

JUAN MUÑOZ Retrospective



La ví en Bologna, 1991
Saw It in Bologna, 1991

- DATES:** 21 April – 31 August 2009
- PLACE:** Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.
Sabatini Building. 3rd floor: galleries, terrace and corridors.
1st floor: Protocol Room, corridors and garden.
- ORGANISATION:** *Exhibition organised by the Tate Modern, London, in association with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. Exhibition co-produced by the Tate Modern and the State Society for Cultural Action Abroad-SEACEX*
- CURATOR** **Lynne Cooke** (Deputy Director and Chief Curator, Museo Reina Sofía)
Sheena Wagstaff (Chief Curator, Tate Modern)

Exhibition sponsored by: Fundación Banco Santander



"I'd like the spectator to be able to walk into the artwork like an actor walking on stage... I'd like whoever visits an exhibition, be it at a museum or gallery, to behave as an actor would, an immobile actor."

Juan Muñoz

The exhibition hosted by the Museo Reina Sofía on the work of Juan Muñoz (Madrid, 1953-Ibiza, 2001) is the most comprehensive retrospective of this artist ever organised in Spain or abroad. Organised by the Tate Modern, London, in association with the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, co-produced by the Tate Modern and the State Society for Cultural Action Abroad (SEACEX), and sponsored by Fundación Banco Santander, the exhibition features several works which have never been previously exhibited in public. It includes sculptures, installations, drawings, radio works, writings... Although previously presented at the Tate Modern in London and at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, the exhibition now on display at the Museo Reina Sofía comprises a considerably larger number of pieces, and consequently a different interpretation.

More than 100 works have been brought together, most of which are displayed on the third floor of the Sabatini Building. However, Juan Muñoz's pieces spill out of the galleries to surprise visitors at different points around the museum, such as the garden, the cloister, the old hospital cloakroom and the vast 400-square-metre terrace overlooking the Sabatini garden.

The exhibition design offers a journey through Juan Muñoz's various artistic phases, from his first works produced in the early 1980s, in which the absence of characters does not imply a lack of human presence, to his final creations produced in 2001.

The artist's earliest output, his first sculptures of miniature architectural elements, such as *Spiral Staircase* from 1984 and *Hotel Declercq* from 1986, are included in this exhibition. Subsequently he explored more complex pieces consisting of various types of sculptural figures involving choreography, highly psychological dynamics, and interaction with both their immediate surroundings and the spectator.

Muñoz's early pieces include wooden figures with articulated limbs, tiny ballerinas, their lower part inserted into semi-spherical bulbous moulds, and ventriloquist's dummies; all of them requiring a "master" to move and animate them. For example in 1988 he animated a dummy, providing it with the mechanical means to talk, entitled *Ventriloquist Looking at a Double Interior* 1988-2000. Some years later, in 1993, Muñoz created *Stuttering Piece* in which two figures, seated on cardboard benches, are given mechanical voices but their "conversation" is distorted by the speech disorder of one of them.



At his first individual exhibition, held in 1984, Juan Muñoz sculpted and drew an image of life size ear. During the following decade ears found their metaphorical equivalent in several pieces with drums. The first of them, included in this exhibition, was *Wax Drum* from 1988, the same year as *Ventriloquist Looking at a Double Interior*. Ten years later, Muñoz reviewed a series of photographs of himself and selected a picture showing him dressed as a drummer, with white canvas sports shoes and braces, and wrote "Self-Portrait" on the photo.

Another recurring motif in Muñoz's work, as demonstrated in the exhibition, is the figure of the dwarf. It first appeared in *The Prompter*, from 1988. As the artist would later recall, "My figures – the dwarves, ventriloquist's dummies – were, from the beginning, always conceptually oriented. I use architecture to give a theatrical frame of reference to the figure." Muñoz continued to deploy George and Sara in a number of later pieces. Sara reappeared in later works such as *Sara with Billiard Table* and *Sara with Mirror*, both from 1996 and included in the exhibition.

The exhibition therefore reveals an oeuvre replete with figures of extraordinary presence: marionettes, acrobats, ventriloquist's dummies, dwarves, ballerinas and unidentifiable or anonymous characters from the Near and Far East. In such works Muñoz deliberately plays on the West's historical and prototypical idea of the exotic, the "other".

In the early 1990s the artist embarked on a series of "conversation pieces", which some regard as his most emblematic works. As shown in the exhibition, the scenes are created using figures with impersonal, generic features caught in attitudes that interact with others. The upper part of the sculpture is figurative, while the lower part is encased in a heavy spherical base. Some of the figures are smaller than the average human being and can only be told apart by the posture of their arms or their physical position. An early example of this type of piece is the bronze entitled *Listening Figure*, from 1991. *Conversation Piece*, from 1996, features five figures whose tactile surface is made from resin and sacking. Another group with the same title produced two years earlier (which consists of 21 figures) has been arranged on the large third-floor terrace. In the mid-1990s some of Muñoz's figures became more complete as their legs, though still footless, were released from their heavy ballasts. Cast from an Art Nouveau-style ceramic bust, all his characters with Asian features look as if they are about to burst out laughing, as seen in *Many Times*, from 1999, made up of approximately one hundred figures. The work, which occupies an entire gallery, accentuates a feeling of isolation in the observer, who walks among them as if unseen.

The mirror is another frequent element in Juan Muñoz's work, as found in *Staring at the Sea* from 1997-2000 and *One Figure* from 2000, one of his last pieces. Muñoz once said, "My characters sometimes behave as a mirror that cannot reflect. They are there to tell you something about your looking, but they cannot, because they don't let you see yourself."



The exhibition also includes several sound pieces: *Building for Music*, 1993, (a 20-minute piece created for broadcast on a local radio station); and *A Registered Patent: A Drummer inside a Rotating Box*, 2001-2002. Juan Muñoz saw himself above all as a narrator: "In a way, I think the radio is the most avant-garde method of communication I know, because it makes the listener imagine the world outside, beyond the work. Somehow, the radio is the territory of the imagination," wrote Juan Muñoz in 1993. In one of the catalogue essays, the exhibition curator Lynne Cooke states that it was in his capacity as a narrator that Juan Muñoz produced many of the most powerful and profound works of his final period: "There is no doubt that, by the late 1990s, the immaterial – whether it was printed words, music, sounds or forms of verbal communication – had become his most radical invention."

Major works from his final period, such as *Derailment* from 2001, *Two Seated on the Wall with Small Chair* from the same year, and *Hanging Figure* complete the exhibition.

The artist and his language

The work of Juan Muñoz marks a milestone in the history of contemporary sculpture. His aesthetic strategy blurs the boundaries between sculpture and other more or less related artistic expressions, such as installation art, vastly enriching these artforms.

For almost twenty years, Juan Muñoz's artistic language incorporated numerous references to the history of Western culture. What we see is not what it seems: his empty balconies allow us to observe what is happening in the spaces of vision; his banisters leading nowhere include dangerous weapons; there are evident reminders of the Baroque in the optical floors that play on the architecture of Borromini in major buildings such as the Palazzo Spada in Rome, framing and destabilizing the spectator who crosses them; the hanging figures recall the trapeze artist portrayed by Degas.

Juan Muñoz belonged to the generation of American and European artists from the late 1980s, including Robert Gober, Thomas Schütte, Katharina Fritsch, Paul McCarthy, Stephan Balkenhol and Charles Ray, who, with varying degrees of commitment, addressed the sculpted figure, or fragments of it, while simultaneously trying to imbue their work with a certain narrative content.

To create his works, Muñoz found inspiration in literature, architecture, mythology, philosophy, music, cinematography, poetry and theatre, as well as certain elements associated with the history of magic and illusionism.

Attracted to mystery and illusion he wore narratives that enabled him to engage the spectator in a psychological game. This tendency also bore fruit in



the form of his large-format drawings, which are made with white chalk on black gabardine and depict interiors. In addition, some of his writings alluded to the literary style and symbolic prose of Jorge Luis Borges. Like this writer, Muñoz combined an interest in his native country with a much wider cultural perspective, blending reality with fiction.

Information about the artist

Juan Muñoz was born in Madrid in 1953. In the 1970s he went to London to study at Croydon College and then at the Central School of Art and Design. It was there that he met his wife, the sculptor Cristina Iglesias, with whom he had two children. In 1982 he went to the United States, courtesy of a Fulbright scholarship, and continued his training at the Pratt Graphics Center in New York, where he met Richard Serra. In 1984 he held his first solo exhibition at the Fernando Vijande Gallery in Madrid. He hereafter exhibited widely, in solo shows in Valencia, Krefeld, Chicago, New York, London and elsewhere.

In 2000 he received the National Visual Arts Prize from the Spanish Government and in June 2001 his exhibition *Double Bind* opened at the Tate Modern in London, where he was the second artist to be invited in the "Unilever Series" (following Louise Bourgeois) in the imposing Turbine Hall. He died prematurely at the age of 48 at the peak of his prolific career, just before the opening of a retrospective at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C.

Catalogue

To accompany the exhibition, the Museo Reina Sofía and Turner have published a catalogue entitled *Juan Muñoz. Allow me an image...* which contains over 160 pictures and offers insight into the artist's sculptures, installations, drawings, radio pieces and writings. The publication also includes essays by **Lynne Cooke**, Deputy Director of Museo Reina Sofía and chief curator of this exhibition; **Sheena Wagstaff**, Chief Curator of Tate Modern; **Luc Sante**, writer and lecturer in Writing and the History of Photography at Bard College, New York; **Adrian Searle**, art critic of *The Guardian* and lecturer at the Royal College of Art in London; **Alberto Iglesias**, musician and collaborator of Juan Muñoz; **Jan Avgikos**, art historian and critic; and the Spanish writer, translator and journalist, **Justo Navarro**.



Parallel activities

To mark the occasion of the publication of the book *Juan Muñoz. Allow me an image...* on 23 April (World Book Day) **Lynne Cooke** and **Adrian Searle** will discuss the artist's writings, an aspect of his practice hitherto largely ignored despite the importance of narrative and the literary in his oeuvre. (Auditorium 200. Nouvel Building. 5:30 pm)

As part of the museum's series *Objetos de discordia, territorios en disputa. Los debates de la escultura en el siglo XX [Objects of discord, territories under dispute. The sculpture debates of the 20th century]*, on **18 June** the exhibition. Curator **Lynne Cooke** will give a lecture entitled "Juan Muñoz. Sculpture, material and immaterial."