the artist’s experience of femininity was that of an unpredictable entity, of a bundle of energy confronting him in ever-changing shapes formed by jagged and thrusting lines. In his eyes the female did not embody Venus but Medusa.

Around 1950, his vibrant structures evolve into prickly three-dimensional bodies. In contrast, his 1953 nudes are real bodies that could be the sisters of Hans Arp’s Torsi. In the *Black Woman I* from 1954, Saura – influenced by abstract expressionism – laid the foundations for his characteristic female archetypes. In this painting he displays, for the first time, the female body in an abbreviated, gestural language, where the brushstrokes radiate out over the entire surface of the painting in wild eddies and short, abruptly disjointed lines.

The *Women in an Armchair* present the unconventional synthesis of a baroque society portrait and pornographic photographs of young women who, in provocatively exhibitionist poses, spread their legs while resting in armchairs. Like no other painter of his generation, Saura understood and felt femininity as a polar elemental force of his own existence.

Saura's writings are necessary keys to understanding his paintings. To help comprehend *Crowds* – a subject that he repeatedly turned to between 1959 and 1997 – the following statement by the artist is relevant: "A painting is primarily a white surface that must be filled with something. The canvas is a battlefield without limits." The driving force behind Saura's compositions of human figures and faces is his *horror of the void*. "The elements spread out to the limits of the fluid edges of the painting, and, at some point, in the extreme urge to fill space that ultimately verges on emptiness and absence – marked by manic and schizophrenic activity – the prospect of cutting off the edges without seriously changing the general structure becomes apparent, much as we cut a roll of fabric sold by the meter."

Saura viewed Francisco de Goya, Edvard Munch, and James Ensor as painters who "most poignantly felt the frightening, terrific, and dull din of the crowds." His *Crowds* are animated accumulations of certain fatal identities that he combined together. They are mute like the piles of bodies of Bergen-Belsen, or mutter like the figures in Munch's *Karl Johann Strasse*, or scream like the rebels being executed in Goya's *The 3rd of May 1808*.

After February 1956, Saura excluded neither human faces nor bodies from a single series or subject matter he took on.

Saura chose different imagery or "borrowings" – almost without exception from the figurative paintings of Velázquez, Goya, Rembrandt, Hals and Picasso – simultaneously defining these appropriations in terms of particular archetypes, which he then endlessly varied in series of pictures.

From 1967 until the end, Saura no longer defined three-dimensional form according to accepted notions thereof, whereby, for example, two eyes, a nose, and a mouth represent a face. Instead he increasingly shifted and interwove features and elements to the extent that single figures had several faces. We can clearly discern four faces in *Self-portrait 2.90*. In this way, such portrayals gain in complexity and present a number of ways in which the painting can be interpreted.

Careful observation of the development in his portraits shows that the painter acquired a masterly hand in expression and in freedom of execution – independent of the practical necessities demanded of the canvas. Saura noted as a conclusion loosely formulated after Goya: "The painter always creates a self-portrait regardless of the subject matter of a work."

Montages and Iron Sculptures

In 1957, Saura consciously made the provocative decision to call his works made of paper or wood *Montages* and define them in literary terms. They essentially comprised collected fragments such as drawings, postcards, and occasionally a painter's palette. He wrote about his work in this medium as follows: "As a basis I took a noticeboard on which one pins one's daily findings. A richly charged creation is born of ruptures and harmonizing elements through joining together disparate pieces. (...) The montage is a document of the monopolizing power of everyday images and their transformation by the principles of overpainting, accumulation, and metamorphosis."

In 1960, Saura realized a series of iron assemblages in Cuenca, Spain. The exhibition is presenting these works to the public for the very first time. We know very little about the conditions and context of their execution. Saura did not touch on them in any of his numerous writings. Probably he felt motivated to create the iron sculptures made of *objets trouvés*, that is, of found objects, through his artist friend Simon Hantaï, who acquainted him with the art practices of the new realism movement (Jean Tinguely, César etc.). In the perfectly crafted and formed sculptures, Saura adopted subjects that were particularly prominent in his paintings too: *Crucifixions*, *imaginary portraits*, and *vertical figures*.

Comics, Overpaintings, and The Wall

In the 1950s, Saura began overpainting a great variety of image reproductions that he had systematically collected. The roots of this method are to be found in the montages and collages of dadaism and surrealism. From 1961 he was producing the *Comics*. In them he took mass-media images and processed them in many stages: they were cut out, pasted together in surprising contexts, overpainted, and put into the context of a new narrative thread. From an aesthetic point of view, the postcards that he began to produce from 1975 onwards represent a link between the *Comics* and *Overpainting*.

The *Wall Pictures* that he executed in 1984/85 present a highly impressive series of works. The spectral creations resulting from 59 overpainted photographs of the Berlin Wall invoke the emotions of fear and threat as well as angry retaliation triggered by the totalitarian monument.

Saura wrote that "the discordant images, because of the contradiction between spontaneous drawing and the frozen photographic image, effect an essential transformation of the symbol, turning it into a sounding board. One mourns the trumpets of Jericho: Still today, no book has been able to tear down a wall."

Goya's Dog and Crucifixions

Saura called a series that he began to draw in 1957 and further developed in paintings from 1960 onwards *Goya's Dog or Imaginary Portrait of Goya*. These pictures were triggered by Goya's enigmatic *Black Paintings*, paintings that Goya executed on the walls of Quinta de Sordo, his house in the country. Since his earliest childhood, Saura was fascinated by Goya's painting of the dog. He studied the art-historical interpretations thereof and outlined his own views, criticizing what he had read, in a remarkable essay. Based on a wide-ranging selection of iconographic examples, Saura investigated the appearance of solitary figures in empty and abstract space. The artist handled the subject in a highly experimental way, and reflected on and varied visual imagery in constantly novel and surprising ways. The dog's head that appears – "the image of our loneliness" – was for Saura "Goya himself who observes *something that is happening at that very moment.*"

Diego Velázquez's *Crucified Christ* in the Prado in Madrid presents a further pivotal work of Spanish painting in Saura's artistic career. This painting marks the beginning of his exploration of the Crucifixion, a subject that acquired new contemporary relevance in the hands of other painters such as Pablo Picasso, Francis Bacon, or Jean Fautrier. Saura saw the image of the Crucified Christ as having a strongly symbolic character. In his eyes it became an allegory for humankind's feelings of forlornness and desperation in an unjust world.

Pinocchio

In the early 1990s, Saura worked on the illustrations for a new publication of Carlo Collodi's *Adventures of Pinocchio*. His concern in these drawings was to make the protagonists graphically recognizable and appealing to children while not having to deviate from his individual style of drawing. Likewise Saura sought to "again imbue the confused, foggy, and undecipherable paradise of childhood with beauty and profundity."

Saura's illustrations remind us of animated films or comics for children. He was fascinated by the hero of the children's book with its careful dosages of cruelty and tragedy. And, moreover, he observed that "in *Pinocchio* the brightly sparkling situations and the hero's chaotic existence point out a fairytale destiny – that of a wooden doll miraculously filled with humanity and the will to live. Pinocchio's very unique fate does not lie in his finally becoming human but instead in his impulsive inability to achieve this wish, in his otherness, in his different biological makeup, and how, in all of this, he mirrors our existence."

Short Biography

1930

Antonio Saura was born September 22 in Huesca, Spain.
His mother Fermina was a pianist, his father a lawyer.

1943

He contracted tuberculosis and was confined to staying in bed
for almost five years.

1946

Motivated by the impression of a dream or hallucination,
he painted his first picture and wrote his first poem.

1950

First exhibition of his work in Libros bookshop in Saragossa.

1951

First exhibition in Buchholz Bookshop and Gallery in Madrid
with surrealist paintings.

1952

First Trip to Paris.

1953

During his second stay in Paris he met his future wife Madeleine
Augot as well as André Breton.

1954

He settled in Paris and participated in the activities of surrealism.

1955

Parted from the surrealists together with his friend Simon Hantai.

1957

He founded in Madrid the group *El Paso*, which he led until 1960
when it broke up. Published writings and manifestos.
His first group exhibition at Rodolphe Stadler Gallery in Paris.

1959

First one-man show at Rodolphe Stadler Gallery in Paris.
Participated at Documenta II in Kassel.

1960

Produced a series of iron sculptures.
Won the Guggenheim Award (New York).

1961

First exhibition in Pierre Matisse Gallery in New York.

1963

Retrospective of his work at Stedelijk Museum, Eindhoven,
at Rotterdamsche Kunstring, as well as at the museums in
Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro.

1965

Destroyed some 100 of his pictures in Cuenca.

1967

Paris his permanent residence. Again he destroyed around 100 pictures.

1972

During a retrospective of his work at Juana Mordó Gallery in Madrid, a terrorist attack took place by the extreme rightwing group Guerrilleros de Cristo Rey.

1977

First edition of his writings. Expelled from France because of his support for the Sahawri National Liberation Movement. Participated at Documenta IV in Kassel.

1979

Under the direction of Ad Petersen, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam organized a retrospective of his work, which then was also shown at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and, a year later, also at Casa de Alhajas in Madrid, and at the Fundación Joan Miró in Barcelona.

1991

He produced the opera *Carmen* at the Staatstheater Stuttgart together with his brother Carlos Saura and Luis García Navarro.

1995

Illustrated the *Adventures of Pinocchio* by Carlo Collodi. Was awarded the grand prix des Arts de la Ville de Paris.

1998

Saura died on July 22 in Cuenca (Spain).

Agenda

Öffentliche Führungen

Sonntag, 11h: 8./22. Juli, 12. August,
9./30. September, 14./28. Oktober,
11. November

Dienstag, 19h: 10./17./31. Juli,
21. August, 4./18. September,
9./30. Oktober

Visites commentées en français

Mardi, 24 juillet, 19h30

Dimanche, 11 novembre, 11h30

Visite commentée en français avec le commissaire Olivier Weber-Caflisch

Mardi, 9 octobre, 19h30

Kunst und Religion im Dialog

Sonntag, 2. September, 15h30

Kinderworkshop:

Sonntagmorgen im Museum

Sonntag, 9. September, 10h30

Anmeldung: T 031 328 09 11,
vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch
Kosten: CHF 10.00

Michaela Wendt liest Texte von Antonio Saura in der Ausstellung

Sonntag, 13h: 9. September,

14./21. Oktober

Dienstag, 18h: 31. Juli, 21. August,
18. September

Musemüntsch: Worte und Bilder

Sonntag, 21. Oktober, 10h – 17h

11h Führung mit dem Kurator der
Ausstellung Cäsar Menz
Eintritt frei

KINO KUNSTMUSEUM



Filmreihe zur Ausstellung
Mehr Informationen ab
Mitte August unter
www.kinokunstmuseum.ch

KATALOG / CATALOGUE

Antonio Saura. Die Retrospektive.

Hrsg. Kunstmuseum Bern, Museum
Wiesbaden, Fondation archives antonio
saura. Texte von Bernard Dieterle,
Matthias Frehner, Natalia Granero,
Alexander Klar, Cäsar Menz, Marina
Saura, Didier Semin, Olivier Weber-
Caflisch. Gestaltung von Régis Tosetti
mit Simon Palmieri. Deutsch, 2012,
300 Seiten, ca. 264 farbige Abbildungen.
Hatje Cantz. ISBN 978-3-7757-3369-4

PUBLIKATIONEN / PUBLICATIONS

Antonio Saura: Über sich selbst.

Hrsg. Kunstmuseum Bern, Museum
Wiesbaden, Fondation archives
antonio saura. Deutsch. ca. 432 Seiten,
ca. 580 Abbildungen. Hatje Cantz.
ISBN 978-3-7757-3410-3

Bert Papenfuß / Antonio Saura:

Die Mauer. Hrsg. Fondation archives
antonio saura, Gestaltung von
Ralph Gabriel. ca. 192 Seiten,
ca. 74 Abbildungen. Hatje Cantz.
ISBN 978-3-7757-3409-7

Exhibition

Duration of the exhibition	July 6 – November 11, 2012
Opening	July 5, 2012
Entrance fee	CHF 18.00/red. CHF 14.00
Opening hours	Mondays closed Tuesday, 10 a.m. – 9 p.m. Wednesday – Sunday 10 a.m. – 5 p.m. August 1, closed
Public holidays	August 1, closed
Private guided tours	T +41 31 328 09 11, F +41 31 328 09 10 vermittlung@kunstmuseumbern.ch

Project managers:

Matthias Frehner, Director of the Kunstmuseum Bern
Alexander Klar, Director of the Museum Wiesbaden

Curators:

Cäsar Menz, Honorary Director of the Musées d'art et d'histoire Genève
Olivier Weber-Caflisch, President Fondation *archives antonio saura*

Next venue of the exhibition:

Museum Wiesbaden, November 30, 2012 – March 17, 2013

In Collaboration with:

Museum Wiesbaden, Alexander Klar, Director
Fondation *archives antonio saura*, Olivier Weber-Caflisch, Genève

Patronage:

S.E. Herr Miguel Angel de Frutos Gómez, Spanish Ambassador in Switzerland

The exhibition is supported by:

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■ ■ **URSULA WIRZ-STIFTUNG**
■ ■

CREDIT SUISSE 

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