

### **Dolores Balsalobre: Landscape as Inscape**

*What Pollock invented from 1947-1950 was a repertoire of forms in which previously marginalized aspects of self-representation – the wordless, the somatic, the wild, the self-risking, the spontaneous, the uncontrolled, the “existential”, the beyond or before our conscious activities of mind – could achieve a bit of clarity, and get themselves a relatively stable set of signifiers.*

T.J.Clark: *Farewell to an Idea*

*In some cases – probably the majority – bits of calligraphy remain: memory traces of the drawing that underlies them. All my paintings start out by being a black oil drawing. The drawing disappears as the painting evolves. You might say that white paint devours it.*

*In fact however, no real technical changes are involved in the White Paintings. What does change is the function of line, and the function of the whites that cover it. Formerly in the Black Series, the drawing IS the picture; in the White Paintings the drawing, almost completely hidden, is merely the skeleton of the composition. It may be almost invisible but it is absolutely essential.*

Fernando Zóbel

### **Some thoughts on Abstraction**

What is the role of abstraction today? What can it say to us that might matter, especially to a society as sick and banal as our own where almost anything that is said with clarity is suspect and where intellectual adventures have been reduced to shopping? Art, or so it would seem, has to carry our disbelief in its tissues if we are to believe in it.

Can abstraction still be an existential or experiential adventure, or has it simply been reduced to a commodified product, easily undressed and aggressively on sale? Where and how can it move beyond a mere play of form and colour, to be something more than yet another poor salesman knocking at the door? Does abstraction as ornament still have a hold upon our emotions? Can we still react with a sense of surprise before its affirmations? I'll try to answer some of these questions from my own perspective. My intention is dialogic and I'd like the space of this essay to be a place for conversation. I shall mention names - some of the names that mark the history of the genre - and I am not seeking to make comparisons or to bolster up the work of Dolores Balsalobre but rather to talk of the climate in which abstraction has functioned and can still function since that is the adventure that she proposes. Her work is obviously derived from landscape but they are literally inscapes: recollections interiorized and represented as sensations.

So let me try and keep those two terms - *landscape* and *abstraction* - in play across this essay. These are admittedly large terms and, in all probability, too large for the scope of this text. Abstraction was of course always present as a latent experience in the world before it was painted, look carefully at any small segment of a Renaissance canvas to sense how the

artists knew what was happening when one zone linked itself to another or brushed itself up against another. These shudders of contact and fusion brought with them thoughts and emotions that went way beyond questions of representing the world or depicting one of its symbolic orders. And should I move into the present I can recall being deeply impressed by something that Pablo Palazuelo said to me: "Once abstraction has been invented there is no going back." And, indeed, here was an artist who was able to push his own world forwards with measures that were both felt and thought - consequences of a long and ongoing process of meditation that drew from diverse fields of science, from the esoteric, and from number theory. Nobody in Spain has done it better and no other artist has proposed the breadth and depth of thought of this artist who is still strangely unknown internationally. So let's accept that there is no going back (pace Heraclitus). The question then becomes how to proceed and, above all, in what direction and with what intention. At this stage in the argument all hell is let loose and we find ourselves confronting all too often what are little more than the strategies of sordid agendas. Nevertheless, the question remains and literally demands an answer: what roles can it effectively occupy? I believe that our present moment is one that is wondrous to live in, and I mean specifically in the sense that the whole edifice is shaking, from the whole concept of culture as our societies of spectacle conceive it to our economic system based on abusive and non-accountable profits. The sole and radical spectacle we now face is that nobody knows what to do. Incompetence and impotency stand revealed. And, even more disturbingly there seem to be no proposals of abstract arguments that carry within them even a mite of conviction. So, in what abstract landscape should we now situate ourselves? Can abstraction create a frame to deal with the immense complexity of global interrelationships?

Back early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it could be argued that new and strange forms appeared because they were necessary to express a spiritual content, to capture what Apollinaire called the "spirit of the times". These new forms, even if less strange, were still being discovered up until the 70s. New forms may still be possible and in all probability they will be articulated by cultures other than our own, yet it is also abundantly clear that new arrangements of forms certainly are manifesting themselves. But do these forms come from inner needs? Do they come from what we loosely call the soul? Or do such beliefs and possibilities belong essentially to a humanist tradition that is now massively under question? It seems highly probable that these forms today might come from the discoveries of science, from what we have never seen until recently, from what is being revealed under the colour-microscope, through computer possibilities that can endlessly alter the shape of the image, through the advances in neurology and biochemistry, or through such fields as chaos theory. In other words, what we might expect as abstract images are parallels between the musings of the creative spirit and those of scientific investigation.

We have lived from the fifties onwards a wave of formalist criticism. I am thinking of Greenberg's declared and aggressive espousal of formal achievement that endlessly boosted the work of Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian or Matisse, and later the continuation of these efforts through the work of the Abstract Expressionists, dismissing all legible content in abstraction as superfluous: two key theories of our time. It is not my intention to criticize the work of this extraordinary critic but certainly to question what appears as a highly limited agenda. When Greenberg tells Olitski, with such immense rhetorical confidence, to crop the canvas or to heighten the orange, and justifies his assertions solely on the grounds of experience, of a life devoted to viewing pictures, can we meekly accept his judgement? And, in any case, what is it that he is trying to salvage in the work? Above all it would seem that he is advocating the need for a heightened aesthetic experience, but is it one that is simply based on his own personal criteria or is it one that can be felt by us all?

Harold Rosenberg, the other critic of the period, said that the turning point for Abstract Expressionism occurred when its artists abandoned the idea of art and “decided to paint ... just to PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from value – political, aesthetic moral.”<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to declare: “At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyse, or ‘express’ an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.”<sup>2</sup> And none of us would dispute that Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline produced these events! But has this process of a discovery of a signature become little more than a recipe for an endless sequel of known and assimilated events where little is at risk since all (risk, dripping, industrial paint, stains, multiple foci, colour fields) has already been competently articulated as a language that can easily and effectively be exploited? Was the somewhat effete sophistication of the Ecole de Paris not proof that a signature style is guarantee of little else apart from establishing the brand name of the artist himself. And even more problematic and innocuous has been the all too common practice of working from the stain as a guarantee of vaporous, lyric, and facile poetic solutions. Nevertheless, the gates for the creation of meaningful abstract images are not permanently closed and I shall return to them later in this essay. Balsalobre’s work is not an event in the sense that Rosenberg intended but neither is it an exercise in calculated abstraction. These works *occur* using both memory and immediate sensations. She very clear about why she opts for an abstract language:

*I use the abstract language to express feeling, states of mind, sensations, situation and non-physical emotions that I cannot express through figuration.”<sup>3</sup> (INT 6)*

It is also clear that Abstract Expressionism represented many things, not only ideological but also experiential. It was used by the American Government as an affirmation of individuality as opposed to the Russian insistence on the collective, thus turning abstraction into an element of the Cold War. A similar ideological reading of abstraction took place in Cuba. It was prohibited by the all powerful Ministry of Culture after what had been an initial unfettered bout of abstract affirmations, censored as being American and culturally negative. But beyond these anecdotal facts Abstract Expressionism with its new sense of space and individual affirmation was a clear assertion of the American way of life with its stress on individuality, adventure, and risk. It was a painting practice that, in the late forties, moved the art capital of the world from Paris to New York. It spoke for a grand adventure. Can abstraction still do this?

Abstraction has been attached to world of the spirit, to mystical beliefs. One of the key points of Palazuelo’s work is the way in which he fuses mystical beliefs with mathematics, with fractal theory, with the occult, with cross-cultural readings of the history of number. He studied the writings of Bohme who sought to identify the forces and conflicts that lie beneath all human existence, taking what he found of use over to his own sense of systems and structures. We can all feel moved when Bohme writes: “The eternal centre and the Birth of Life ... are everywhere. Trace a circle no larger than a dot the whole birth of Eternal Nature is therein contained.”<sup>4</sup> Such assertions imply the search for the underlying life-form, the Ur-form, and of course, an implicit belief in the fact that such a form exists. Balsalobre is not a theoretical painter but an intuitive mover within the world where, using the strength

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenberg, H., “The American Action Painters,” *Art News* 51, Sept 1952, p344

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* p.342

<sup>3</sup> e-mail correspondence, April 2009.

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Georges Poulet, *The Metamorphoses of the Circle*, John Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, 1966, p xix-xx

and beauty of the landscapes that have impressed, she seeks to find her place. Task enough, and one in which nature becomes a guide.

What I would like to insist upon is my belief that the key ideas of our time, the philosophical humus that manifests itself as an abstract energy, can find their expression consciously or unconsciously in abstract painting. Perhaps, I ought to say *can* find and *will* find their expression.

We have seen in the last few decades how art has become simply one more commodity - an elitist commodity – that even if it contests such a fate by diverse aggressive strategies inevitably succumbs. Commodities know how to find their market in our neo-liberal economy and abstract art has had a privileged place. It has status in that it deals - apparently - with depth and with a complexity of thought and emotion. Yet is this really the case? Richter has shown us that abstraction is simply a code that can be practised automatically and whose results can be gauged beforehand. Thus if the artist is seeking a semblance of depth he might well be drawn to using it. Nevertheless, the purely mechanical production of Richter's abstractions continues to nag at us and beg the question about the role of the abstract. Does it still have a place or is it simply a matter of endless, increasingly banal, regurgitations of an overworked and much abused code.

Mystical thought, ritual, and the occult have been interwoven with abstraction. We can all think of moments in recent art history of intense interaction. None of us would question that the quest for transcendence was the essence of Kandinsky's work, resulting in a kind of biomorphic abstraction that later reappears in Rothko's early work. The question today, as it was for the artists I have just mentioned, is how to define and represent the precise nature of this mystical presence so that it is able to speak *for* and *to* us. All of us have seen how the grid served as an inclination towards the idea of the void in the horizontal vertical rigors of Mondrian. The grid is infused with transcendental postulates: a play of correspondences is reflected in its above/below symmetries. Similarly we are all aware that ritualistic practices in the making of a painting were at the heart of Pollock's work and perhaps even help explain why De Kooning said that Pollock "broke the ice" and opened up the ground for not only the affirmation of gesture but also a sense of why it was so necessary. Looking at a Newman painting, we can all sense his curiosity for the unknown and even more importantly his recognition that it can perhaps best be articulated through the abstract.

Contemporary works often make demands on us if we are to come close to what they hold. To study a black painting by Ad Reinhardt involves a process similar to Zen meditation – a deceptively simple affair that "consists only in watching everything that is happening, including your own thoughts and your breathing."<sup>5</sup> Granting one's vision sufficient time to perceive the resonant hues and shades in a painting by Reinhardt is equivalent to the assumption of a meditative process. In other words, the work imposes its own measures of time and *rapprochement*. We need to become involved and when we do the painting seems to yield its essence all at once, recalling the comment of an Indian musician: "All music is in the understanding of one note."<sup>6</sup>

If we turn to the 80s we might think of the work of Bruce Marden whose well-known interest in alchemical and numerological systems leads to works that are patently occult in meaning and consequently raises substantial questions about the continuing role of the spiritual as a viable factor in serious contemporary abstract painting.

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<sup>5</sup> Watts, A., *In My Own Way: An, Autobiography*. Vintage, N.Y., 1973, p.436

<sup>6</sup> quoted *ibid* p.450

But let me go back a moment to Kandinsky and specifically in terms of the preoccupations that underlie Balsalobre's work. All of us who have followed the history of abstraction know how Kandinsky discovered one route to its realization through the dematerialization of a recognizable subject and, even prior to his decision to step into total abstraction, he had already studied the hidden construction of his paintings: the trelliswork. It is worth recalling his three categories: *impressions*, *improvisations* and *compositions*. *Impressions* are just that, impressions of external nature expressed in painterly form. *Improvisations* represent a higher type which consists of "expressions of events of an inner character, hence impressions of internal nature." The highest class is that of the *compositions* which are "the expressions of feelings that have been forming within me in a similar way (but over a very long period of time), which, after the first preliminary sketches, I have slowly and almost pedantically examined and worked out."<sup>7</sup> The implication here is an ascent from the world of sense impressions to the level of intellectual deliberation. At the root of Kandinsky's search is the desire for "a cosmos of spiritually active beings",<sup>8</sup> and in order to achieve this he seeks to create a dynamic space in which individual emotions manifest themselves in softly expressed colour and form.

It is Kandinsky who notes at the beginning of the century that: "Abstract painting leaves behind the skin of nature, but not its laws, Let me use the "big words" cosmic laws. Art can only be great if it relates directly to cosmic laws and is subordinated to them."<sup>9</sup> That is a wondrous statement, literally awesome in its scope, but it is also possible that we may have moved beyond it. The Abstract does not simply leave behind the skin of nature, nor even more majestically the skin of a cosmic consciousness, but in the layered differences of our global times something less rhetorical but penetratingly precise, smaller in scale but alluring: the skin of uncertainty. What is it that underpins abstract thought today? There are multiple answers but amongst them there is the overwhelming sensation that "we have blown it" and the disturbing conviction that our blindness and arrogance are such that there are no longer any limits to catastrophe. I don't mean that this sensation need appear as the subject of abstract work but simply as a sliver of the energies that run through it.

What we have seen in our century through the work of Malevich and Pollock - and I am talking of two figures that have understood the implications of the new symbol - is the new order that emerged from Revolution and from the savage so-called democratic manifestations of American capitalism. These were figures that felt their times and gave them shape in their work. One wonders if it might still have been possible, as we gradually slid into the opaque pool of neo liberalism, to produce figures as radical and convincing as these two artists. What happened to these dreams - to those of the transcendental Suprematist, Malevich, and to those of the existential self prey to *angoisse*, Pollock? And was there anything else at stake? I think so! Pollock produced great walls of accident and necessity, like a metaphor for chaos theory even before it had been scientifically articulated. They remain spellbinding, even if we have assumed them as a known and familiar image and even if, in such an assumption, their scale is somehow visually reduced. I recall them blasting me apart and now they caress. I felt unsure what to do with them but now they seem very easy to digest, almost ornamental.

What was it then that was taking place in these works? I believe that it was the search for a new pictorial unity or, equally possible, for the lack of it. Admittedly, such a quest might seem an excessively optimistic adventure but the times in both instances seemed to promise

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<sup>7</sup> Kandinsky, W., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, Faber and Faber, London, 1982, p. 218

<sup>8</sup> *ibid* p.250

<sup>9</sup> Kandinsky, interview with Karl Nierendorf, *id*, p.807

it. Today, one wonders if the word *unity* has any reverberation. Does it stand as a false representation, as somehow suspect, when we see it in a work? This is a world of endless differences and brilliant fragmentation that we are learning to accept, living with, if not learning from. Things don't come together; neither do they have to. They tend rather to lie up against each other. Collage, assemblage, fragmentary procedures, and hypertexts become the natural order of the day. Yet, might it also not be true that the nature of painting or, more correctly, the nature of the human mind is to search for holds, for cohesion, and for a certain sense of coherence. I am not thinking of a grandiose, egocentric understanding a la Ezra Pound but of more modest, ex-centric, and subjective statements. And it is here that I would situate Balsalobre who seems to me to be engaged in a loose bringing together of what she has seen, known, and felt through images that are, on occasion, drawn from reality and, on others, reorganized as a composite rendering: landscapes refashioned through memory as a personal writing or more rhetorically as a personal truth. In her work landscape serves as a metaphor for the discovery of self. It is literally a space, a place, where she encounters her own ideas and emotions. To experience these immense and memorable (in all senses of the term) landscapes has allowed her to find measures of the self.

These urges to situate ourselves in reality and to define some kind of self image in the flowing meanderings of experience are common to us all. Do we call that a style? Maybe! Yet it remains a questionable term and those who settle upon a definition and hold to it across their lives or appear to assert it as their sole objective do not necessarily convince and, indeed, often seem over-exposed. A signature style is often little more than a cage for the self. The two major artists of our time have no style: Richter and Polke. They seem to assert a hungry freedom to roam and prowl within the world, prolific in their questions. Indeed, Richter asserts that abstraction is a mechanical gesture, little more than a linguistic choice, yet paradoxically out of these massive mimetic gestures – in black and white - something new surges out at us. David Salle set us up with that possibility of no-style painting back in the 80s even if by mid-nineties he also found out that no-style had become style, exhausted as it were by the battle, or as if the sophisticated mask that capriciously blended high and low sources finally stood exposed, temporarily blocked until its fragmentary nature was able to set out once again to find the forms of representing complexity.

We are now characterized by a doubting consciousness and it will have to find its representations, should it not already have done so. I don't necessarily mean a postmodern cynicism, even when critically activated, but an interrogative stance to the world and especially at a time when it hurls questions at us – on ideological belief, on economics, on race, on religion, on ethics, on how we wish to live and how we are to talk to each other and if the word "humanity" still as any small echo within both it and us – all such questions are receiving very cloudy answers and often from the world of art no answer whatsoever.

So now let me apply these initial musings on abstraction to the work at hand, to that of Dolores Balsalobre – and let me repeat it is not my intention to force comparisons between her work and that of the large names that I have mentioned but rather to look at her choices within the framework of the options that these artists have proposed, that is to make some suggestions as to why she has chosen an abstract language that moulds itself to and derives itself from the evocations and intimations of landscapes.

What then are the possibilities she sees for abstraction? What is it that lies behind her choice of this language? The best answer is perhaps the simplest but it is an answer that is also fraught with difficulties: that of the exploration of individual subjectivity. What does that mean and what is it worth? Modernism was dominated by the ego, the Western I, and it has

wrought a brilliant havoc! Subjectivity appears as a measure of individual depth and sensibility yet it is also a conditioning that is culturally learnt. We no longer believe we are as deep and individually different as we once felt ourselves to be. Yet the pendulum continues to swing back and forth in the history of art and we now find ourselves returning, once again, to the "subject". Balsalobre's work reveals a turning away from the world without losing contact with it and an obsessive turning inwards by means of a gesturally structured language, a gritty calculated saying, a vertical or diagonal organization that leads, as it were, to the slow fall of emotions, all orchestrated through a tonal reduction. It is a language that suggests a meditative, muted and modulated, vision exploiting the classic polar colours of black and white - an option that responds to the need to concentrate on the importance of what is being said. We are confronting what is clearly the need to find the measure of a substantial change in her life and in her views as to the potentials of painting as an emotive force. Does it matter to us? Well, *yes* and *no*. *No*, if she is simply dealing with her own impressions of place and the particulars of her own life, and *yes* if these works succeed in proposing a frame for our own structures of recollection whereby we are able to feel with her the process of filtering ideas and emotions. Artists tend to reduce to black and white when they have something of significance that needs to be said and when colour seems merely a seductive extra, a detracting addition. Balsalobre moves towards reduction, occasionally jabbing at us with a cool and explosive yellow or with a soft blue that Kandinsky would have called the colour of abstraction.

Languages are also culturally learnt and when I asked her about her own interests she mentioned the following artists: "When I started to discover abstraction the first abstract artists that interested me were Sonia and Robert Delaunay, Canogar, Clave, afterwards I discovered Kandinsky, Mondrian, Klee, Saura, Palazuelo, Mompo etc. But the artist whom I most admire is Fernando Zóbel, all periods of his work. I am able to identify with all of it, with what he says and how he says it, and I am conscious that it has to a certain extent influenced the work I am presenting."<sup>10</sup> (INT3)

In other words, a natural hotchpotch that reads more like the result of haphazard encounters than answering to any specific search. She includes what was going on in the Spanish scene around her and the large names of art history, one of whom, Kandinsky, I shall be returning to in this essay. Yet as a list it contains no definitive push towards the discovery of a contemporary language. There are no Americans, a strange omission since that was where abstraction was and where the Americans would still very much like it to be! Emphasis is given to the work of Fernando Zóbel. It is a straightforward admission of influence that can, I believe, undoubtedly help us understand some of the concerns that lie behind her works. Zóbel's last paintings, in my view, gathered an assurance and a gestural boldness that his earlier works did not have. Yet, it is the earlier work with its slide towards a structured lyricism that perhaps most impacted Balsalobre and that she has been able to use in her own way. Why? Because these earlier pieces can be seen as intimations of landscape and this is precisely the zone in which she will centre her own struggle to articulate the complexity of what we think and feel before the beauty of landscape, the whole process of recollection, and the ways in which we situate these experiences in our mind.

Black and white constitute, as I have just suggested, a natural language for the artist when he/she is looking for new expressive possibilities, new structures, or simply struggling to draw forth into image something that is profoundly felt or/and thought. In short, the use of black and white often signals a radical move in the artist's work. She mentions Saura, Canogar, and Millares who produce torn works that talk of existential *angoisse* of a life

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<sup>10</sup> Written interview, May 2009.

caught up in the ideological miseries and violence of the period. They are psycho-dramas, jagged and pained. You believe them or you don't! In the case of Millares, these sensations ripped through his life and left their scars; whereas in the case of Zóbel there is a deliberate move away from drama (we should possibly ask ourselves why since such permission might easily be read as an ideologically indifferent and elitist stance) and a deliberate turn towards highly calculated structures and *poesis*. For some this would appear as a strange avoidance of commitment, for others a relief.

I asked her why black and white and she answered in the following terms: "as far as I am concerned colour is related to the physical, to all that can be seen or touched, it is like the sensation of happiness and vitality, like light and shade. Colour provides me with a number of resources for resolving both compositional problems and questions of volume and perspective."<sup>11</sup>(Int.1) In other words, colour is an adjunct that can be used for problem solving. It is not the focus of the dance, not the inner music. These are tentative expansions: orchestrated tone poems. They don't have the casual contempt of Pollock – a discourse very much in the American grain - who happily incorporated buttons thumbtacks, matches, a key, all the debris of everyday life into the matter or morass of the work. Pollock's choices made the works alive and he found himself being pushed towards an accelerated automatism in his search for a renewed spirituality. Balsalobre is subtler and opts for a convoluted speech that goes back on itself only to move forwards again. She goes on to note with regards her preference for black and white:

*"Black and white are intimate colours, more spiritual. As far as I am concerned these works have been a challenge and an exercise of introspection where I try to express the essence of what I have lived and felt.*

*The physiological is very important for me I am unable to express the same thing with a wet brush sliding over the paper as turning over colour with the strength and energy of a spatula that I feel as a physical extension of my arm. Sometimes I believe that it my hand that applies the material."*<sup>12</sup> (INT4)

Balsalobre also mentions Mompó who may have shown her the tight interrelationships that exist between the disciplines of painting and music - something that both Klee and Kandinsky were acutely aware of and integrated into their work. Zóbel also felt the abstract magic of the flute! Yet, as I have said, there is a marked absence in Balsalobre's list of those figures that were really pushing us into new forms of awareness: Rothko, Kline, Pollock, De Kooning. Zóbel himself had no hesitation in recognizing the impact of Kline that evidenced itself in his last works and also, in one of his texts, acknowledges the impact of Rothko after seeing an exhibition in New York).

### **Balsalobre and the presence of Zóbel**

So let's take the lenses up a little closer to this relationship between Zóbel and Balsalobre to look at what she has been able to draw from it with regards her own work. In the first place, her paintings are not preconceived but emerge as the result of a process, like those of Zóbel, which depends upon the play of emotion and analysis, of intuition and thought. Like Zóbel, she looks for movement through line.<sup>13</sup> Her impulse is romantic and lyrical, but it is not squashy as the lyrical so often is, not a facile collapse into pastels and the arabesque's of an

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<sup>11</sup> written interview

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Palazuelo and Klee are also fundamental explorers of the line since both artists see it as an element that thinks not merely a physiological extension of the hand but a real agent and actor.

individual sensibility. Balsalobre gives us hardened thought, a reflection not only in the silences, shoals, and stillnesses, but also in the concentrations and intensities of the mind as it attempts to fashion memory: both the flood of associations and the precise particulars. Balsalobre's work is a nervous tracing, sometimes light in touch, sometimes energy charged. It is in the Heideggerian sense a drawing forth of truth from the ground in the knowledge that it can only be partial - a truth anchored in a gnawing insistence on the flow of meaning, on how things change in the very act of recovery. Her gestures move not towards self-affirmation as with the American gestural painters but towards musing on the meanings of personal experience. She is trying to order it without losing its intensity.

As far as I am concerned - and it is admittedly a fairly obvious conclusion - the two blocks of Zóbel's work that most relate to her own are the *Black Paintings* and the *White Paintings* that followed them several years later. What is it, then, that these two series specifically offer her? In the first instance, I would say scale as a place to enact movement or, to put it in Zóbel's own words: "Scale becomes a matter of concern in the black paintings. There are references to the immensity of landscape ... The real subject matter of these paintings is movement. "Movement" in a very wide sense of the word, in the sense that you might say a landscape or a chair "has movement."<sup>14</sup> And secondly we can see the emphasis on the reduction to the essential, to eliminate, if you like, the static, the chatter, the extra. Balsalobre is constantly trying to clear out the merely anecdotal from her memory-box. This does not mean that the works are not sometimes crowded with incident but the implication is that the details have been filtered: thought or sensed as belonging.

In Zóbel's *Black Paintings*, more a matter of modulated greys animated by accents in black, Balsalobre might well have found a model for allowing the nuances of sensation to gather and find definition: reduced but inevitably complex. I recall Robert Duncan saying that, as poet, he was the nexus through which things passed and his task was to listen and select the significant. This might well provide a methodology for Balsalobre. There is a real problem in the dilemma of exclusion and inclusion, whether to put all the information in and allow the spectator to move amongst complexity or to take things out in what appears as a possibly mythical move towards essence. Zóbel's process of reduction was due to the fact that he saw things in art as being either necessary or superfluous and this led him to using black lines against a white background. Balsalobre's calligraphy (a mixture of pulsions, signs, gestural brushstrokes, palette constructions, linear traces) is a constant mapping, a physiological trace that might well amount to what Michael McClure called an intellectual process: that is to say, an understanding that springs from the body.

Yet what Balsalobre truly takes from Zóbel is the concept of "landscapes remembered" where memory itself becomes the theme. Her landscapes are not real landscapes, not abstract studies of the structure of landscape, but a play of tensions between the signals from the landscape and the reception of the beholder, not as an immediate transcription but as retention and reflection. She calls them memory landscapes and writes of them:

*They are an answer and a recreation of the traces left in me by landscapes that I have seen and lived intensely*

*They have emerged after my return from trips I have made especially to the orient and they forced me to recognize the need to use a different technique from the one I usually employed*

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<sup>14</sup> Zóbel, F., 'Interview with Rafael Perez-Madero', *Zóbel/La Serie Blanca*, Ediciones Rayuela, Madrid, 1978, p.86

In other words, they are pondered and matured, filtered and sieved through memory. She does not deal with the overwhelming immensity of the literal phenomenon - the Andes, Patagonia, the Bay of Halong etc – but with a more subtle temporal register that allow the tremors, whispers, perceptions, and reverberations to diffuse, sharpen, and penetrate. Landscapes form and inform those who live and move within them. They teach us about ourselves. For William Wordsworth, the English Romantic poet they were figures of authority, educative forces that were also imbued with the power to punish.

Zóbel's *White Painting*, in fact, appeared twenty years after the *Black Paintings* in the mid-seventies. *La vista series* (1975-1980), for example, is based on the view from the artist's window in Cuenca where details and anecdotal material are progressively eliminated. Balsalobre, however, is not looking for skeleton structures but creating something akin to a musical score of her recollected and meditated experience. There is a natural fluidity: nervous flurries, aggressive traces of the palette knife, delicate annotations, jagged cuts.

It was Zóbel who said in relation to Gustavo Torner that "Art consists of tension; distractions kill it." Zóbel created these tensions often through a linear geometry where the lines cut into each other; Balsalobre's tensions are those of the dance, of a counterpoint of movements.

She is however pushing in a similar direction: that is to say, towards lyrical abstraction, to an essentially romantic rendering of our world. Zóbel writes: "The final effect I want to achieve is that of a white space lyrical, unreal, metaphorical. A space that attempts to organize the memories of the spectator. With nothing but white and grey? Why not? As Jocelyne Francois put it in one of her poems: "meme le blanc est vehement." <sup>15</sup> Balsalobre probably knows this text and she is doing precisely that: organizing her own memories of what she saw and felt as a spectator before the grandiose but in a more organic form of writing. I think of Agerich's turbulences as she galvanizes Rachmaninoff's landscapes or Mark Tobey's "white writing" that is like an endlessly qualified meditation upon the world and its impromptus of meaning.

Zóbel goes on to observe - in terms that Balsalobre herself would certainly accept as coming close to her own exploration - that he is shaping memory: his own and that of the spectator. "I remove still more; I eliminate local colour, because it ties me down to a moment in time. Finally nothing is left but a structure and a certain light: the light of the painting, not the light of a moment in time. In other words, nothing is left but MY view, the one that exists in my memory. And here comes the strangest part. If I succeed in giving shape to my memory I find that I have also given shape to then memory of the spectator. It becomes HIS view as well as mine"<sup>16</sup> Her search, like that of Zóbel, is for the epiphanies of painting and her work like that of so many painters of the 20th century is a bodily inscription of vision and cognition within the parameters of established pictorial language conventions. At the same time, like so many of these Modernist artists, she is looking for a renewed spirituality outside the purviews of European Christianity and perhaps outside the purview of a somewhat discredited European Modernist Abstraction.

Let me make two final points with regards her indebtedness to Zóbel and obviously I am not talking about formal influences but about attitudes to painting and, even more specifically, to the *seizing* of landscape through gesture and how to give to gesture a sense of order. Balsalobre's work is highly dependent upon these two factors. To look at it is to look at organizations of order, at possibilities of order or, to repeat an earlier phrase, at intimations of order. Zóbel asserts, without the slightest hesitation, that: "gesture is relation. I'm

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>16</sup> *id.*, p89

interested in the gesture, that of a specific moment, not in what happened before or what might happen after. I am interested in the gesture in an abstract sense, in the four or five elements that make up the characteristics of a gesture.”<sup>17</sup> Balsalobre is equally interested in the gesture as the conveyer of accumulated and even contradictory energies. Gesture serves not only as an assertion of self but also as a vehicle for continuous nuance of experience.

Order is necessary and, as we now know, even chaos has its own order. These orders are integral to the rhythms and attitudes of the individual. Zóbel’s work occasionally seems prisoner to its almost clinical precision and sophisticated polish. Yet what remains interesting is the fact that Zóbel see this *cleanliness* as a sign of beauty: “They are pretty quiet. And order is essential. In the widest sense of the word, order is one of the secrets of what I recognize as beauty. Years ago someone told me that in Japanese the same word can mean “clean” and “beautiful”. I have given that a lot of thought. ... Order, and certain simplicity of composition, probably accounts for a good deal of the tranquillity you can seem to find in my pictures. Incidentally, that may explain why I can’t seem to work directly from a model. There is too much going on. I prefer to trust the abbreviated sense of order imposed by memory. Memory selects and organizes. It seems to whisper: “THIS is worth while” and I try to listen. It isn’t all as easy as it sounds.”<sup>18</sup> There are two points here that I would like to reiterate since they touch upon keys of Balsalobre’s own attitude: firstly the need to establish distance from the model given the fact that the specific landscape at hand has too much going on within it and, as a consequence, too much going on within the self; and secondly the idea of an abbreviated sense of order imposed by memory or, in other words, a highly selective pattern of intuitions. Balsalobre selects and memorizes as she views:

*I did not even make sketches for the backcloths (70 square metres), since I construct them mentally, I memorize the plans, perspectives and volumes, proportions etc. What I did do, however, was to put a mark on the canvas so that I would always know where I was.*<sup>19</sup> INT 8

These are deep waters since what is the abbreviated order trying to contain? Truth, beauty, experience, the clarity of energized perception? Beauty to my mind is not an aesthetic category but something that each age defines and recognizes in its own terms, applying what Kant called a *sensus communis* by which he meant not a common understanding but a shared sensibility, something that we recognize as image but can’t define in words. The imagination, Kant tells us, defines without concept and when the imagination turns its attention to beauty – always one of its options even if massively undervalued in our times – the results carry the potential for surprise. Form, Immendorff once told me, is the result of process. Without pushing deeper into these arguments they seem to me suggestive as pointings of where Balsalobre wishes to situate her work. She is remembering forwards, following the process whilst, at the same time, allowing the physiological to be part of the field of cognition and perception.

Balsalobre, like Zóbel and indeed the American poet, Allen Ginsberg, is driven by what Cezanne called the lyrical search for *petites sensations* - a narrowing, if you like, but also an intensifying of focus – and fully engaged in the process of imaginative reception, assimilation and return.

### **Landscape and the transcendental spirit**

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<sup>17</sup> id., p.90.

<sup>18</sup> id.p.91

<sup>19</sup> written interview April, 2009

In the sense that abstraction inherently permits, these are works that are about nothing, works held together by the internal strength of their style that somehow gathers into a knot the web of emotions and the chaotic play of the partially defined. Balsalobre's canvases are locations where the subject is invisible in the sense that it is an inscape but latent, clearly hinted at by the shell of the form, by the simple strategy of holding altogether by the memory traces of the contours of landscape. The emphasis here is given to the gestural brushstroke, to the weight and quantity of paint, to the aggressions of a palette knife, and to the loose accumulation of signs that define potential content. Signs are often arbitrary but they can conjure up a sense of longing – a longing to say what cannot be said or, even more explicitly, where the nuances of what is being said simply pile up on each other: amplifying, contrasting, contradicting, counterpointing. They produce a lacework, a filigree of what Kandinsky, as I have said, called improvisations.

These works are re-readings of the world through the spectrum of emotion and experience; they deal in emotion and detail recollection. They are what the English romantic poet, William Wordsworth, called *intimations*: recollections in tranquillity. They include, I suspect, a sense of awe before the majesty of these vast landscapes, fear, wonder, a sense of infinity and eternity, musings on the meanings of it all, together with a search for what was important to her as a register of form, as a transmutation of the complex play of idea and emotion - of memory and recollection - into image or into what Ezra Pound called an "ideogram": a pushing together of the multiple in order to create the sensation of what was felt as it was seen and later recollected and to attempt to communicate that nervous construct to the viewer. In that sense, they are close to Kandinsky's improvisations. Indeed, as I pointed out earlier, there is a clear tendency in abstraction to abstract from a given and Balsalobre exploits her landscapes precisely as givens. They have a close relationship to what Gerald Manley Hopkins called *inscapes*. They are recollections infused with emotions. In other words, these landscape forms are not precise references but rather outlines that are filled in with a gathering of feelings that finally give it form. This form is related to the real but it is above all the form of memory. They are recollections remembered forwards.

I want now to turn back to the idea of the romantic push in Balsalobre's work and specifically in relationship to the Northern Romantic tradition and, even more explicitly, to those artists who use it as part of a spiritual quest. Balsalobre's search for self, is intensely modest and unassuming. She is a private person preoccupied with unearthing the intimacies of self:

*What we do – those of us who wish to say something in the world of painting – is to use a language that allows us to express more fully what we feel and we do it in a personal way that identifies us.*<sup>20</sup>(INT5)

What, then, are my grounds for attaching her to this tradition? And who precisely am I thinking of? Well, in the first place, her attraction to the vast expanses; and secondly, the fact that she sees them as a place of communion with the self. This is not an easy question to broach since I want to disassociate Balsalobre from any specific influences or associations. What I am suggesting is a *company* with whom she would feel at ease, some figurative some abstract, but all of them artists who see landscape in terms of a confrontation with the self. These series deal with specific and imaginary landscapes where she is witness to the overwhelming presence, to their play of light, energy, and mystery, and to their seductive void. Before them man is small and definitely a late-comer! I am thinking of names such as Caspar David Freidrich, Albert Pinkham Ryder, Mark Rothko, Georgia O'Keefe, Ferdinand

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<sup>20</sup> *id.*

Hodler, William Turner, and Mondrian – names that evoke a profoundly illuminating body of work!

My intention is to suggest zones of feeling with which Balsalobre's might well identify. Friedrich is, of course, painting landscapes with human presences often included within them - figures literally and figuratively on the brink of some elemental and mystical experience. They are landscapes that evoke a primitive uninhabited state, close to what Robert Rosenblum calls "the precipice of nothingness". Friedrich paints the majesty of mountains. One thinks of his view of *The Watzmann* in the Alps – that he himself only knew from a watercolor - that exploits a contrast between the verdant foreground and the purity of the unattainable peaks. It is a work that invites speculation. Friedrich, of course, presents this in figurative terms contrasting the dimensions of the human or of a humanized landscape with the inaccessibility and dramatic force of the mountain. There is a sense of empathy and mystery that Balsalobre also feels when confronted by the Andes:

*This series (the Cordillera Series) is inspired by the Andes and by a month that I spent travelling around in the immensities of the virgin landscapes of Patagonia, in the clear contours of the mountains, sometimes cut out against the sky and at other times hardly visible amongst the clouds.*

*None of these works are a concrete image of a particular recognizable place. I have not represented the Torres del Paine, or the Fitzroy, or the Mountain Range of the Torres, but they are there in each and every one of the landscapes of the peaks and mountain ranges of the Andes*<sup>21</sup>

She probably took Paul Theroux's book, *The Patagonia Express*, that narrates a journey by train to Patagonia along with her!

This series is interesting because the first part still holds to landscape forms with churning browns and blacks that counterpoint gesturally against the encroaching white ground. Here, even if she is working from memory she still relies upon the image as a completed landscape, yet it is also clear the most effective pieces, *Cordillera I* and *Cordillera 111*, already show a clear predisposition to the abstract. The black and white group, however, radically affirm the need for a greater freedom and we are given mountain peaks that are alive with abstract activity, It is as if she is showing a spot of time or a moment of space that holds vision precariously open to further experience. The journey inwards has begun, and the gaze before this solitude and wilderness is transfigured by hope not by despair.

Holder, another Romantic figure, also painted mountain summits, emphasising the absolute stillness and sanctity of these impressive locations. They are seen from a distance with a towering peak, they remain inaccessible to humans. These works imply an abandonment of the terrestrial realm where man displays all the emblems of his meanness in order to leave us lost in the contemplation of a looming vision of the potential for transcendence. Holder eliminates man and centralizes the peak, turning it into a timeless symbol. His *The Jungfrau from Schynige Platte* (1908) shows the peak soaring through a cloudscape replete with misty suggestions of the Madonna and Child. It is a vision that leaves us with no doubt as to his sense of the religious in these natural miracles.

Yet both of these artists were dealing with specific sources whereas Balsalobre repeatedly insists that her landscapes are mental re-creations:

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<sup>21</sup> Written statement, April 2009

*I always paint directly onto the canvas, without preparatory sketches, because when I conceive a work in terms of a specific size, I feel disappointed and demoralized when I do it on a small scale. What I tend to do is to compose the work mentally and study all the elements of the composition in detail. Sometimes this obliges me to make significant corrections.*<sup>22</sup> INT 7

And even more specifically she notes:

*The Mountain Peaks series is a recreation of those magical places in the snow covered mountains that we have longed for and dreamt of but have remained inaccessible, lived at a distance, and to which we can only travel through the spirit and through the eye*<sup>23</sup>

In short, she clearly affirms a spiritual relationship and a recognition that full understanding of the meaning of the timeless power of these peaks, together with the silence and emptiness of the vast open landscapes, can only be reached through the transcendental, through a belief that the spiritual is still deeply engrained within the potential of art.

These Peaks provide her with the pretext for giving greater freedom to the gesture and emotion. They evidence the painterly activity. The jagged forms are containers. The black and white stresses the inner need and the assumption of a new dimension. Balsalobre is now effectively translating what she wishes to say and the radicality of the choice of colour seems fully in tune with the desire. The four works in blue soften the emotion but heighten the distance. We can see here what Ruskin meant when he advocates the need by any means whatsoever to put the viewer's mind into the same ferment as his own. Balsalobre achieves here a music within the remembering!

Although Mondrian has no formal association with Balsalobre's work, the fact remains that mystical scrutiny and the transcendental are keys to his work. It can be seen as a romantic search for the spirit in matter, for the supernatural in the natural: a tree, a flower, a landscape. Mondrian, under the influence of Rudolf Steiner's theories, found in flowers a reflection of life forces, the key to life, death and resurrection, and in trees the translation of inert matter into vital spirit. Just look at his *The Red Tree* (1908) and there is no way not to be aware of the nervous extensions of the twisting dancing branches and the sense of searing almost bleeding passion that comes from the red hues. Nature holds a permanent dialogue with us and it is precisely this sense of an engagement in dialogue that Balsalobre shares with the Romantic tradition to which these works belong. Where Mondrian finds in the dunes of low coastal regions of the North Sea a metaphor for the supernatural infinites of nature, Balsalobre turns to the imponderable mysteries of these vast mountain ranges.

Mondrian goes beyond even the startling economy of the dune landscapes and turns to a search for a world without objects, for that world of *Gegenstandslosigkeit* (to use the German word most often applied to the goals of abstract art), which had already begun to haunt the imaginations of many German Romantic artists and aestheticians. Balsalobre has found herself pushed in the same direction, to a greater dependence on abstraction as permitting a more profound disclosure of the spirit that lies beyond the material surfaces of nature. Mondrian had a mystical program; Balsalobre has no structured philosophical view but she wants to make things clear to herself and in so doing to communicate sensations, intuitions, energies, and forms.

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<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> Written commentary, *id.*

Mondrian in the *Sea* (1912) reduces his language to the point where there is no difference between land, sky, and sea. He gives us a kind of web of arc-shaped forms and horizontal planes. All is fused in a kind of grey expanse. Indeed, Mondrian's annihilation of matter and objects goes one stage further in *Composition No.10, Pier and Ocean* (1915), entirely dependent upon the play between a calm horizontality and restless vertical thrusts. Both simple and complex, this work asks us to intuit the religious mystery behind the material surfaces of the seen world. Mondrian was moving, of course, towards a symbolic order, whereas Balsalobre is graphing an emotional and intellectual complexity that finds guidance in nature: a quest for self.

She has the following to say about the *Black Landscapes* that makes her position very clear:

*These are intimate landscapes where can come into contact with our spirit. They are internal landscapes that speak of peace, calm and freedom, where the light and the shade are opposite poles but where both remain necessary in order to achieve balance.*"<sup>24</sup>

It is an interesting remark since it insists on spirit as inherently part of landscape whilst, at the same time, insisting that these landscapes finally become interiorised and belong to the self. They serve as a passage to transcendental experience. She finds what she finds in them: peace, calm, freedom. Yet these same mountain landscapes inspired in the Romantic poets emotions of fear, authority, power. In other words, she is engaging in what John Ruskin called in *Modern Painters*, the "pathetic fallacy": that is, the attribution of human feelings to non-human subjects or, to put it another way, an intense sense of empathy with particular landscape elements.

This is a dense series where the images appear like cuts in the landscape or elements of intensity. One thinks of the words from Wordsworth's "Ode to Immortality": "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears". It is as if the landscape is offering her a chance of self-recovery. They are accumulations of sensations: topologies of the mind: strange, busy, moving, alive with contradictions.

This sense of empathy can certainly be felt in *The Bay of Halong* where Balsalobre, in an almost oriental impressionism, recreates this irresistible and enchanting bay. There is something akin to the quality of oriental watercolour in this work, perhaps the white space, the patches of subtle colour, and the serene stillness, but I also recall something that Zóbel wrote when asked about the oriental influence in his work. He said that they might well look "oriental" in the West but that they always appeared more and more Western every time he saw them in the East!

These are intensely poetic works and Balsalobre notes of them:

*This was one of those magical places that I was lucky enough to visit that penetrates the soul more than the mind is initially aware of, and the impressions it had left continued to grow until they overwhelmed me and I felt the need to recreate it.*<sup>25</sup>

Our world is indeed dense, crowded, and complex in its internal workings. It is a place where time is tied to man and is made by man. To contemplate a timeless landscape is to feel a sense of awe. Everything in these five works seems as if submerged and levelled by an atmosphere and that might possibly be seen as an equivalent to the oriental sense of taste: limpid, delicate, balanced, and assured. This series also has an impalpable formal authority

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> *Id.*

that appears as a tacit recognition of oriental tradition. Balsalobre suggests in this series that if we really have come to understand life, then we can only keep a distance from it. The diptych floods us with the calculated lightness of a Chopin *Prelude*, a mood of exuberant felicity where, to quote another poet, “all violences stayed and sudden light”: a work at rest.

Georgia O’Keefe is another artist caught up in the particulars of landscape who often painted sublime sites in the American West, describing those breathtaking infinities of unspoilt nature where the absence of human beings prevents us having a real sense of the scale. She painted the uninhabited desert landscape, remote from man, his history, and his works. Here were prehistoric landscapes that perpetuate themselves across time. What is it, then, that Balsalobre shares with O’Keefe and consequently with the whole Romantic tradition? I would suggest two things: firstly, Balsalobre, like O’Keefe, was inspired by specific landscapes; and secondly, there is almost always a tendency towards abstraction. O’Keefe distilled the components of a primitive landscape experience to an almost abstract image as, for example, in a small watercolour from 1917 *Light Coming on the Plains 11* or in *Red Hills and Sky (1945)* where there is nothing but the contour of two hills, a simple “v” shape, and a mysterious void filled by a nebulous sky. Balsalobre similarly frequently frames her work in a schematic contour that demarks the space for an abstract activity that includes not so much the formal skeleton of the landscape but the sensations that accrued in the process of recollection. I suspect we all do this when we look at a dramatic landscape, whether it be a desert, a mountain range, an infinite plain, or an endless expanse of sea, and that we all may think in such moments of the evolution of the universe and the frailty of man within this process, but equally we think of who we are before it, what it says to us, what chords it strikes and deepens in our emotions, and what it proposes to our sense of ourselves as presences in the world.

The last artist I’d like to mention in the sense of a genealogical history and of a climate that helps us to understand the intentions behind these works is Mark Rothko. Interpretation leans on history to find orientations. These are overtly mystical works and as such distinct from Balsalobre’s discourse with nature. Rothko’s Houston Chapel underlines the implicit religious experience of his art, of his desire to go beyond the aesthetic, to a dark and sombre vision that obliges meditation – a far from common experience in the art of the twentieth century. Rothko leaves us on the brink of a resonant void from which any palpable form is banned. As he himself tells us: “I am not interested in relationships of color or form or anything else ... I am ingested only in expressing the basic human emotions - tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on - and the fact that lots of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* with those basic human emotions. The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved by their color relationships, then you miss the point.”<sup>26</sup>

This is a powerful statement and aspires to a more grandiose and all-embracing vision than Balsalobre’s proposal. In Rothko’s antiformalist attitude we recognize a statement of intentions beyond that of the work, articulated with a *frisson* that occurs when the colours brush up against each other. Rothko could not function with the iconographic needs of the Church but he is stalking the possibilities of the spiritual in our contemporary society. Balsalobre – whatever the scale of her ambition – also turns to abstraction to register her own pulsions whose intentions stretch out way beyond that of the merely physiological. She lets go of the security of form and simply registers jagged sensations, like a musical chord - inscapes of the way we register the meanings found, seen or felt within our experience of

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<sup>26</sup> Rothko, M., in Selden Rodman, *Conversations with Artists*, N.Y., 1957, p.93-4

the world. It is a matter of looking with care – very much an oriental concern – pondering what has been seen and giving it *life* rather than *form*. Balsalobre is strung out in this series on her own trapeze and in free fall. She has let go of the figurative holds, the contours of the peaks, the outlines of a Sierra, or the burst of a rock formation on a terrain. She is, as she says, simply listening to herself and such simplicity involves risk. Balsalobre - and this is the reason why I mention Rothko or O'Keefe – knows that the turn inwards, when honestly phrased and not simply mouthed as so much of our contemporary production tends to do, inevitably *communicates* a complexity that escapes articulation. She has the following to say about this series:

*Behind very work, figurative or abstract there is always a story, a motive or an internal or external cause,*

*In this series I am simply responding to a strong impulse without any plan or theory to hold onto or that I might develop*

*It is like an energy that I need to free, that flows in the form of vibrations, sometimes rhythmical, and sometimes that forces that attract or repel each other*

*I feel that the motivations repeat themselves although with different nuances, but the fact is that there that makes me feel the idea of freedom as strongly as nature, especially immense solitary stretches of land, whether they be land, sea, or air.*

*I no longer want to paint anecdotes and I am now trying to express the feelings and sensations that ideas or places produce in me.<sup>27</sup>*

It is a clarifying statement that clearly responds to an inner need. She has learnt from nature sensations and understandings that deepen her own experience and, even more importantly, she has found a language through which she is able to express them. The push and pull of the yellow and the black, the angular slash like an outcrop of rock (*Pulsiones* 11), pure sensations of a rockface or conifers caught in a pool (*Pulsiones* V), or of the mountainside with the vegetation and rocks sliding down. There is no precise point of departure, it is more a matter of experience interiorized and freed as image whose release of image is finally a release of self from all constraints. We acquire trappings almost as soon as we enter the world and when we leave it we tend to be clumsily and senselessly loaded down – family, house, objects, acquisitions etc. Balsalobre seems to be unloading in these works, sure enough of herself to make small but concentrated points, to gather sensations into an abstract knot, and to realize that these things that we have learnt by intuition, experience and study can only hold, should they hold, momentarily. These are energy clusters: concentrated bursts of clarity, representing the energy of thought and emotion. They are, as I have already mentioned, ideograms in the Poundian sense of the term. They stand as images, intensely particular to person, and that is what gives them both value and the communicative power that Rothko talks of, since we are all capable of recognizing its affirmative presence. This series is a completion of a process. This does not mean that Balsalobre cannot return to specific landscapes that have moved her but it states categorically that there is always a place beyond reality and reflection; and that place is abstraction!

It is hardly surprising that Balsalobre should find herself attracted to dance since her work is marked by an elegance of movement, by bursts of articulated energy and gestural flow. She clearly affirms her interests:

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<sup>27</sup> Witten commentary, April 2009

*What attracts me about dance is its expressive force, the energy it transmits, the aesthetics of movement and the ephemeral and unrepeatable quality of each instant, as well as the capacity of the human body to express any emotion.*<sup>28</sup>

It is a statement that seems to suggest the idea of the paintbrush or the arm as dancer and makes us think of Pollock where the artist's whole body was involved in the affirmation of gesture. Balsalobre's son is, in fact, a dancer, and she was invited to take part in a project in which he was involved in France. It was a multidisciplinary event that went under the name of *Tri-Bioma* involving dance, debates, lectures, workshops, and exhibitions. Her contribution consisted in twelve abstract hanging screens, or Chinese scrolls, painted in the classic blue of abstraction.

She has the following to say about it:

*To take part in this project constituted both a challenge and a motivation as far as I was concerned. In this work, my intention was to express the way I see and feel the development and evolution of the human being according to his physical psychic and spiritual conditioners.*

*They could also be seen as landscapes of human behaviour*<sup>29</sup>

In the first of these groupings, *Context*, she looks specifically at human movement as conditioned genetically and almost literally as abstract gesture; in the second that goes under the rather rhetorical name of *Utopia*, she looks at her own individual sense of freedom in a world where we are all the same but different. These works opt for total abstraction but they also encounter two of its major stumbling blocks: firstly, the capacity to effectively represent ideas of immense scope such as that of utopia where the social definitions of the same would have little common ground; and secondly, the definition of a plastic language capable of embracing and communicating such a concept. In relation to this series Balsalobre also talks overtly of a desire for transcendence. My own suspicion is that such a desire would inevitably entail a major innovation in the plastic language and thus would push her work into a totally new terrain.

The final two groupings, *Conviction* and *System*, attempt to complete the project. The first seeks to represent the energy the individual expends in his attempts to become free and how he relates to others in terms of his/her thoughts and emotions; the second, with also Sempere overtones, shows how the system almost always finally absorbs him and enmeshes him within its spokes. Whilst applauding her ambition, I have reservations as to its feasibility and tend to feel more at ease when her abstraction is rooted in the particular and emerge as it were from the drama of landscape. The wilderness is not just something we look at; it's something we are part of. We live inside a body made of wilderness material. It is possible that the intimacy of this arrangement is one of the origins of beauty. The wilderness is beautiful because we are part of it.

Balsalobre in touching upon landscape has engaged in a huge subject, as big as the earth and its atmosphere and reaching out to the edge of the universe: to that point where metaphorically transcendence seems a potential or a possibility. We are literally before something where changes are taking place. It is here that the artistic spirit's need for immortality finds its profound satisfactions. Landscape provides a condition for the internalization of quest.

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<sup>28</sup> e-mail conversation, April 2009

<sup>29</sup> Written commentary, April 2009

And, let me conclude with the words of the poet, George Oppen, in a short and characteristically modest poem, "Product", that seems to leave us at the very heart of Balsalobre's work

*What I've seen*

*Is all I have found: myself*

Kevin Power