Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain

Jo Farb Hernandez, San Jose State University
Epilogue
Now, with a straight new road through the site where the art environment had been, Pujiula still goes down to the spring every morning, and below the road he has built a small tower for visitors to climb after taking a quick swim. Along with refining and enhancing this tower and surrounding passageways, he is also working on a more private creation, a place that contains his memories and will someday hold his ashes.

It remains to be seen whether this site will be sufficiently accessible to the public to enable Pujiula to engage in the playful yet earnest aesthetic dialogue with his viewers that had become crucial to his work. With phenomenal intensity of effort and purpose as well as an admirable tenacity that allowed him to keep working despite the repeated need to dismantle or demolish components of his work, Pujiula created a special place of his own that he eagerly shared with others. He reveled in the fact that by inviting visitors into his space, they became part of it—as viewers, inspiration, and co-creators. Given that Pujiula’s masterpiece at the Font de Can Sis Rals resulted at least partially from his being energized and inspired by public visitation and response to his work, it is ironic that the same public visitation was used as an excuse to destroy it. Further irony lies in the fact that during the same year in which Spain celebrated the sesquicentennial of the birth of Antoni Gaudi, the work of another Catalan architectural innovator was demolished in the name of progress.

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Editor’s Note
This essay was adapted from Jo Farb Hernández, Forms of Tradition in Contemporary Spain (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi and San José State University, 2005), a groundbreaking study of artists working today in Spain, examines these varying relationships by exploring the myriad influences upon the work of four artists. Significantly different approaches to the creation of their art is revealed, as is the use of and/or investment in it by community members. By including both visual arts and performance events, a broader vision can be engaged beyond that which is bounded by media or genre categories; by studying groups of artists as well as individuals, shared qualities as well as idiosyncratic personal discourse can be evoked.

In addition to Josep Pujilua i Vila, the book profiles a potter, Evelio Lópe Cruz, sculptors David Ventura and Neus Hosta; and performance troupe Les Gargoles de Foc.

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Notes
2 The author conducted a series of interviews with Pujiula during the summers of 2000, 2001, 2002, and 2004. All otherwise unattributed quotations by the artist are the author’s translations from interviews in Spanish or from Josep Pujilua i Vila, L’Home de les Cabanes (Argelaguer, Spain: self-published, 2001), which was written in Catalan.
3 Pujilua i Vila, op. cit., p. 56.
4 R. Ponsart, Josep Pujilua i Vila: L’Home de les Cabanes, L’Argelaguer, Spain: self-published, 2001), which was written in Catalan.
6 Ibid.
7 Casasses, op. cit.
Evelio López Cruz, who learned his craft from his mother, makes unglazed earthenware vessels in an area in La Mancha where ceramics have been made for more than a thousand years, primarily by women. Bucking historically stringent socio-sexual mores to be able to follow his family's tradition, he has little interest in innovation in any aspect of his technology or production. López Cruz digs his clay by hand, builds his vessels on a pre-Christian-style wheel that does not use centrifugal force for turning, produces only styles of ware that have been locally customary, and fires his kiln with wood. Grounded in the creation of modest objects inspired by and responsive to the needs of daily life as they have been manifested for generations, he is proactively and unswervingly dedicated to preserving the time-honored aspects of his ancestral lifestyle and artistic production.

David Ventura and Neus Hosta are cartoners, or sculptors in press-molded paper, who construct monumental gegants (figures) and capgrossos (heads) for use in public festivals and processions. They learned their craft through oral transmission and self-teaching, and they produce traditional images that respond to community standards within the framework of rituals and festivals as well as innovative aesthetic variants that nevertheless remain linked to Catalan tradition. Function is important to the artists—the heads and figures must be light enough to be worn and danced in the streets—but they are also able to be inventive and concentrate fully on aesthetic and expressive value. Folktales, legends, and myths vie with images from contemporary culture or local events to enliven performance events with their expressive and eloquent creations.

Les Gargoles de Foc, a group of masked folk street-theater performers, lead correfocs, night processions whose now widely known forms retain relics of pre-Christian cults as well as later medieval elements sanctioned by the Catholic Church as it incorporated them into its own ritual framework. These "devils," dressed in homemade costumes and masks, waving wands with elaborate pyrotechnics and accompanied by a fire-spitting "dragon" float, simulate the misrule of satanic disorder, pitting Evil against Good as they fleetingly capture and reign over Catalan villages. Les Gargoles at once continue a tradition and creatively adapt it with innovative theatrical elements and technological advances. The flow of the procession is primal and visceral; the elements combine to create an immense—albeit fluid—work of art that can be neither completed nor consummated without community involvement.

DVDs of each of the featured artists have been produced. For information, contact Jo Farb Hernández at Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery, School of Art and Design, San José State University, San José, CA 95192-0089; 408/924-4328; or jfh@cruzio.com.