

Robert C. Morgan, "MATTO'S MEMORY"

To dive into the scope of an artist's work, to marvel at the restraint, the lucidity, the dynamic subtlety of the form, to come to grips with the deep structure, the sensual involvement, and to realize that the artist was from another place in the world, from another time, a not too far distant time-- these are the determining factors that allow us to experience a work of art, to get into the experience and to refine our sensibilities. This kind of experience is not merely a linguistic one. It is not a purely formal exercise. Through direct contact with the work we arrive at some subtlety of meaning. The experience of the viewer is a phenomenon partially intended by the artist yet primarily instigated through the actuality of the work. The consciousness of viewer attends to the work and makes contact with the form as a distinctive reality, as sensual cognition. In doing so, art incites another level of linguistic inference. By allowing such art to cast a spell upon the viewer, the viewer sees what was fully intended to be seen.

During his lifetime, Francisco Matto opened the threshold of his artistic forms to a new kind of experience -- a conjugation of heart, body, and mind. His work recalls the history of all forms, the subjective history of individual consciousness through these forms, and the archaeology of a lived memory. Born in Montevideo (Uruguay), Matto never lost faith in what he was doing as an artist. He traveled to Europe as a young man to learn from the members of the School of Paris -- to see their works and to meet them. By the thirties, he had become enamored with the work the great Uruguayan painter Joaquín Torres-García. There was an instant camaraderie between the two artists. Later as an homage to Torres-García, Matto would sign his paintings "T.T.G." This meant Taller (Studio) Torres-García. By giving his work the name of his mentor, Matto believed he was following in the great tradition of Western art. Just as paintings from the Baroque era are often credited as "School of Rubens" or "Follower of Holbein", Matto believed that he should acknowledge the leader of a Constructivist Universalist style of painting and sculpture that had come to be of considerable importance at mid-century.

The exhibition at Cecilia de Torres, Ltd. of the work of Francisco Matto (1911-1995) has been extended through February 16th. Here is a wonderful opportunity to see one of the most articulate, powerful, and richly innovative artists to follow in the tradition of one of the great artists of the southern hemisphere during the last century. The exhibition focuses on the graphisms (paintings), totems (wooden sculpture), and portraits of Matto. It is a modest exhibition, but superbly presented. It is the kind of exhibition that begs for more, that opens up a new threshold of experience, beyond the banalities and the cyber-kitsch of the last few years in New York.

Matto believed he was in search of "elemental forms" because it was through these forms that he could discover something basic, yet essential in human consciousness. Matto felt this was the mission of the artist -- to come to terms with the real though realizing one's inner-nature. While adhering to a constructivist aesthetic, in the tradition of Torres-García, Matto also had a fundamental belief in nature. For him, there was no contradiction. As Cecilia de Torres point out in her essay, Matto loved the barren plains along the River Plate. He would thrive on the feeling of nature. This may seem odd for an artist so bent in the direction of the constructive. But for Matto it made perfect sense.

There is a photograph taken of the aged, lean-figured Matto near one of these barren plains in which he is holding a right-angled section from one of his totemic sculptures. What this photograph reveals so poignantly is not only the dignity and extraordinary presence of the artist, but the sense that nature is within the human system of thought -- that human thought is nature if we allow our thinking process to fuse with our emotions, to connect poetically with who we are as physical, emotional, and intelligent beings in the world. Matto understood this reality as intrinsic to his own sense of self and to his presence as an artist. He wanted to grasp representation as a fact of expression. He had a marvelously delicate way of juxtaposing planar elements -- particularly in his later wooden totems -- that carried a sensual quality, a grace, that lifted the form into a kind of primitive universalism, a kind of raw ether. Like some African carvings, Matto understood the essential, the symbolic, and the emotional infrastructure that informed the space, the elegant maneuvering of space in relation to planar form. The subtle application of color in these works is as poignant as in many of the sculptures of David Smith.

Matto's compared his totems to what he saw in Chile in the Atacama desert -- a series of roughly carved wooden figures. While the totems of Matto are more flat than those seen in the Mapuche Cemetery in Chile, there is a striking resemblance.

There is the basic human necessary to represent. When one sees such affinities, there is every possibility that the need to inscribe figuration in materials is of a biological necessity. Much the same can be said about his "graphism." Graphisms are paintings, largely composed of grids, in which various signs and symbols have been inscribed in the various compartments. This is a formal idea begun by Joaquín Torres-García. (It was also used briefly in the forties by the second generation abstract expressionist Adolph Gottlieb.)

Matto's graphisms contains a rich variety of shapes and forms -- many linear, some cryptic. Shaped like cuneiform marks (in some instances), these inscription tell a story, but not a narrative one. It is more about the semiotics of culture as inscribed within memory. For Matto, memory was everything, and these signs were the diligent repository of what he knew to exist below the level of the rational, below the surface of conscious thought. There is a Jungian exegesis somewhere in these paintings, and they are wildly imagination, purposeful, and subtle to observe. The color is sometimes brooding and dark, sometimes light and effervescent. But there is always the clear knowledge -- the alacrity about the method or the process, as the case may be -- that these graphics are without dependence on a theoretical proposition outside of what the artist knew and felt at the particular moment he was painting.

In fact, painting and writing begin to touch upon one another in Matto's graphisms. The distinction is not clear. The spirals and the triangles, the pictographic features of the figure (in simplified form) and the emblematic shapes of nature, are all combined in a single grid -- a marvelous grid, a storyboard, yet without narrative, It is a theater of simultaneous action, a lingering vestige of primal memory that keeps surfacing over and over again. The quality of these paintings is so ineluctable, so definitive in their intention, yet so liberated in terms of their execution that the viewer literally becomes carried away, carried into some flight of remembrance, perhaps, even below the surface of the unconscious -- a point that touches strongly upon the work of Jung.

The later portraits of Matto are also included in the exhibition. They relate somewhat to Modigliani who also had a certain sensibility that related to what at the time was known as primitivism. But Matto's portraits are so completely intuitive, and therefore so difficult to pin down in terms of style. They are an utter delight to behold -- so expressive and so tender in their agility and feeling. The portraits show the other side of Matto -- a side of resilience to trends and fashions, an intimacy that was bold and powerful, yet completely within his own invented discourse. It is this sense of an artist being within his or her own invented discourse -- without the prosthesis of theoretical claims or academic incursions -- that gives a lightness and a force to the forms of Matto. It is this forcefulness within the structure of art that is the artist's best recourse to memory, to primordial memory, to getting outside the blockages of everyday strife and the discordance of endless banalities. It allows us a passage into another world. Matto's world of memory is a special world -- a place to gather oneself, to rediscover the sense of self that is so necessary for our spiritual health in a world gone awry with cynicism and calculation. Matto's memory is a world of whimsy, yet serious whimsy, a world of Zen-like play, a clearly conceived vision of the heraldic imagination.

*Robert C. Morgan is an internationally known art critic, writer, poet and lecturer. His latest book *The End of the Art World* was published by Allworth Press.*

This article first appeared in the February 1, 2000 issue of Review magazine.