



Ibarrola: Colour, Space, Freedom

Published by RUBÉN CERVANTES GARRIDO *on* 18 NOVEMBER 2023

With the death of Agustín Ibarrola we say goodbye to what Carlos Martínez Gorriarán has dubbed the trinity of late-twentieth century Basque art. Like Eduardo Chillida and Jorge Oteiza, the other members of the trio, the work of Ibarrola is eminently abstract. Each had a distinct artistic personality, but while it is possible to imagine a non-specialist confusing a sculpture by Chillida with another by Oteiza, it's very difficult not to recognise an Ibarrola.

The first thing that made him stand out were his brilliant, unleashed colours—a trait that should not obscure the deep meditation behind his work. (There's something in aesthetic pleasure—in joy—that makes some people not take certain artists fully seriously.) Furthermore, Ibarrola never abandoned figuration altogether, as many of his most well-known public sculptures come to show. His figures, reduced to mere profiles, literally cut-out on a steel background, are three-dimensional developments of his paintings and drawings depicting the world of factories, one of

those extremely rare cases where political commitment and aesthetic audacity not only do not clash, but feed off one another.

Ibarrola was always a curious artist. In the mid-fifties, he felt the urgent need to move to Paris for some years to see the art that was being made there first-hand. Back then, the French capital continued to be an irresistible destination for young artists who longed to measure themselves against the great figures of the avant-gardes. In Paris, Ibarrola would embrace abstraction as the result of theoretical reflections brought about through his association with José Duarte, Juan Cuenca, Juan Serrano and Ángel Duarte. Together they formed the collective 'Equipo 57', one of the main exponents of European concrete art. Their aim to produce a pure, impersonal art, focusing on the qualities of light, space and form, would leave a lasting influence on the Baque artist.

On his return to Spain, Ibarrola joined the Communist Party and ended up in jail for it between 1962 and 1965. There he continued to paint and draw, and some of his works secretly made their way to the outside world and were shown in international exhibitions. Shortly after his release, he was imprisoned again for a further two years. Outside of jail, his anti-Francoist activism would earn him a new blow, perhaps the greatest of all: just a few months before the death of the dictator, a group of far-right thugs burnt the large country house that he used as a studio.

In the early eighties, Ibarrola's quest to develop forms in space found an extremely audacious outlet. In 1982 he began to paint the trees of the Oma Foest, an endeavour to which he devoted almost a decade and that probably remains his most celebrated work. With it, he began a whole series of interventions in natural landscapes, such as the painted stones of Garoza or the *Cubes of Memory* in the port of Llanes. Through them, he aimed to continue an age-old tradition. 'I think ... that landscape has been constructed by man since his conception; the landscape we see every day possesses the geometry man has given it throughout history,' he said. Like

the best modern artists, the past (however remote) proved a rich source of inspiration.

It is almost impossible to speak of Agustín Ibarrola without mentioning his firm denunciation of the terrorist organisation ETA. When doing so, however, one fears downplaying his art. It's true that his international acclaim was never dependent on the political persecution he suffered, but to ignore it almost seems a discourtesy. There are people like [Maite Pagazaurtundúa](#) who can give first-hand accounts of his political commitment. Suffice to say here that his advocacy for freedom earned him the attack of two fanatic nationalisms—and that, thanks to the latter of the two, a seventy-year-old man was forced to employ bodyguards for over a decade. The fact that many of us became familiar with Ibarrola's face (a constant presence in anti-ETA demonstrations) before his name or his art illustrates the price of freedom when one defends it in earnest. Thanks to people like him, we cannot quite yet relegate the figure of the 'engaged artist' to the condition of a bad joke.

Agustín Ibarrola died on Friday 17 November 2023.

This article was originally published in Spanish in [Letras Libres](#). Translated by the author. See all my texts translated into English on my blog [Un cuadro, una silla](#).