Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea
(1963-2016)

Javier Viar
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Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea’s painting overflows with the natural world. The artist was born in the region of Álava, a place notably defined by its mountains and open plains and where meteors and the seasons, the harvest and distances make their presence felt. Ortiz de Elgea spent his childhood and youth in the rural village of Aretxabaleta, which is near the capital, Vitoria-Gasteiz, but a place where nature prevails. In fact, he has almost always lived there and he also had his studio there for some years before moving to a country house in Peñacerrada, 30 kilometres away further up the Vitoria Mountain Range on one of the routes to La Rioja. It is there, since 2000, that the artist has painted, keeping his works in a similar location in Alegria-Dulantzi in the Alavesa Valley about 15 kilometres before reaching Pamplona, although he is now back in his childhood home in Aretxabaleta after a period living in Vitoria.

I have started my text with these biographical details in order to suggest an initial reason for the prevalence of the idea of landscape in Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea’s work, albeit filtered via the avant-gardes and with Cubist conceptualism as one of its principal reference points. In addition, the figuration deployed is not the type traditional to that genre. However, the large structures that organise his paintings, the sense of the multiple, and many of the forms are only conceivable in relation to nature. Ortiz de Elgea’s figures habitually inhabit landscapes while his abstract works reveal topographical origins. Furthermore, the artist has always defined himself as a painter in relation to the landscape and it is to there that he has largely gone to find inspiration for his paintings. From the Landscape to the Landscape was the title he gave to an exhibition in 1984 that was based on a reencounter between the earliest works he produced as a child and the landscape of Aretxabaleta where he lived when he created them. However, that clearly defined landscape of his origins is not the only one to have offered him motifs. It is his principal reference point but his extensive travels and varying periods of time spent living in other places constantly offer him new iconographies and visual stimuli, new forms and colours that naturally add themselves to his essential multiplicity. Ortiz de Elgea’s
connection to a landscape of sweeping panoramas has ensured that his painting is characterised by the excessiveness of incredibly vast spaces, offering him an epic and at times grandiloquent type of nature. This excess is furthermore accompanied by disproportion and imbalance. *Disasters of the Earth*\(^1\) was the title of a text that I wrote for an exhibition by the artist held in Durango between 1995 and 1996, while another that I wrote for a retrospective in Vitoria in 1999 had the title *The violated Landscape,*\(^2\) and the fact is that Ortiz de Elgea’s fragmentary and terrifying landscapes, which completely twist reality and disturb it to its very roots, as only truly happens with Altdorfer and Tintoretto (the latter an artist particularly appreciated by Ortiz de Elgea), produce a cosmic anxiety that fills his works with dynamic convulsion. A type of ongoing compulsion obliges the artist to force the expressivity and to break any compositional, spatial or chromatic equilibrium. This compulsion has been present in his painting since the outset, is still evident today and was observed by some of his earliest critics. A baroque unease constantly prevents his landscapes from being stable, even when they reinstate the horizon line. For Ortiz de Elgea, the world seems to support itself on a tectonic fault line that is permanently active and which is the backdrop of a profound existential uncertainty, although during some phases it communicates itself as a contagious joie de vivre and the lack of proportion also contributes to this. The result is a profoundly autobiographical oeuvre.

It could be said that Ortiz de Elgea has not been an experimental painter in the normal sense of the term, in other words, an artist given to new techniques and unusual materials, aware of new trends and engaged in creating a variable, innovative discourse. It is true that over the nearly sixty years of his career he has paid tribute to specific contemporary movements which have offered him characteristics and methods that have enriched his work, but this only was the case at the very start of his career and for a short period. With the exception, then, of the years 1956 to 1968 when he produced abstract matter painting and Pop Art, and possibly between 1973 and 1980 when his landscapes became abstract without ceasing to be landscapes and which I do not consider to be a true rupture, the rest of his work has evolved with fluent coherency. Nonetheless and while remaining traditional, his pictorial techniques (generally oil on canvas) have been complex and wide-ranging and have given his work enormous versatility. An enormous talent for colour and a particular freedom of line and brushstroke have given Ortiz de Elgea an imaginative repertoire of stylistic options. The echoes of Impressionism, Post-impressionism, Cubism and Pop Art present in his work have provided him with a variety that not only appears from one painting to the next but which frequently arises in different parts of a single painting. In this sense, what prevails here is a painter’s instinct which only justifies itself in the act of painting, which needs that act with compelling urgency and which has manifested itself in abundance and in size, but also in risk. The result has been that Ortiz de Elgea’s work constitutes an oeuvre that is difficult to assimilate, its protean nature lending itself to a complex survey. The present exhibition aims to focus on the principal lines of this corpus of painting in order to offer an ordered survey of the artist’s visual thinking and to follow a clearly legible route through his most important artistic discoveries. His varied skills and his numerous concerns when choosing motifs and resources could function to distract the viewer’s attention. In the exhibition held in Madrid in 2003 I began my text “Carmelo Ortiz de Elgea (1980-2003)” by justifying the chronological boundaries of that retrospective as a concern to achieve unity and a better understanding of the artist’s creative activities.\(^3\) In the case of the present exhibition, which encompasses...
his work from his earliest painting to the present day, only a rigorous selection has allowed us to define a principal direction for it, a choice that has resulted in sufficient clarity although with the associated risk of losing interesting secondary directions. Having said this, I am convinced that the most creative and most fully realised aspect of Ortiz de Elgea is represented here through some of his most convincing and balanced works and that nothing of his essential spirit has been betrayed.

The division of the exhibition into five sections corresponds to the more or less clearly defined phases through which Ortiz de Elgea’s painting has passed, although I would say that rather than phases these are aesthetic or thematic options (sometimes overlapping ones) which best explain the nature of his work over the past thirty or thirty-five years. The importance of the artist's early works, particularly some matter painting landscapes, does not diminish the impression that a quest relating to the period in which they were created led Ortiz de Elgea to divert his painting towards aesthetic options that would not become his definitive forms of expression, which could in fact lie more in the earliest and least contaminated works of his childhood and early youth than in his subsequent ones that reflected international movements of the time. The section “Early works” thus includes not only the emerging interest in landscape but also the artist’s experiments with painterly abstraction and Pop Art, logical experiments that led him towards his final approach and made it more sophisticated. That phase ran from 1959 to 1968. These works are followed by a second group which I have entitled “Figures with landscape”. This definition, like the one given to the later section “Landscape with figures”, is the one that best corresponds to the principal line of this body of work. In a way, the conjunction of the figure and the space of the landscape constitutes the artist's expressive core and it could be said that the absence of one of the two elements is evident on occasions as a striking loss. The second section emphasises the prevalence of human forms over the landscape. In fact, one would have to look at each painting in turn to support this affirmation, but there is a descriptive interest in the figures, a presence and a characterisation of them within this overall body of figuration that imposes itself over that of the spaces that contain them, which are more fragmented and abstract. The third section of the exhibition is entitled “Abstractions on landscape” and the contradiction in this title derives from the work itself. At one point in 1973 the figures disappeared to leave only structures that had some tendency towards geometry and which represented large spaces with the appearance of aerial landscapes, complex planimetric elements that also recall the configurations of Synthetic Cubism, their different fragments of colossal proportions being well defined and possessed of a varied morphology derived from natural structures. It was precisely at the end of the 1970s that these works, which had gradually broken down and evolved towards a type of Expressionist, Informalist description, less like geological collapses than stormy weather effects of apocalyptic lights, reconquered the landscape through more conventional descriptive approaches. What the artist really regained was the horizon rather than the landscape (which he had never in fact abandoned), in other words the positioning of the earth and sky in their natural locations, through the reencounter with his earliest landscapes which he rediscovered discarded in his studio one day in the 1980s. This discovery very probably enabled Ortiz de Elgea to overcome a critical moment in his painting, given that his works of this time convey a certain indecision and alienation. Finally, the fifth section, entitled “Landscape with figures”, turns the tables on the second in order to give greater importance to the landscape by making it more legible and enriching it with more varied and evident descriptive elements which more explicitly refer to supposedly original ones. This section includes works by the artist created up to the present day, albeit with numerous slight variations and differences that have resulted in the necessity to present another group of landscapes without figures due to the recurring appearance of important works that are exclusively landscapes executed at the same time or slightly prior to the others, which were in turn created at the same time as a third group that should be considered abstract. I have entitled the group of pure landscapes “Return to landscape”. A final group has the title “Recent landscapes”.
Early works (1963-1968)

Ortiz de Elgea’s painting arose not only from the stimulus of the landscape present in his daily life but also from a significant visual landscape culture. In the mid-1950s when the artist was first starting out - taking part in children’s art competitions and discovering the mountain landscape near his home with his father, a heather broom-maker by profession - landscape painting was a particularly successful genre in Spanish painting. The School of Madrid with Arias, Ortega Muñoz and above all Benjamin Palencia, all of them landscape painters, was the most successful official group and the one that had embarked on an initial renewal of painting under the Franco regime which would be overtaken by the young Informalist avant-garde during precisely this period. However, Palencia’s expressionist landscapes with their aggressive colours and tortured forms represented a startling innovation in bourgeois taste of the time and would achieve full recognition at the 1st Hispano-American Art Biennial of 1951, winning first prize. Behind this style lay the art of Van Gogh, which Ortiz de Elgea encountered through reproductions at a very early age. Other influences lay closer at hand. In 1956 a group of landscape painters called Pajarita was founded in Vitoria by various painters who regularly exhibited in that city and were notably present in its cultural life. The group was clearly influenced in some respects by the School of Madrid and produced a type of Fauve landscape, but its emergence was not a totally chance one nor were the members only influenced by Fauvism, given that painting in the Álava region had possessed its own key figure in this field who had represented its painting since before the Civil War and who died aged 90 in 1956. This was Fernando de Amárica, an excellent landscape painter and the patriarch of the visual arts in the region until his death. Landscape painting was thus a genre profoundly rooted in Vitoria during these years, to the point where Javier San Martín could write: “In the 1960s the identification between painting from Álava and the landscape was almost inevitable.” 4 Ortiz de Elgea’s precocity can largely been seen as determined by the pre-eminence of a genre which the circles closest to him must have considered successful and in a way unavoidable. In fact, his earliest landscapes reveal the influence of some of the Pajarita painters such as Enrique Pichot, Enrique Suárez Alba, José Miguel Jimeno, Ángel Moraza and Gerardo Armesto.

In a work such as Amboto from Aramayona of around 1963 (cat. 1, fig. 1) the artist’s initial spontaneity, looking directly at nature, at the landscape and at the houses of the villages around Aretxabaleta is already modified by his knowledge of Palencia whose treatment of colour, particularly his violent yellows, and impetuous composition are clearly evident. It should also be noted that the conflictive nature of Ortiz de Elgea’s visions is already present in the way the artist locates himself in front of the natural setting, always on the path that divides the views, in other words the place of penetration or eruption into them or the place that marks a natural topographical division which he confronts with the same arrogant centrality. Similarly, in The old Sands (1965) (cat. 2) he places himself in the middle of a path in order to depict with all-enveloping and sinuous rhythms a landscape of more muted colours – greys, maroons, blues and greens – that is also clearly divided and is treated with a synthetic mastery superior to that of his local models, obliging the viewer to enter into it.

Ortiz de Elgea’s interest in a certain type of descriptive abstraction, also evident in these two landscapes, increased over the coming years, as did the use of matter. In the early 1960s a series of events in the Álava art world would influence the young artist. In 1963 Joaquín Fraile (1930-1998), a painter born in Navarre but living in Vitoria, held what is considered the first exhibition of abstract painting from the region. Fraile’s work was notably influenced by the Informalism of Manuel Viola (1916-1987), whom he had met in Madrid, but he made use of matter, gesso, pieces of wood, cord and objects to create three-dimensional collages. Rafael Lafuente (1936-2005), another artist of this generation, had made use of Informalist abstraction between 1956 and 1957 although this phase did not reach public attention as his first solo exhibition of 1958 comprised figurative expressionist paintings. In 1963 Juan Mieg (born 1938), another young painter from Vitoria who had studied in Madrid and Barcelona and lived in Paris before returning to Vitoria in 1962, exhibited various matter paintings made with marble dust and influenced by Tàpies and other Catalan Informalist artists whose work he could have seen at first hand. Mieg only produced a few works using this technique but they became a reference point in painting in Álava and in Basque painting in general, given that matter-ba-
sed Informalism scarcely took hold there except in the case of these artists from Álava and a few others in Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia. The close friendship that arose between Mieg and Ortiz de Elgea began in 1964 and the two would become the most significant artists working in Álava in the following two decades. In 1965 they lived and worked together in Madrid and following their return to Vitoria in 1966 they jointly exhibited the work they had created in the capital. Ortiz de Elgea used oil for his matter paintings, the first of which, painted in 1965, were still landscapes although the one entitled *Landscape of Matter* I (cat. 3) includes such an overwhelming amount of matter that the natural and descriptive features are partly concealed beneath the lumpy density of some extremely expressive and convulsively structured, pure visual values. The muted, earthy colours, organisation of the planes and sporadic application of brushstrokes, paint squeezed directly out of the tube and scratches give this work a profound, baroque intensity and disturbing mystery derived from the surprising balance between the free composition and the imitation of nature. It is as if this landscape offered two aesthetic options that were at the time antagonistic: the School of Madrid and matter-based Informalism. In comparison, a work such as *Painting no. 1* (1965) (cat. 4), which seems to be structured as a still life rather than as a landscape, also has an inescapable aroma of the School of Madrid and of design of the time but it is in fact proof of Ortiz de Elgea’s interest in incorporating unusual images in his work in order to give it a growing “modernity” and abstraction, the phase he embarked on immediately after this.

In 1965 Ortiz de Elgea exhibited for the first time in Madrid at the Círculo 2 gallery. It is worth quoting José Hierro’s opinion of his work as Hierro perceptively singled out characteristics that would remain present in the artist’s style, although the critic interpreted them as impulsive youthful traits. He also recognised Ortiz de Elgea’s talent. Hierro saw “a certain disorder” in this painting which threatened to “destroy the overall harmony of the work” and which took shape in a “fight between its formal structures […] and its technique.”

A response to Hierro seems to be found in the opinion of José Luis Merino, written years later in 1991, when he referred to “a creative and essential disorder, given that it is a secret, invisible order, that order which the great masters have pursued for centuries.” In the case of Ortiz de Elgea, figuration disappeared from his work, which for a time focused on a matter-based abstraction that involved the use of cast-off materials such as pieces of old wood and mirrors in a way characteristic of this style. While in the matter landscapes of 1965 the artist’s obvious discoveries reflect the expressionism of his seminal work, simply functioning to take to their furthest extent the visual concerns that had preoccupied him to up to this point while also representing a good and direct assimilation of influences, it would seem that he was not as comfortable with pure abstract matter paintings. In those works Ortiz de Elgea felt obliged to make use of forms that are too rigid and imposed, such as spheres or zigzagging lines, with the aim of guarding the expressive force of the material against any exaggerated formal contamination. While these are works full of force, some of which reveal the painter’s stylistic interest in expressing himself through colossal proportions which in some cases, such as *Gesture between Spheres* (1966) (cat. 5), succeed in giving the image a cosmic dimension, they reveal an essential rigidity which traps the wide-ranging imagination that Ortiz de Elgea always aimed to express, resulting in an excessive hardness. During this period his need for complex, asymmetrical and dynamic forms and compositions did not find a truly comfortable way of manifesting itself and this short episode remains an interesting byway which, over the course of the years, would allow him to occasionally incorporate matter-based resources that were thoroughly assimilated into his work.

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More important was the artist’s Pop Art work, which first appeared in 1966 and immediately replaced his previous type of output. This was because it gained Ortiz de Elgea a place in the now classic exhibitions held by the Basque School groups at the time when the Orain group was founded in Álava, of which he was one of the founders. This episode in Basque culture is sufficiently well known not to require a detailed account here and it is enough to say that the Orain group exhibited at the Barandiarán gallery in San Sebastián for the first time in 1966 and at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Álava that same year, showing alongside the Guipuzkoan group Gaur and the Biskain group Emen. The conflicts that arose from the last event were the principal reasons for the group’s demise, including a clash between Emen - which was more open to different, even conventional aesthetics and thus larger and more assembly-based – and Orain, which championed more strictly avant-garde forms of expression. In fact, the manifesto of the Álava group, written by Juan

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*The Temptations of the Passer-by*, 1967
Mixed media on chipboard panel
182.5 x 183 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
Mieg and the critic Javier Serrano, was the most emphatic with regard to its cultural proposals and the one that best defined the Basque artists’ militant position. Ortiz de Elgea also won two Basque Painting Prizes with his Pop creations, a third prize in 1967 and a first prize in 1968, having won a second prize in 1966 for matter painting. This incursion into Pop Art was primarily important in that it offered him the human form and absolute spatial freedom, in addition to bright, direct colour, and with these elements some fundamental tools for embarking on his first major mature period; the figuration with which he emerged on the Basque painting scene in 1968 as one of its principal modernising exponents. However, even Ortiz de Elgea’s Pop work needs to be defined with some reservations, given that he did not totally assimilate the conceptual nature of that movement. I have referred to his instintucntal nature and to a manner of painting little given to rational steps and not generally arising from line, flat colours or precision in the forms. Its authentic roots should be looked for in the Post-impressionists, in Bonnard and in post-Cubist Picasso with regard to the way of describing the colour, and in Synthetic Cubism for the organisation of the space, which Pop poster design had just liberated. A work such as The Temptations of the Passer-by (1967) (cat. 6, fig. 2), with its numerous Pop elements such as the spatial compartmentalisation and the typography, is nonetheless clearly painted in a way very different to the classic Pop manner with its industrial technique and objective coolness. It is true that other paintings by the artist of this period include popular icons, stuck-on photographs or series of hand prints, but the treatment of the paint, the colour and the form can never be strictly defined as characteristic of international Pop Art. However, as I have noted, this body of work facilitated Ortiz de Elgea’s gradual progression towards a figuration that would result in his most recognisable style and his first masterpieces.

Figures with landscape (1968-1971)

It is not entirely easy to locate some of the paintings of this initial moment in one of the two potential groups and to classify them as Pop or figurative. The earliest work that fulfils all the requirements of that large-scale figuration on which Ortiz de Elgea embarked at this time dates from 1968 and is entitled Bathing (cat. 8, fig. 3), so I will refer to that date, albeit with some reservations. These arise from the fact that another interesting work such as Memento of a Journey (cat. 7) is dated 1969 but is nonetheless closer to the artist’s late Pop works than to his new figurative ones. Memento of a Journey, which includes the Egyptian motif of the Sphinx of Gaza, isolates its images in spaces that are closer to those of The Temptations of the Passer-by, while Bathing is set in a broad, continuous landscape despite the lack of uniform scale. Memento of a Journey is also an early example of the artist’s incorporation of motifs from his travels into his visual repertoire, a practice that would become habitual in his painting and which would enrich a body of imagery filled with autobiographical references, the precise origins of which are sometimes hard to pinpoint. Using an imaginative and exuberant technique, Ortiz de Elgea took pleasure in representing a fantastical and complex erotic and paradisiacal world full of humour, the absurd and spatial inconsistencies and inhabited by ridiculous or ghostly characters who can sometimes be melancholy and pathetic, or fragments of them caught unawares in strange poses and all of them undoubtedly bearers of stories. A primitive impulse, that of the early chronicler of places and people, would give this group of works their particular force. These large, self-referential landscapes with mountains, lakes, paths and vegetation, or ones simply constructed from chromatic blocks justified by pictorial reasons displayed their orography with disjointed spatial freedom. In Bathing, which depicts a group of different figures who together form a group of bathers around a lake, the presence of

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a man in a beret on the left, who is in fact the artist’s father making a sudden entry into the rural world of Álava in an exotic, Gauguinesque context, offers an example of Ortiz de Elgea’s crowded and uninhibited poetical-iconographic repertoire which is capable of fusing pictorial fantasies and primordial eroticism with the most everyday domestic reality. It should be said that spatial continuity is achieved through the rhythms of the chromatic planes and the figures without any notion of the habitability of the landscape or perspectival coherence with regard to size or morphology determining these depictions. Filled with brilliant, cheerful colour, these works express the painter’s hedonistic fantasies as well as his compelling creativity, laying the bases for a body of work that would remain faithful to itself over the years despite its constant innovations.

I noted earlier that this title, “Figures with landscape”, which I am applying to the period between 1968 and 1973 (although only represented in this exhibition by works up to 1971), functions like the title “Landscape with figures”, which I am using for the part of Ortiz de Elgea’s work executed from the early 1980s onwards, and that both serve to define most of the artist’s output or at least its principal core. The slightly different wording reflects his different gaze on figuration during the two periods in question.

The primitive instinct to be found in Ortiz de Elgea’s work of this type led him to depict every element as he considered it could be most clearly described, without subjecting it to a single style, in other words without imposing excluding conditions on his descriptions. “It’s about an ability to enter into immediate contact with everything that relates to his profession (reality, nature as phenomenon and idea, painting and its methods and techniques, the real iconography and the one devised by art) and of preserving that purity during every
moment of the creative process.” This is a purity of awareness that I have attributed to the painter and which I encountered as an idea in Herbert Read, who applied it to the Italian Primitives in their quest to leave behind the symbols of medieval art and to represent nature. With Ortiz de Elgea this led to the description “of the crystalline and impossible world of Edenic mythology where everything of the most varied type finds its place and everything from the cavalcade of things, or its image running through a maze of mirrors, can be revealed with the same primeval wonder.”

It seems clear that this first cycle involves a discovery of stories and characters, and in particular the appearance in the artist’s work of the human figure which encouraged him to produce descriptions in which it is precisely that figure, reflected many times, that structures the overall argument of each painting, including its composition. This certainly does not mean that the backgrounds, spaces and landscapes lack importance, but nonetheless the characterisation of the figures with their strange poses, invasive corporeality, ghostly appearances in trees and bramble bushes, mysterious connections and almost invariably indolent, autistic poses (given that they seem to ignore each other) had a particular force in these works and that they had to be given priority in a carefully considered equilibrium between them and their settings. We will now see the justification for the other title, “Landscape with figures”. A painting of 1969 entitled Massiel (cat. 9) includes the motif of the famous Spanish pop singer of the day, making this work one still indebted to Pop

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10 Viar 1975.
subject matter. This is a splendid painting which, even more than *Bathing*, contains all the ingredients of this early figurative painting by the artist and which can be associated with international post-modern figuration of the time. Its formal presence, the freedom of the image and the technique, based on loose brushstrokes and different types of description - from the dancing figure that recalls Bonnard to the references to geometrical painting while making use of multiple resources of line, modelling and transparency in the service of primarily horizontal narrations - have here attained the expressive coherence characteristic of a mature style. Paintings from the following year, 1970, confirm this assessment and take the group to its highest level of expressivity. They include *Contemplating the Landscape* (cat. 10), a work of enormous quality with a composition centred on a naked, seated figure looking up abstractedly in the manner of Adam in the Garden of Eden reflecting on the meaning of the recently discovered world. Further into the pictorial space a naked woman is walking around while among the landscape elements on the right are some obscurely menacing figures. *Dance* (cat. 11, fig. 4) and *Tree of Life* (cat. 12) are two of the finest works of Ortiz de Elgea’s entire career due to the fluid manner of integrating the different and varied elements of the narrative and of making them come together as an overall whole. In the case of *Dance*, a gigantic nude woman forms the centre of the composition, a type of pneumatic, floating figure surrounded by others located in different zones of the landscape, some natural and others architectural. In *Tree of Life* a fairy-like world invades and fuses with the natural one. The appearance of faces and fragments of bodies among the plant elements makes this painting the least obviously structured of the series, giving it a marvellous fluidity and an idea of continuous, delirious transformation. This effect is heightened by its vertical format which emphasises the work’s ascending rhythm and volatile appearance. Further on in the cycle, a large-scale work from 1971 entitled *Mural* (cat. 13) is in contrast resolved through closed structures that give the impression of being a group of randomly shaped windows through which we see different scenes. This composition of more separated planes heralds the type that would prevail in the artist’s abstract works from 1973 onwards. The figures that fill the narrative in *Mural* now give way to solitary planes of landscape, which in turn acquire greater descriptive abstraction, becoming more stereotyped and conventional than previous ones.

**Abstractions on landscape (1973-1978)**

The large, planar structures that made their appearance in 1973 were also present in earlier works in which the figure still survived as a more encrusted form among others difficult to decipher. When the human presence completely disappeared, and as observed in the tendency announced by *Mural*, the forms became more defined and crystalline, with the result that they were distributed across the space with geometrical precision although always retaining their ability to engage in complex descriptions, on occasions trapped between simpler and more rigorous planes (cats. 14 and 15). At times these could take the form of large objects of recognisable appearance or identifiable as something real, although their initial intention was not representational. It is relevant to point out the naturalism of these creations and their proximity to forms and other attributes of nature. We only need to compare the descriptions that surround the figures of the previous period with these to confirm their continuity. This period, which lies on the boundary between greater freedom of construction and the suggestion of natural configurations, would become richer in terms of material consistency as would the use of colour, reaching the point of works such as *Painting* (1975) (cat. 16, fig. 5), which is a taut and sumptuous composition due to both the opulence of the colour and texture and the coherence of its design. In the most informal and sensual works of 1978, notably five large paintings that seem to represent authentic meteorological cataclysms, important pictorial concerns which characterise later works are already notably present, such as the description of nature’s convulsive “emotions” rather than of its structural collapsing. These five works, which were included in the exhibition *Erakusketa 79*, can
be considered a point of conclusion in which the precise, structured world that had launched this cycle (cats. 17-21) appears dissolved and formless. It is important to emphasise Ortiz de Elgea’s preference for large formats that correspond to the magnitude of the settings, infinite horizons and impassable gradients which, for their complete expression, require a magnified voice, the voice of the mural and the expressive dimension of the epic. For Javier Serrano this type of painting “Fights against domestic spaces and against the diminution of man; against a concept of art as interior decoration. An invocation to public and collective spaces.”

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This type of painting, which was difficult to leave behind and a true apotheosis of expressive resources and visionary unease located on the edge of the abyss, required Ortiz de Elgea to reencounter his very early work, as I noted earlier, in order to reconsider the direction to be followed. A shift as radical as the one that exists between the last five, large-format paintings and works such as *Wounded Animal* (1989) (cat. 22) and *Lacquer* (1981) (cat. 23, fig. 6), which are very different to each other, offers proof of a significant crisis. The first is a true landscape; everything in it encourages us to consider it a naturalistic description despite its freedom. With a structure only discreetly evident and without obvious, emphatic forms, it allows the viewer’s gaze to enter the background through different, subtly established planes, reinstating the horizon and incorporating the landscape’s real iconography into a contemporary aesthetic. *Lacquer*, in contrast, is a spatial experiment that is structured as a large model of the landscape but is a work filled with the devices of abstract painting, specifically Abstract Expressionism, which give it a strikingly experimental appearance. This is also the case with other paintings of this period, in which the abundance of spontaneous, risky methods such as the drips that create planes and seemingly seeking compositional models and ultimately new images, reveal both a certain bewilderment in the painter’s style and the discovery of new resources. It was during these years that Ortiz de Elgea’s rediscovery of his earliest paintings, the landscapes executed during his youth with which this text began, offered him a guideline for recovering the landscape in general. In 2003 he wrote that rather than the recovery of a landscape that had always been present, this was a recovery of
the horizon, given that in addition to incorporating his elements in a more textual manner he also incorporated a representational order that included perspective, the violation of which had been a consistent trait in his style since he left behind his first series of landscapes. *Lacquer*, for example, takes its starting point from a very similar painting, *My Father in the Landscape* (1981), from which it principally differs in the presence in the latter of the painter’s father in a central position with an extensive landscape background, allowing *Lacquer* to be identified as a true work in that genre even though it lacks a horizon and the description is of a structural type. As such it looks forward to a compositional model that would be repeated over the following years in many of the works that constitute the “Landscape with figures” phase.

Ortiz de Elguea’s reencounter with his early work and his consequent change of direction led him to include his early work in his above-mentioned exhibition of 1984, *From Landscape to Landscape*, in order to explain the way in which this process had come about. During the 1980s the artist produced works that contained immediately recognisable images and in which free drawing, colour, expressive density, spatial licence and, in general terms, distorted organisation still allowed them to be identified as large expressionist landscapes and on occasions the actual place depicted could be determined. I refer to works such as *Bird of Paradise*

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(1984) (cat. 24, fig. 7), which despite its fantastical nature includes an element to be found in the artist’s earliest, small-scale landscapes, namely a central path to lead the eye into it; Large Sky (ca. 1985-1995) (cat. 25), which beautifully evokes oriental landscapes and shares their serene tension; Mist over the Reservoir (1986) (cat. 26), which plays in a balanced manner with real elements and other imaginary and merely compositional ones; and La Rioja (1987) (cat. 27), a model of the imaginative visual interpretation of a real landscape and a work that respects the horizon and the viewpoint, including a clear reference to the spirit of the School of Madrid while nonetheless remaining completely original. This is always a very personal type of landscape painting supported by its emphasis on imbalance and which needs to explore the most extreme potential of the composition and to experiment with discordant elements. After he created these works, for part of 1987 and all of 1988 Ortiz de Elgea devoted his time to painting portraits of friends and did not fully return to his habitual subject matter until 1989.

**Landscape with figures (1983-2008)**

This section should be located in parallel to the previous one given that although there was a particular interest in reinstating the landscape per se, as we have seen, the presence of the figure persisted in the paintings of this type so that the period to which they correspond serves for both types. Furthermore, a true discontinuity cannot be established between the landscapes of “Return to landscape” and “Recent landscapes” and I have only separated them in order to point out the initial importance of their revival of the landscape, the effort to return to it in a more explicit manner at a time of creative anxiety and the increased figurative or narrative emphasis in some of the latter at a time of calm maturity and continuity. I have already referred to My Father in the Landscape as a first reference to this new phase and an example of that parallelism in which landscape alone and landscape with figures evolved. A masterpiece of integration is Backlighting (Korres) (1983) (cat. 28, fig. 8) in which we see the form of a ghostly figure over the landscape that again occupies the centre: the alter ego of the artist and the viewer and a figure that provokes awareness of the contemplation of the space, which is the space of existence. The ghostliness conveyed by this work is primarily due to the way in which it is painted, through the effect of transparency achieved by the technique of painting on the back of the canvas and of playing with the resulting paint stains that appear on the front. However, the name of this section, “Landscape with figures”, gives pre-eminence to the landscape precisely because it is this that embodies the transformation and because it has acquired more importance than the figures. In the world that Ortiz de Elgea created between 1968 and 1973 the figures can be taken as the primordial presence, with a more abstract spatial context. In the present group they have lost their individual nature and are true shadows in a more real setting.

The description of the environment envelops them in light. The ghostly formlessness of the figure in Backlighting (Korres) continued to be present in later paintings and the figures depicted were sad, transparent phantoms existing as bodiless presences. Figure crossing the Wood (1986) (cat. 29) seems to be a nocturnal vision of someone who leaves shreds of himself behind in the trees, lacking the corporeality of many of the characters in the works of 1968 to 1973. These come to mind in a slightly later painting, Autumn on the River (1987) (cat. 30), in which we see various figures bathing in a pool and trying to play with the water but here they take the form of a bitter vision like that of an aged Garden of Eden, lacking the life-giving enthusiasm revealed in the moments represented in the artist's earlier work, here with a more muted palette and a thinness of the paint that makes them translucent. An existential decline invades the scenes of this period and we encounter many other works filled with pathos and solitude, in comparison to which the pure landscapes expressed much greater faith in the reality depicted.
These works also frequently feature a single figure, although it is not the viewer’s shadow. We have encountered two examples and others that could be cited include *The Lookout* (1988) (cat. 31), *Mummified Saint* (1992) (cat. 32), *Bilbo I* (1993-1995) (cat. 34), *Marks (my Studio)* (2002) (cat. 39) and *The Shellfish Gatherer* (2008) (cat. 40). In the other works that represent this series in this exhibition each scene has very few actors, far from the tumultuous gatherings of *Massiel or Mural*. Thus in *The Lookout* a single figure raised up on top of what appears to be a mast or columns like a stylite is outlined against a sweeping panorama to create one of the strangest and most beautiful images in Ortiz de Elgea’s oeuvre. Here there is an enthusiasm for colour despite the overall penumbra, making the work a jewelled standard and a highly imaginative figurative image, a dense and enjoyable witticism due to the figure’s extreme situation. In turn, *Mummified Saint* depicts the subject referred to in its title in a handsome setting with celestial characteristics; a contradictory (and ironic) presence of the corruption of the flesh floating in a transparent atmosphere worthy of Giotto. *Bilbo I* is the artist’s first treatment of a striking theme in his work, to which he paid considerable attention and which resulted in eighteen works, some of large size. Their subject is the destruction of industry that took place in Bilbao in the 1980s, resulting in abandoned sites and a context of ruin and decline visible on the banks of the Nervión through the remains of the steel industry and other associated industries. While painting of this type had acquired a profoundly dramatic dimension since 1979, it was only with this cycle
that the type of panoramic collapse that it depicted had a historical context. Ortiz de Elgea’s capacity to depict large, unstable or uninhabited terrains proved ideal for reflecting the reality of Bilbao at this period. Bilbo I can be seen to summarise the spirit of the entire group with its description of a chaotic, imaginary industrial landscape, dirty and broken, in which the artist includes a human shadow that enters the visual field diagonally from the bottom: a special spectator, a puzzled witness to the catastrophe. Almost a decade later, in 2012, Ortiz de Elgea again devoted a dramatic cycle to a historical episode, in this case the bombing of Gernika on the 75th anniversary of that event. Marks (my Studio) is a panoramic self-portrait of the artist working in his studio in Alegria-Dulantzi, offering a figurative description of its space and objects, in which pale grey and blue tones and a light, incisive line prevail and on which the artist printed the soles of his shoes by walking on the canvas after he painted it; a curious reiteration of spatial occupation which involves both the reality of the canvas and the representation on it. The realist inclination of this work is not in fact unique, as other landscapes, urban views and depictions of buildings are to be found alongside more textual landscapes from the mid-1990s. The Shellfish Gatherer is a panoramic self-portrait of the artist working in his studio in Alegria-Dulantzi, offering a figurative description of its space and objects, in which pale grey and blue tones and a light, incisive line prevail and on which the artist printed the soles of his shoes by walking on the canvas after he painted it; a curious reiteration of spatial occupation which involves both the reality of the canvas and the representation on it. The realist inclination of this work is not in fact unique, as other landscapes, urban views and depictions of buildings are to be found alongside more textual landscapes from the mid-1990s. The Shellfish Gatherer is a busy, fantasy-like composition, an underwater vision that takes the artist’s story-telling capacity to its furthest extreme in order to describe unlikely places and visions but ones depicted with a rich range of images and executed with a penetrating line and rich, balanced palette.

Paintings with pairs of figures or three figures painted at the same period as the above-mentioned ones also reveal a clear emphasis on the spatial setting and even in cases where the figures possess a solid, fully resolved visual presence they are mere sketches of figures or manikins that embody an almost inanimate humanity which blends into the backdrop. Their very mechanical nature has its own story: The Distraction of the Chaperone (ca.1993-1994) (cat. 33) maintains a characteristically humorous note, given that it depicts a couple in an amorous situation which escapes the brief control of a bust symbolising moral orthodoxy, in a reference to the traditional “chaperone” of the title. The Felucca (1997) (cat. 35, fig. 9) is one of the most visually beautiful results of the artist’s recollections of his travels: an unusual view from above of the type of Egyptian boat referred to in the title which displays all its typical beauty on the rippling waters of the Nile. The viewpoint is uncommon but can undoubtedly be associated with Ortiz de Elgea’s baroque gaze, which never hesitates to locate its point of contemplation in unlikely spots. The painting is also an example of the interpretation of the results of natural acts or their pictorial effects when rendered in visual terms. Also relating to Egypt is an intensely colourful painting entitled The Mummy Thief (1983-1997) (cat. 36) which has a rather Pop Art appearance due to the precise definition of the figures. As with Ortiz de Elgea’s previous paintings, however, these figures are dolls in human form that are impossible to define. Accident and Remains in the Snow, both of 2001 (cats. 37 and 38), depict figures in white landscapes. Accident is notable for the use of random forms (drips of paint) that create some of the passages of landscape, as we saw with Lacquer and other works of 1981, creating a contrast with the figures, which are executed with a more traditional control of the brush.

In this mature body of work by the artist, which began in 1980, we encounter at least three difference expressive routes or sub-genres: pure realist (or rather, identifiable) landscape; pure abstract landscape; and landscape with figures. This division affects not only the results but also the origins of the work given that there are paintings which arose from preliminary sketches made from life and others that are rather the result of a spontaneous and random procedure in the manner of painting the canvas. The most evident characteristic of all these canvases is their diversity, which is more evident than in any previous phase, although some thematic threads can nonetheless be identified. When approaching a work, the artist himself acknowledged two parallel stimuli - chance and nature, both related to multiplicity – and he located himself on a boundary: “I don’t know what I’m going to paint in a work. I start to smudge, stain and dirty the canvas.
The Felucca, 1997
Oil on canvas
300 x 250 cm
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum
The suggestion of a patch of paint calls out for me to pursue that direction. The world of suggestions is the one that most interests me in art. I’ve always painted like that.” He goes on to say: “Reality itself is far braver than the bravest painting you could paint. Art will never exceed reality. You don’t go beyond its colours or its forms. Reality is the great fiction. The source of creativity lies in nature.” In order to resolve this issue of multiplicity, without which it would be difficult to understand this aspect of his work, he concluded: “Paintings that resemble each other bore me.”

Since Ortiz de Elgea returned to landscape there seems to have been no limits to his imagination. All his pictorial resources, images and techniques have joined forces in order to work together. The presence of nature largely determines their appearance but their relationship to reality is one of conflict and it is here that another of his creative focus points lies. On the one hand we have the need for reality in order to obtain stories, forms and structures from it; on the other lies the opposing necessity to modify it and impinge on it in order to achieve unprecedented distortions. This has a lot do with the artist’s baroque, expressionist nature, which frequently takes him to the limit of the artistic resources available to him, locating his art on the edge of excess. His openness when starting to paint, open to chance and to the stimulus of everything, also facilitates associations from which he derives an enormous capacity for transformation. On occasions Ortiz de Elgea alters his models to the point of making them seem like something else or creates a strange hybrid which may not aim to be anything, given that abstraction protects it in its flight from real forms but gives itself away as supposedly natural. Distortion and transformation, which are not always easy to identify when separated, are recurrent traits in Ortiz de Elgea’s dramatic relationship with reality while related to them are simulation, disguise and mystery. Due to this ability which we have just observed, things and people are ultimately not what they seem, in an endless game that agitates any identity in a constant state of transforming itself into a different one. All this gives rise to a complex world that is initially difficult to set in motion: dynamic, violent, concealing messages inside other messages and expressive of a profound spiritual unease.

Recent landscapes (2000-2016)

Many of the landscapes of the period that we are looking at lie on the frontier of abstraction, although it should be said that those works, which could initially be considered true abstractions due to their doubtful basis in reality, are in fact naturalistic in origin if contemplated with care, as I noted earlier. It is only when compared to others that are demonstrably based on first-hand observation, i.e. sketched out in front of the motif, that they can be seen as abstract. The five paintings which form part of this final group are representative of these different approaches, each one achieving true mastery in its difference. The first three, *Flowers-Fire* (2000) (cat. 41), *Asturian Landscape* (2003) (cat. 42) and *The Thicket* (2009) (cat. 43, fig. 10) are perfect examples of the undetermined encounter between landscape and abstract painting. In *Flowers-Fire*, which has a vertical format, the prevailing motifs are opulent floral shapes which occupy the foreground and rise up on long stalks, creating a concentrated, sensual setting to which the work’s large scale adds an unusual grandeur only to be found to this degree in some of Kiefer’s works based on similar motifs. Again vertical, *Asturian Landscape* is more structural in character, revealing the disproportion characteristic of the natural world that inspires it. The centrality of the principal motif, which grips the viewer with its powerful sense of a division, recalls those to be found in the artist’s earliest landscapes, in particular the two of around 1963 and 1965 which open this exhibition. The piling up of foliate motifs to the point of creating

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14 Ibid.
an almost unrecognisable, dense and impenetrable image makes *The Thicket* a brilliant work of complex colour and description that comes very close to a gestural Informalism, even though this is manifested in its overall arrangement and in many of the details such as the heart of a fantastical forest and derives from the depiction of its impenetrable mesh.

The easily recognisable figurative landscapes, which are more realist than those of the previous decade, first appeared in the early 1990s and have continued up to the most recent examples. Two of them, *Shepherds’ Huts in California* (2012) (cat. 44, fig. 11) and *The Mangrove Swamp* (2015) (cat. 45), originate in the artist’s travels. Starting in 1992, the periods Ortiz de Elgea spent in Niembro (Asturias), Roquetas de Mar (Almería), Port de la Selva (Girona) and Fuerteventura have resulted in numerous oils, some already discussed here. The trip the artist made to Padua, Mantua and Verona in 2006 to see the exhibitions on Mantegna to mark the 500th anniversary of that artist’s death made a profound impression on him. His travels to other places, including a second trip to Egypt as well as to Germany, Cuba, Mexico, the USA, India, the Dominican Republic, Patagonia (Argentina), Malta, Guatemala and Belize, resulted in important works and a new range of motifs. His discovery of New York gave rise to a number of important paintings on the city in 1999, while Chicago inspired several large-format views painted in the winter of 2003. A period spend in Reno, Nevada, in 2012 on the invitation of the anthropologist William Douglass from the Department of Basque Studies that now bears his name in that city, produced some landscapes of celebrated locations in the American West, including views of the Grand Canyon, its vast and powerful layout responding to the artist’s own inclinations, as well as depictions of Pyramid Lake, Lake Tahoe and Death Valley. Among these works, Ortiz de Elgea painted the most important after his return home. In the large-scale *Shepherds’ Huts in California* he depicts the solitude of these structures on the banks of Lake Tahoe in California. Arising from a different
trip is another large painting worthy of separate mention: *The Mangrove Swamp*, painted on the basis of a first-hand preliminary study of 2008 painted in Guatemala. Also requiring mention here are figurative landscapes that are perfectly recognisable as such but which nevertheless do not reflect a single, real model but rather various ones. *Desolate Landscape* of 2015 (cat. 46), for example, is made up of fragments of different remembered locations, once again mango swamps, which function as a synthesis of views recorded in different places around the world. The same is the case with *Mining Landscape* of 2016 (cat. 47), which is based on sketches made at the Riotinto mines in Huelva but which also includes other images.

Reflecting on the expressionist landscape Kenneth Clark wrote: “Expressionist art involves a dangerous tension of the spirit”. Associating his opinion with specific aspects of the modern spirit, he added: “In an age of violence and hysteria, an age in which standards and traditions are being consciously destroyed, an age, above all, in which we have lost all confidence in the natural order, this may be the only possible means by which the individual human soul can assert its consciousness.”

It is interesting to think that something of what these words suggest lies in the vision offered to us by Ortiz de Elgea’s painting, which recounts the story of an attack on the natural order and on reality, making it disproportionate and unstable through the artifices of painting but without totally abandoning the signs that visually identify that reality and even intensifying them, as if their distortion or negation created a “tension of the spirit” as great as the one that led the artist to create them, while also urging on the opposite process which is that of their reconstruction and recognition.

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