

# Light is where mystery lies

What is light? Why is it relevant to an art piece? How have artists faced the challenge of interpreting this matter? This exhibition explores the possibilities of light for representation, translation, description and recollection through visual essays related to drama, the revelation of the instantaneous nature of atmospheric light, and metaphysical and rationalist conceptions.

## **The course of light. C. R. Stia**

One of the most fascinating and debated objects of study throughout the history of science is, and has always been light. Still today, it questions us. The attempts to comprehend its nature have gone way beyond the study of optics. This natural phenomenon has been dealt with by various fields of study, such as geometry, astronomy, chemistry, electromagnetism, quantum physics, among others. But there is more to it.

Related to the idea of knowledge itself, light and its mysteries have branded scientific and cultural pursuits to such an extent that mystics, poets, painters and philosophers have devoted their attention and thoughts to it for centuries. We cannot conceive nor name that which is unknown to us; neither can we stop staring at the sky without being awed by what we see, while being confronted with unwanted questions. This is what creates the need for analogies which will comfort us.

Light is ray, particle, and wave. It travels through space at a finite speed, turning around corners, slipping in through interstices, dodging obstacles and distorting itself, flowing like water. Light is also information and warmth, revealing itself only in a tiny fragment within a wider spectrum, thus turning into colours. And, appealing to the persuasive nature of metaphors, light can emerge like a beacon outing darkness and produce flashes of something that resembles happiness. Or beauty. It can also be a blinding presence that disrupts logic. Or the primordial shape, the origin of the divine.

From the dark caves to the present day, we have pondered about the light coming from the sun and stars and, possibly, from the fire, that first fire. What is this radiant energy that embraces all it touches? How does it affect our surroundings and our perception? How or why do we see what we see? Can we feel light? Some of the first questions which spring from direct observation, from sensorial experience and which, at the same time, pave the way for other more existential questions: Was there ever a first light? How were stars formed? At which point, after the origin of time, did light and matter split so that the universe could become what we believe it to be, and this Sun and the rest of the visible stars could continue questioning us with their glimmer and their colours.

How do we, as of today, perceive this fugitive light which has been travelling for thousands of millions of years? There is no other way of grasping the universe that isn't through light. Observing further into space means observing further back in time. Light is the echo of the cosmos.

## **Drama. Contrast and chiaroscuro as artifice**

The treatment of lighting allows for the creation of visual metaphors which depict various manners of sensitivity, characterise periods, distinguish worldviews. In painting, light achieves density and concentration when shadow adopts an active role in composition. Darkness causes light to be intensely perceived. In a context of luminous tension and opposition, the theme often reaches psychological and emotional value – dramatic depth: *pathos* or commotion resonate effectively in the spectator's mood. In its symbolic and technical aspects, *contrast* is an essential tool in the artistic language which highlights wills and purposes.

*Portrait of a woman* was signed in Florence between 1914 and 1917, when Augusto Schiavoni participated in Giovanni Costetti's workshop along with Manuel Musto and Emilio Pettoruti. As the latter mentions in his autobiography, the Tuscan artist, as well as imparting a solid academic education,

sympathised with the new classical interpretations that gave rise to Noucentisme, bringing an alternative for avant-garde during the interwar period. Some of Schiavoni's drawings belonging to the museum's collection show the influence of his master's lessons, aimed at anatomic study and imitations of nature. What is more, it was mandatory for foreigners in Europe to visit museums and to study the pioneers of occidental art since it helped artists connect with and be involved in the tradition.

In our painting, Schiavoni creates a three-quarter-view figure in the style of courtesan portraits. He respects the Renaissance and Baroque traditions and resorts to the contrast of an illuminated face - whose volume has been carefully moulded - with black hairstyle and black clothing which barely stand out from the dark background. The intense contrasts and the radical practice of chiaroscuro were baroque techniques attributed to the abrupt changes in the way of thinking and the spread of new concepts involving alchemy, astronomy, physics, chemistry and mysticism. Our artist retrieves historical formulae, hints at symbolism, allows the figure to surge from the background, defines space without geometric references and creates an unsettling and moving image. Back in Rosario, Schiavoni created his own personal language based on proportion, harmony, synthesis and rigorous lines, which allowed him to create pictorial works, mainly portraits, that recovered classical ideals in a modern style.

## Atmosphere. The conquest of the transience of light

Plein-air painters faced the novelty -and the challenge- of capturing light and seizing the fleeting, fortuitous and unpredictable moment of the atmosphere in permanent motion. Artists found in landscape the setting for *effect* and ethereal, vibrant light. This could have been motivated by a pantheist feeling for nature, inspired by literary modernism and the notion of theme as an interior motive for sentimental projection, or caused by the appeal of impressionism, which pursued an image capable of translating the perception of the retina. Painting freed shapes from their corporeal limitations, it dissolved them in the air and used the stain and the wide variety of hues to define the shapes in terms of irradiation of colour.

The interpretation made by Fader of the mountain sights shows romantic and lyrical concerns. In his own words, the image is a poetic translation of his emotion, of a state of the soul, into colour and light. But his work also had a tint of ethic connotation: in the landscape, he looked for the singularity and the atavistic traits of the land, to help lay the identitarian foundations of Argentinian art, an objective that was closely related to Ricardo Rojas' nationalistic cultural proposal.

Fader had settled in Ojo de Agua, in San Clemente afflicted by tuberculosis, and that same year he prepared the first plein-air landscape showcase for the Muller Gallery. The canvases from his time in Cordoba are characterized by thick short strokes, by a quick and sharp technique of light strokes, and a palette full of saturated and luminous colours. Sometimes, he used them straight from the tube to finish the mixture on the canvas itself. The layer-over-layer technique allowed him to intensify the properties of the pictorial surface with subterranean currents which affect its appearance and create fusions and contrasts with powerful optical effects. "The pond" is one of the first paintings of this period, considered to be his moment of most expressive freedom. Our artist studies the light that streams through the tree branches and emphasizes the effect with the use of complementary colours, captures the shaking of the orange leaves, the glow of the whitewashed well, and the blue and purple shadows projected on the terrain. The stains allow him to study the infinite variations in tones and the vibration of the reflections in the space that surrounds his easel.

Even though his health deteriorated, Fader never abandoned his campaigns into the mountains until 1931, when he made his last trip to the Guasapampa settlement with his brushes.

## Daydreaming

### Light across the threshold into the real

There is a luminosity akin to the whole pictorial constellation that composes the inter-war surreal roots from which our artists nourished: French surrealism, metaphysical painting, Italian noucentisme. Both interiors and landscapes portray —among other mysteries— a shining that blurs the sharp

borderlines between daylight and nightlight, natural light and artificial light. A liminal luminosity that paradoxically aids in the perception of frozen time: a luminosity which sheds light on psychological experiences like daydreams and oneiric phenomena, as well as any other human experiences beyond chronological reason. Artists create estranged atmospheres out of the coexistence of elements coming from foreign realities, enhanced by the incongruous interplay of lights and shadows that disturb the stable classical rules.

Lino Enea Spilimbergo travelled to Italy in 1926, funded by the prize money he garnered in 1925 on being awarded *Premio Único al Mejor Conjunto en el Salón Nacional* (Unique Award for Best Collection at the National Salon). During his time in Italy, he studied pre-Renaissance artists, incorporating their compositional structures and grand dimensions. This influence paved the way for his career as a muralist, especially after the arrival of David Alfaro Siqueiros in Argentina in 1933. Later, while residing in Paris, Spilimbergo attended André Lhote's workshop and became part of a group known as *Grupo de Paris*.

At Lhote's workshop, Spilimbergo delved into Cezanne's reductive perspective and its influence on Cubism, an experience uniquely reflected in his work *Paisaje de San Juan* (*San Juan Landscape*). This piece features a triangular mesh that structures the terrain, combined with an aerial perspective filled with multiple and divergent vanishing points. In a sort of secondary background, a mountain range can be seen stretching towards a bluish sky — that twilight blue which lays the foundation for the timeless principle of distance that the metaphysical landscapes used to evoke. That distant background is overlaid, like a montage, by a closer landscape, recognisable by its references and details, painted in reds and greens. The light in this landscape, a place where the artist lived several times throughout his life, casts flat shadows that cut across the terrain, and enhance the feeling of spatial dislocation already suggested by the forced perspective and overlapping planes. Spilimbergo crafts a distinct atmosphere that blends the regional characteristics with the artistic tenets of his era. This fusion contributed to the development of what Berni termed a “new realism” by the late 1930s.

## Invention. Objectified light

The manipulation of light played a pivotal role in the artistic traditions that shaped the concrete art trends in Argentina in the 1940s and their subsequent developments. Techniques such as the decomposition of objects, the faceting of shapes and the application of prismatic vision to spatial representation, as well as the reflexivity of plastic elements and their autonomy revolved around light as their central axis and guiding model. Far from being merely a medium that makes the world visible, light emerges as the phenomenon through which the world is refracted or else it becomes objectified for representation.

*Lumière élan* is part of a series of seven lithographs that Pettoruti donated to various institutions across Argentina. It was created in Fernand Mourlot's workshop in Paris between 1958 and 1959, once he decided to settle definitively in Europe in 1953 after an earlier journey. In this series, the artist showcases a selection of his early paintings, predominantly created during his formative years in Florence (1913-1916). *Lumière élan - Luce-elevazione*, also known as *Retrato del pintor Xul Solar* (*Portrait of painter Xul Solar*), was exhibited in his first solo exhibition at the Librería Gonelli in Florence in 1916.

During his Florentine period, Pettoruti studied primitive Italian art as well as Byzantine and Etruscan art, from which he incorporated their principles of harmony and balance in the composition of the pictorial space. This vision was blended with the influence of Futurism, with which the artist established close ties. He participated in several avant-garde collective exhibitions, even though he was not organically linked to the movement. The way in which Pettoruti fragmented and faceted the planes also brought him closer to Synthetic Cubism, an influence that was solidified during his brief stay in Paris before his return to Argentina in 1924. This year was crucial for the development of the avant-garde movement in this country, in which Pettoruti played a major role.

In *Lumière-élan*, Pettoruti focuses on an idea that he will develop more extensively in the 1940s with his study of suns, in which he achieved a solidification or materialisation of the rays of light. Far from treating light as a template that conditions the perception of space and objects, he succeeded in objectivizing it to perceive it as a self-referential element: ‘autonomous light for autonomous art: the light of invented painting’.

## **La Espera (The Wait). Román Vitali, 2024. Guest Artist.**

The piece *La Espera (The Wait)* is presented as a site-specific work in the central hall located on the ground floor at J. B. Castagnino Museum. This piece is created by the interaction of several systems and formal operations, which can be summarised in three fundamental elements: neon light, which projects drawings in the surrounding architecture through fixed and intermittent systems; space, conceived as a formal container of dialogue and dynamic trajectory; and reflective materiality, achieved through woven acrylic beads, which generates interruptions and discomfort in the silence of the waiting room.

As a whole, the work proposes a visual narrative that interweaves the artist's creation with Lucio Fontana's reflections on light and space, knitting a conceptual patchwork between both artists. This artistic fusion is specially inspired on "*Ambiente spaziale*", 1967, created using neon light and exhibited at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. This exchange is reflected on Fontana's transcendental works such as "*Concetto Spaziale, Attese*", 1966, characterised by his precise cuts on canvas, and "*Concetto Spaziale, La fine di Dio*", 1963-64, characterised by perforated oval shapes. Thus, *The Wait* becomes a convergence point between the present and the artistic influence of the past, which results in a reflective aesthetic experience.

### **Román Vitali**

(Rosario, 1969)

*La Espera (The Wait)*

Neon light. Transformers and sequencers. Woven with faceted acrylic beads and nylon string on wooden structures covered in golden sheets.

Painting and drawing on a wall.

300 x 920 x 20 cm.

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