Review of *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*

Diana C. du Pont, ed. Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007

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Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted, is the first major U.S. exhibition of Mexican artist Rufino Tamayo's (1899 - 1991) work in nearly thirty years. Diana C. du Pont, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, organized the show and edited the catalogue, to which she contributed the essay "'Realistic, Never Descriptive': Tamayo and the Art of Abstract Figuration."[1] From Santa Barbara, the show traveled to the Miami Art Museum (MAM) in Miami, FL, where Assistant Curator René Morales oversaw its coordination. Next year, *Tamayo* will close at the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo in Mexico City.

At the Miami Art Museum, the exhibit's mandate is apparent in the titular promise of reinterpretation. The show is divided into three parts, each of which is then separated into thematic groupings. "Tamayo's Reenvisionings," work the artist created primarily during the 1920s and 30s, focuses on Tamayo's explorations of various forms of modernism, especially European. "Tamayo's Abstract Figuration," his paintings from the 1940s and 50s, is the heart—and the splendor—of the show. It explores the artist's representations of the human figure and the human condition. The paintings he created during the period from the 1960s through the 1980s are grouped as "Tamayo's Universal Humanism."

Paisaje (1921), a post-Impressionist street scene, and *Paisaje con Rocas* (1925), a Cézanne-like proto-Cubist construction (including decidedly un-Cézanne-like *maguey* plants) initiate "Reenvisionings," the first and chronologically earliest section of the exhibition, introducing a crucial premise of the show: Tamayo's controversial negotiation of the national and international art worlds and his development of "fusion modernism," the blending of motifs and techniques of European and Mexican schools.[2] The exhibition characterizes "Reenvisionings" as "points of departure in his oeuvre,"[3] and a "reenvisioning [of] these artistic directions from a

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Mexican perspective."[4] However, most of the works in "Reenvisionings" actually appear to be fairly direct interpretations of art of the European avant-garde. In her essay about this period, Karen Cordero Reiman cites the influence of two Mexican schools of art, the Best-Maugaurd Drawing Method and the Escuelas de Pintura al Aire Libre, "both of which, in different ways, questioned the traditional approaches of art academies."[5] In the exhibition, however, it is difficult to discern whether Tamayo's exploration of "marginalized genres" is best attributed to Mexican or to European schools, many of which had been also challenging tradition.[6]

In the catalogue, du Pont argues that Tamayo developed a European-Mexican fusion, but not with the goal of assimilation.[7] In other words, while Tamayo drew upon Mexican and international styles and motifs, he strove to maintain a distinctly Mexican character in his work. "Still Lifes"—a subset of "Tamayo's Reenvisionings"—is notable for its inclusion of his trademark *sandías* (watermelons), as well as traditionally Native American motifs such as corn. "Reenvisionings" is certainly a "point of departure" in the artist's career, but it remains unclear whether this period is best characterized as one of innovation in fusion modernism, as the impact of European art on the works presented is more potent than the incorporation of Mexican motifs. The paintings in this group mostly suggest that during the 1920s and 30s, Tamayo was sharpening his skills as an artist and, indirectly, a serious student of modern art. Informed and studied paintings that he created during this period seem inspired by the masters of European modernism: Gauguin, Cezanne, Matisse, Chirico and Picasso. Tamayo's skillful incorporation of such diverse styles and motifs indicates a sophisticated and nuanced understanding of international art.

Movemiento Fabril (1935) exemplifies one of the exhibit's missed opportunities for reinterpretation. In subject and composition, it is comparable to the brand of social realism made famous by *los tres grandes*. The condensed, repeating forms of the depicted factory strike echo Diego Rivera's work without quoting too directly. An unexpectedly humorous touch is Tamayo's signature, which appears on a sign held by a worker at the center of the painting. In the catalogue, du Pont argues that Tamayo—while decidedly at odds with the Mexican muralists' socialist art—was at times subtly political.

Regrettably, this idea is not explored deeply in either the catalogue or the show, although it would have been an opportunity to generate truly new ideas about the artist. For instance, *Discusión Acalorada* (1953), Tamayo's famous image representing his ideological battles with the muralist Siqueiros receives its own wall text. However, the tantalizing mention of their debates over the nature and purpose

of art only hints at the question of politics, giving short shrift to both the conflict and to Tamayo's relationship with the muralists in general.

Similar to *Movemiento Fabril*, several other paintings in the show (*Homenaje a Juárez* of 1932 and *Homenaje a Zapata* of 1935, for example) exhibit similarly overt politics. In contrast to du Pont's literal reading of such paintings as direct homage—and therefore evidence of Tamayo's political sensibility—Reiman argues that Tamayo instead painted such works as metacritiques of political painting of the era, providing a more interesting and complex interpretation.

The focal point of *Tamayo* is the second large grouping from the 1940s and '50s, "Tamayo's Abstract Figuration," a collection of his most exciting work. During this period, the artist concentrated on the human figure and solidified his trademark "fusion modernism." "Personifications of Fear" encompasses some of his most interesting and most discussed images of human anxiety and torment. It is here that the artist initiates his obsessive examination of the human experience, expressed in superb coloration, and in his self-proclaimed style of "nondescriptive realism."[8] From this period, *Mujer Temblorosa* (1949) is an exceptional work with powerful hues and nuanced brushwork (as is often the case, such details are far more extraordinary in life than in reproduction). The painting depicts—in bruise-like purples and reds—a woman standing in a candlelit room, across which a diagonal wall slices, leading only to another wall. The claustrophobic interior and ominous title recall the troubling scenes of such Metaphysical, proto-Surrealist paintings as Giorgio de Chirico's *The Melancholy and Mystery of a Street* (1914). However, in Tamayo's painting, the anxiety is primarily generated by the figure, while the empty, shadowy streets and acutely foreshortened perspective in de Chirico's painting create its anxiety.

"Reconciliation and Renewal" proposes the arguable idea of post-War contentment. Incongruously, this section also includes Tamayo's wonderful and haunting *Desnudo Blanco* (1943), a portrait of his wife, Olga. However, the painting fits neither the chronological nor thematic category of post-War, peacetime *alegría*. In the catalogue, du Pont characterizes the figure's apparently red face as brown, discussing the painting in terms of race, and focusing on Tamayo's interest in José Vasconcelos's treatise *La Raza Cósmica* of 1925. She then links the image to Picasso (particularly his 1907 *Les Desmoiselles d'Avignon*), in regard to primitivism and race.[9] While the painting does have a figural pose and composition similar to *Les Desmoiselles*, Picasso clearly delineates mask and body, whereas Tamayo—whose figures frequently bear mask-like faces—extends the red coloration across the torso and limbs. Further, the color here does not seem to be a racial signifier, especially compared to the distinctly brown faces in *La Familia* (1936). Because, as du Pont

writes, the artist had publicly associated this painting with an abortion Olga had in 1943, *Desnudo Blanco* appears mostly to address sexuality and violence, not race.[10]

Tamayo's well-documented inspiration by indigenous sources is touched upon in scattered moments throughout the show, generally without specificity. The group entitled "Wartime Allegories" comprises Tamayo's paintings of fearsome dogs, commonly understood as responses to wartime terror. Interestingly, *Tamayo* also cites birds as pre-Columbian symbols of attack. *Amigo de los Pájaros* (1944), also on view in the exhibition, is a strange painting in which a figure with a distinctly Mayan profile sits on a platform, with a pyramid in the distance. Echoing the shape of the pyramid, a group of birds fly toward the man's outstretched hand. This enigmatic and infrequently discussed painting is especially interesting in the context of pre-Columbian forms and symbols, which receive only nominal attention in this show.

Finally, "Tamayo's Universal Humanism," the last section of the exhibition, addresses a "romantic definition of the human condition," and includes the artist's experiments with Abstract Expressionism and his explorations of the subject of death.[11] With the notable exceptions of *Encuentro Num. 1* (1961) and *Retrato de Olga* (1964), these paintings are sobering successors to his mid-career work. After dozens of Tamayo's early modernist paintings, a splendidly frenzied momentum occurs with his vivid, beautifully constructed work of the 1940s and 50s, a joy that ends abruptly in this final section. The small selection of his later works—collected under a title better suited to the show as a whole—is ultimately a foil to the heart of the exhibit. The "universal humanism" that is ostensibly suggested by the paintings' drastically generalized features is far less compelling than Tamayo's mid-career work. The paintings of the 1940s and '50s more intensely depict the ideas and emotions of universal humanism: joy, fear, love, and anxiety. His later work simply seems more generalized than universal. The question of how to reinterpret a body of work—of an "icon" no less—through exhibition is a difficult one, which may account for why Tamayo's extraordinarily complex relationship to Mexican and international modernism is not entirely clear in this show. Unfortunately, the curators undertook a project that may have been beyond the scope of such an exhibition. Had they adjusted the focus, the ideological underpinnings of the show could have been as strong as the work itself. Where *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* really succeeds is with its repeated, nuanced emphasis on the artist's obsession with the human condition, and most importantly, in its dazzling presentation of a large collection of exquisite paintings.

1 Diana C. du Pont, ed., *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara

Museum of Art, 2007).
2 Exhibition text, *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, Miami Art Museum, September, 2007.
3 Karen Cordero Reiman, "Appropriation, Invention and Irony: Tamayo's Early Period, 1920-1937," in *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted*, ed. Diana C. du Pont (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007), 167.
4 Exhibition text.
5 Reiman, 168.
6 Reiman, 168.
7 Diana du Pont, "'Realistic, Never Descriptive' Tamayo and the Art of Abstract Figuration," in *Tamayo: A Modern Icon Reinterpreted* (Santa Barbara, CA: Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 2007), 60.
8 du Pont, 35.
9 du Pont, 88.
10 du Pont, 88.
11 Exhibition text.