

Erlea Maneros Zabala

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Sabatini Building Floor 1
Fisuras Program



Project

Project carried out
by the Department
Museum Collections

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Erlea Maneros Zabala
*Sala 403 / Un arte para el régimen:
ruina y utopía en el sueño de exaltación
nacional [bis]*

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Exercises on Abstraction, Series V, 2015

India ink on offset paper, 91,5 x 61 cm

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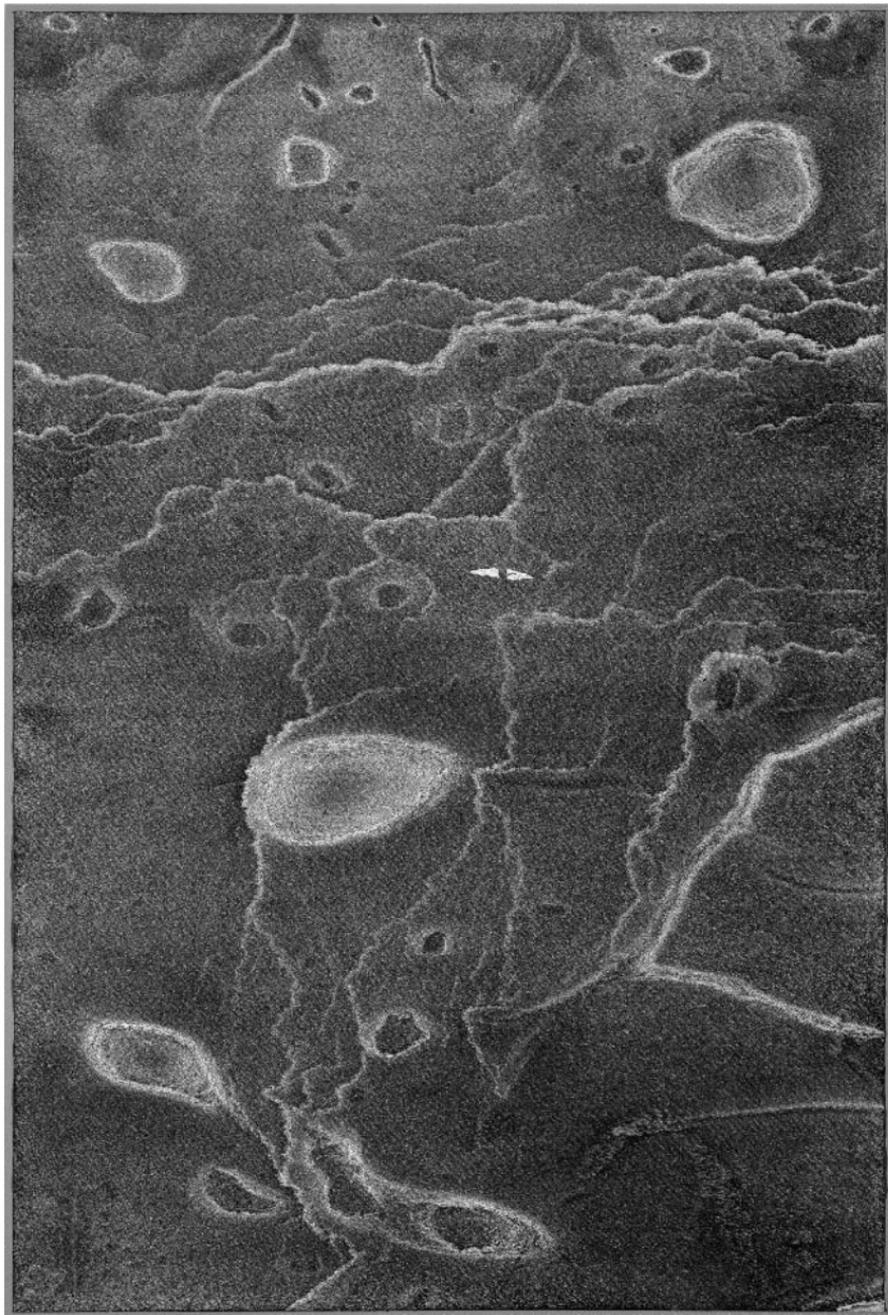
This exhibition is the result of an invitation to the artist Erlea Maneros Zabala (Bilbao, 1977) to carry out a specific project based on the contents of the Collection of the Museo Reina Sofía. Lying behind this proposal is the institution's interest in searching for new ways of establishing relations and collaborating with artists who can help to enrich the discourse of the Collection. In accomplishing her task, Maneros Zabala has worked with various professionals involved with the nearly 21,000 artworks held by the Museum. The conversations held with them and the investigations carried out in the months prior to the inauguration of this show have fed into a new production entitled *Sala 403 / Un arte para el régimen: ruina y utopía en el sueño de exaltación nacional [bis]* [Room 403 / An art for the Franco régime: ruin and utopia in the dream of national exaltation (2)]. Besides this specific project, the exhibition presents other works by the artist: the series of *Exercises on Abstraction*, 2007-2015, and *Untitled (The Whole Art of Marbling as Applied to Paper, Book Edges, etc.)*, 2011-2016.

I.

Understanding the title of the program, *Fisuras* [Fissures], in its most 'material' sense as a crack running through the Museum, Maneros Zabala's intervention connects two rooms situated in the Sabatini Building: Room 403, located on the 4th floor, with an exhibit of the museum's holdings, and Space 1, located on the 1st floor, dedicated to temporary exhibitions. In this way, the project is doubled into two spaces, formulating a new itinerary that infiltrates its way into readings of the Collection and invites the viewer to combine these two separate rooms into a joint visit.

Under the title of *An art for the Franco régime: ruin and utopia in the dream of national exaltation*, the display in Room 403, inaugurated in 2010, studies the art produced in Spain under Franco's dictatorship through the work of artists like José Caballero (Huelva, 1913-Madrid, 1991), Salvador Dalí (Figueras, 1904-1989), José Gutiérrez Solana (Madrid, 1886-1945), Amando de Ossorio (A Coruña, 1918-Madrid, 2001) and Joaquín Vaquero Turcios (Madrid, 1933-Santander, 2010). The earliest work in this space dates from 1936, the year of the military coup that marked the start of the Spanish Civil War, and the most recent from 1956, a moment associated with events such as the organization of Spain's first Salon of Abstract Art.

As expressed by the title and explained on the room's information panel, these works coincide with a moment of a "return to order", and respond to the "redemptive combination of ruin and utopia" which imbued the historical context. They are pieces which form part of a post-war avant-garde production that brought together formal positions close to Surrealism, though shot through with "Spanish essences", and references to the architecture and melancholy imagery of Italian metaphysical painting. Moreover, one peculiarity shared by the artists in Room 403 is their participation in the succession of frequent alliances between the theatre and the visual arts that occurred in the 20th century. This collaboration materialized in the production of sketches for stage scenery and drawings of costumes like those executed by Dalí or Caballero, but also in the construction of reality that could only be narrated when "theatricalized", as in the desolate landscapes of Vaquero Turcios and Dalí, and in the carnivalesque scenes of popular culture characteristic of the work of Gutiérrez Solana.



Exercises on Abstraction, Series I, 2009
India ink on offset paper, 91,5 x 61 cm
Museo Reina Sofía



Exercises on Abstraction, Series II, 2009
India ink on offset paper, 91,5 x 61 cm
Museo Reina Sofía



Exercises on Abstraction, Series II, 2009
India ink on offset paper, 91,5 x 61 cm
Museo Reina Sofía

Taking these materials as a starting point, Maneros Zabala's intervention evokes a theatre play from a basis in the study of theatrical prompt books. This is the form of descriptive writing adopted by the artist towards the group of artworks she addresses. The characters in the play are the female figures in the works on display in Room 403, and it has a duration of twenty-four hours, beginning at midnight on March 2, 2016. What occurred at that particular time and place is detailed in a book where the figure of the prompter, who directs and accompanies the actors on the stage, has been replaced by that of the visitor. On the one hand, the proposed book or script makes reference to the physical and material context of the space (location of the stage, lighting, blocking notes), in a gesture that reminds us of the evident and frequently unnoticed fact that the museum display system affects the ways in which artifacts and artworks are shown, determining our reception. On the other hand, besides minutely recording practical aspects and indicating the rules and protocols inherent to these institutional display systems, the text incorporates "fictional elements" in an unexpected plot that stimulates other readings of this room within the Collection.

In the construction of the piece, Maneros Zabala makes use of a language close to graphic design. This language is reduced to its minimal expression, turning the images and spaces into signs and signals deprived of any density. On the narrative plane, the protagonists of the pictures are identified as geometrical figures that come to life and reflect upon the objectualization and fetishization of their bodies in the original works. Translated into logos, these women question each other on their historical conditions and the context in which they were created. Through this operation, the work evokes other territories regulated by geometric order, from

the dystopian society described by E.A. Abbott in the cult novel *Flatland* (1884) to spaces organized by signaling systems and corporate manuals that permit contemporary subjects to move across the surface of the global city, and also guide their steps inside the museum.

The prompt book proposed by Maneros Zabala invites an awareness of the scene we form part of when entering the rooms of the museum. To the time of the viewing experience and the chronologies proposed by the institution, it adds an “extra” time corresponding to the twenty-four hours in which the play’s action occurs. Such an intervention interferes with and challenges the arrangement and the “way of being there” of the works in the Museum, and also that of the visitor, enabling new narratives and other discourses generated by a Collection that acknowledges its own nature, always inconclusive and contradictory.

2.

Also shown in the exhibition is a selection of ink drawings on paper entitled *Exercises on Abstraction*, which the artist has been producing since 2007. Made mechanically by submerging sheets of offset paper in black ink, various techniques of marbling are applied in series II, III and IV, leading to a wide range of different effects such as waves, zigzags or corn-ears. Some of these works form part of the Museum’s holdings.

Maneros Zabala’s *Exercises on Abstraction* refer in their very title to one of the central movements of canonical 20th century modernism: American Abstract Expressionism, and by extension, European Informalism. Artistic modernity and dominant ideology often are closely bound in the last century.



Exercises on Abstraction, Series V, 2015
India ink on offset paper, 91,5 x 61 cm

In this respect, the “cultural export” of Abstract Expressionism as a U.S. government policy during the Cold War has become a widely studied and debated topic. In the late 1950s, Franco’s régime started to apply similar strategies for the promotion and diffusion of the arts. These were propaganda policies which tried to use cultural production to bring about the international normalization of the image of a country that was politically both maladjusted and irregular, having fallen prey to a military dictatorship that was not to conclude until more than two decades later.

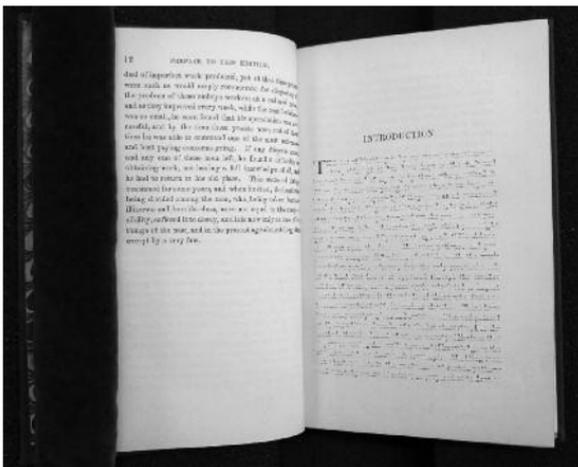
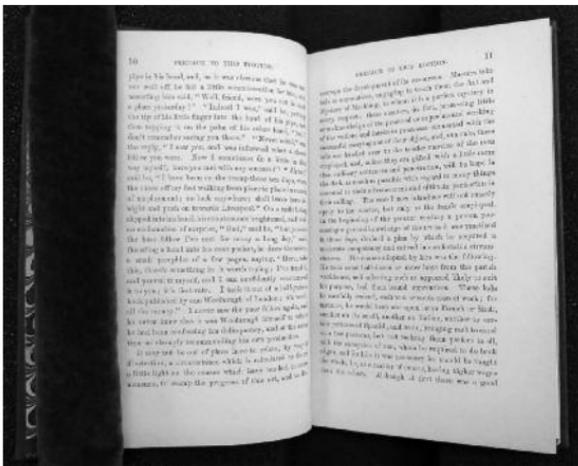
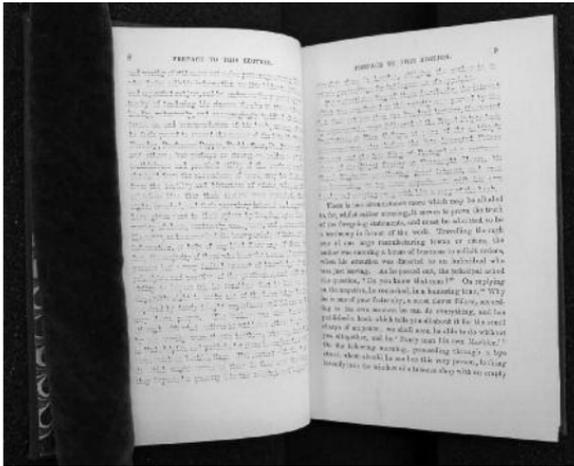
The analysis of the conditions of production of the images, focusing on the contexts in which they are generated and the ways they are distributed, is a topic that runs through much of her investigation. These monochrome *Exercises* thus question the academicization of the languages of abstraction and their instrumentalization by politic. Another important aspect of these series is their allusion to the transcendent and even religious character that accompanies the production of abstraction, artworks executed by a subjectivity of ineffable (male) genius which the artist now converts into *exercises* (mechanical, not *spiritual*). To the detriment of the notion of the unique and original, Maneros Zabala systematizes her (serial) production and evokes artisans’ techniques – the marbling of the paper – and traditional handicrafts.

This investigation of craft production is also a recurrent theme of projects like *Untitled (The Whole Art of Marbling as Applied to Paper, Book Edges, etc.)*, 2011-2016, on show in the Protocol Hall. This work begins with the reading of a book published in the late 19th century by an English craftsman called Charles W. Woolnough on the marbling techniques introduced to Europe via the great trade routes to the Orient. Western workshops appropriated these technical procedures,

which came to be named after different countries – Spanish, Italian, French...

Maneros Zabala's project also addresses the division of labor and the ways in which these skills were pushed into the background with the implantation of new processes of mechanized production. Among the most impassioned detractors of this incipient mechanized world was a contemporary and compatriot of Woolnough's, the writer John Ruskin. In his exhaustive study on *The Craftsman* (2008), the sociologist Richard Sennett takes the English critic's words as the basis for one of the most accurate definitions of this figure, one evocative too of the work that concerns us here: "For Ruskin, the craftsman serves as an emblem for all people in the very need of the opportunity for 'hesitation... mistakes'; the craftsman must transcend working by the 'lamp' of the machine, become in his or her doubts more than an 'animated tool'."

These necessary displacements among animated subjects, inflamed figures, tests, oscillations and integrated errors provide us with a few keys for negotiating the spaces occupied by the exhibition in the museum, along with its other "affected" rooms: 1st Floor. Space 1: *Sala 403 / Un arte para el régimen: ruina y utopía en el sueño de exaltación nacional [bis] / Exercises on Abstraction*; Protocol Hall: *Untitled (The Whole Art of Marbling as Applied to Paper, Book Edges, etc.) / Exercises on Abstraction*; 4th Floor: Room 403. *An Art for the Franco régime: ruin and utopia in the dream of national exaltation.*



Excerpt from the preface written by Charles W. Woolnough for *The Whole Art of Marbling as Applied to Paper, Book Edges, etc.*, George Bell and Sons, London, 1881

Preface to this edition

There is one circumstance more which may be alluded to, for, whilst rather amusing, it serves to prove the truth of the foregoing statements, and must be admitted to be a testimony in favor of the work. Traveling through one of our large manufacturing towns and cities, the author was entering a house of business to solicit orders, when his attention was directed to an individual who was just leaving. As he passed out, the principal asked the question, "Do you know that man?" On replying in the negative, he remarked, in a bantering tone, "Why he is one of your fraternity, a most clever fellow, according to his own account he can do everything, and has published a book which tells you all about it for the small charge of sixpence; we shall soon be able to do without you altogether, and be 'Every man his own Marbler.'" On the following morning, proceeding through a bye street, whom should he see but this very person, looking intensely into the window of a tobacco shop with an empty pipe in his hand, and, as it was obvious that he was not too well off, he felt a little commiseration for him, and accosting him said, "Well, friend, were you not in such a place yesterday?" "Indeed I was," said he, putting the tip of his little finger into the bowl of his pipe, and then tapping it on the palm of his other hand, "but I don't remember seeing you there."

"Never mind," was the reply, "I saw you, and was informed what a clever fellow you were. Now I sometimes do a little in that way myself; have you met with any success?" "Ah no," said he, "I have been on the tram these ten days, worn the shoes off my feet walking from place to place in search of employment; no luck anywhere; shall leave here tonight and push on towards Liverpool." On a trifle being slipped into his hand, his countenance brightened, and with an exclamation of surprise, "Gad," said he, "but you are the best fellow I've met for many a long day," and, thrusting a hand into his coat pocket, he drew therefrom a small pamphlet of a few pages, saying, "Here, take this, there's something in it worth trying; I've tried it, and proved it myself, and I can confidently recommend it to you; it's first rate. I took it out of a half-guinea book published by one Woolnough of London; it's worth all the money." I never saw the poor fellow again, and he never knew that it was Woolnough himself to whom he had been confessing his delinquency, and at the same time so strongly recommending his own production.

It may not be out of place here to relate, by way of illustration, a circumstance which is calculated to throw a little light on the causes which have tended, in some measure, to cramp the progress of this art, and to discourage the development of its

resources. Masters take lads as apprentices, engaging to teach them the Art and Mystery of Marbling, to whom it is a perfect mystery in every respect; these masters, in fact, possessing little or no knowledge of the practical or experimental working of the various and intricate processes connected with the successful carrying out of their object, and, as a rule, these lads are handed over to the tender mercies of the men employed, and, unless they are gifted with a little more than ordinary acuteness and penetration, will be kept in the dark as much as possible with regard to the many things essential to their advancement and ultimate perfection in their calling. The case I now introduce will not exactly apply to the master, but only to the hands employed. In the beginning of the present century a person possessing a general knowledge of the art as it was practiced in those days, devised a plan by which he acquired a moderate competency and retired in comfortable circumstances. The course adopted by him was the following. He took some half-dozen or more boys from the parish workhouse, and selecting such as appeared likely to suit his purpose, had them bound apprentices. These lads he carefully trained, each to a separate class of work; for instance, he would keep one upon large French or Shell, another on the small, another on Italian,

another to certain patterns of Spanish, and so on, bringing each to excel on a few patterns, but not making them perfect in all, with the exception of one, whom he required to do book edges, and for him it was necessary he should be taught the whole, he, as a matter of course, having higher wages and the others. Although at first there was a good deal of imperfect work produced, yet at that time prices were such as would apply remunerate for disposing of the produce of these embryo workers at that reduced price, and as they improved every week, while they cost of labour was so small, he soon found that his speculation was successful, and by the time these youths were out of the time he was able to command one of the most extensive and best paying concerns going. If any dispute arose, and any one of these men left, he found a difficulty in obtaining work, not having a full knowledge of all, and he had to return to his old place. This state of things continued for some years, and when he died, the business being divided among the men, who, being taken from an illiterate and humble class, were not equal to the responsibility, suffered it to decay, and it is now only as one of the things of the past, and in the present age almost forgotten going except by a very few.

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Sundays
from 10:00 a.m. to 2:15 p.m.
the whole Museum is open,
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are open Collection 1
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(check website)

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