

Mario Carreño and Sandu Darie on Concrete Art

Form, experience, and the construction of a modern way of seeing

By Juan Sarracino

In 1957, Sandu Darie placed Mario Carreño's painting within a collective undertaking: the renewal of the visual language of his century. The title of his essay, "Mario Carreño en la aventura plástica de este siglo," announces that intention to establish a historical position. His argument brings together terms that a hurried reading might consider incompatible: emotion and control, intuition and construction, spirituality and spatial relationships. Examining these associations illuminates both the work being interpreted and the position of its interpreter. Darie writes about Carreño through questions that also engage his own artistic practice. [1]

Their relationship is therefore more significant than the coincidence of two artists working with geometric abstraction. Their writings and editorial collaboration reveal an intellectual affinity: a confidence that invented forms, detached from the immediate description of the visible world, can produce a meaningful human experience. Their works, however, assign different functions to space, time, and the viewer. In the Carreño paintings examined here, the gaze activates relationships that the composition holds stable. In Darie's transformable structures, the viewer's intervention can alter those relationships materially.

I propose reading this difference as a divergence within a shared concern. Both artists use geometry to investigate how an experience is constructed; its possibilities depend on their respective decisions about support, formal organization, and the participation of the person looking. The 1957 essay is the center of this reading. The collaboration on *Noticias de Arte*, Darie's letters to Gyula Kosice, and Carreño's statements recorded in *Revista de Arte* supply the documentary points of comparison.

A relationship built beyond the studio

The collaboration has a precise foundation. Carreño, Darie, and Luis Martínez Pedro founded *Noticias de Arte*. Their "Presentación," published in September 1952, proposed broadening knowledge of national and international art and giving artists a space to communicate their ideas, open to different tendencies. The text is consulted here in the transcription included in a study by Abigail McEwen. [2]

This activity allows us to interpret their association as an intervention in the conditions under which art is received. Publishing means selecting subjects, circulating arguments, and addressing readers whose judgments may still be forming. Establishing a magazine brings a task of mediation into artistic practice: a new work needs opportunities to be seen and a language through which it can be discussed. The three artists' association shows that the modernity they advocated was also being developed through shared initiatives.

A detail in the correspondence offers a more specific measure of that exchange. On June 3, 1955, Darie told Kosice that Carreño had received a publication from a Madí exhibition in Italy and had informed him that his name appeared in it. [3] The episode documents the circulation of news between them. Its significance lies in this connecting function: printed materials linked local experiences to discussions taking place elsewhere.

Their intellectual relationship became public in another way in 1957. Darie devoted a text to Carreño that accompanied his works in the Instituto Nacional de Cultura publication. Carreño

is identified there as visual arts adviser; the colophon names Guillermo de Zendegui as director general. [1, digital pp. 21–22] This institutional precision helps situate the document: it involves a cultural body, an artist with responsibilities within it, and another artist formulating a critical judgment. The essay's authority emerges from that engaged position. Darie participates in the artistic field he describes and seeks to shape Carreño's recognition within it.

Darie interprets Carreño and defines a way of looking

The essay's opening gives emotion a decisive role. According to Darie, Carreño's paintings offer "an emotional impact expressed with determination." [1, digital p. 4] Determination introduces will and organization into sensory experience. From that first sentence, formal construction appears as a way of directing emotion.

Later, Darie explains that the works made between 1950 and 1957 can be classified as "abstract nonfigurative": abstract because of their intellectual content, and nonfigurative because they do not copy immediate reality. He adds that Carreño expresses his visual emotion through colors on the surface of the canvas and orders his forms with a constructive sense. [1, digital p. 8] This definition connects thought, matter, and feeling. The painting retains its condition as a worked object and a perceptual experience even when it abandons a recognizable referent.

The most revealing formulation occurs when Darie attributes to Carreño the ability to express his "artistic intuition" "under rationalized control." In the same passage he mentions optical phenomena, psychological responses to color, vibrations of light, and texture. [1, digital p. 12] Reducing this interpretation to a defense of geometry as calculation would remove much of its substance. Rational organization makes possible an experience that includes sensory qualities irreducible to an inventory of shapes.

Looking performs an active function. Darie describes an "optical journey from one form to another," during which the viewer discovers rhythm and traverses the painting's space-time. [1, digital p. 12] The composition does not deliver its entire meaning at once. It requires shifts of attention, comparisons, returns, and the recognition of intervals. Time enters painting as the duration of an experience, although the support remains still.

This idea helps explain why Darie could recognize a significant interlocutor in Carreño. An artist investigating relationships among forms finds in another's work an organization capable of mobilizing perception. The essay establishes a reasoned critical affinity. Reading it alongside the objects Darie was producing is particularly fruitful, without turning every statement about Carreño into an autobiographical declaration by the critic.

The scope of his praise also requires examination. Darie attributes an "intuitive golden law" to the compositions and concludes by asserting that Carreño's historical importance has been demonstrated "with analytical rigor." [1, digital pp. 12 and 17] The text offers formal observations, but presents no measurements establishing a systematic application of the golden ratio. The phrase communicates a conviction about balance; by itself, it does not demonstrate a geometric studio procedure. A critical reading can value the precision of certain observations while recognizing the assertive and persuasive character of the conclusion.

The contested meaning of concrete

The word concrete requires attention to the artists' uses of it. In his letter to Kosice of July 14, 1955, Darie distinguishes abstract thought from the concrete work it produces and treats concrete art as a broad category extending beyond a particular affiliation. [3] This distinction helps explain how abstract and concrete can designate different aspects of the same process.

From this perspective, returning to the 1957 definition proves productive. When Darie calls Carreño's painting abstract because of its intellectual content, he is naming an activity of thought. When he discusses surface, colors, and relationships among forms, he addresses its perceptible realization. The apparent terminological contradiction diminishes once those levels are distinguished. It remains necessary, however, to attend to differences between a painting that invents geometric relationships and a construction that introduces movable joints. A shared vocabulary does not determine in advance how each work functions.

Carreño's position adds his own voice to the comparison. In "Algunas consideraciones sobre la pintura abstracta constructivista," he presents geometry as a grammar connected to the search for order and relates pictorial autonomy to music. [4] In the Sol de Bronce forum, Ramón Vergara contrasts Carreño's lyricism with a concrete art he considers dehumanized. Carreño rejects that characterization and defends the human capacity expressed through concrete invention. [5, pp. 17–18]

This disagreement is decisive for interpreting the relationship with Darie. The convenient opposition between a sensitive Carreño and a rationalist Darie would reproduce a boundary that Carreño himself resists. His statements raise a more demanding question: what do we understand by humanity in a work once the recognizable figure disappears? If artistic experience includes inventing, ordering, and perceiving relationships, human presence can manifest itself through those operations. Figuration then ceases to be its sole guarantee.

Carreño does not intervene in that forum to explain Darie's essay. He speaks to other interlocutors in another situation. Comparing the two documents nevertheless reveals a convergence: the emotion Darie finds in pictorial construction is compatible with Carreño's defense of invention. The affinity rests on comparable arguments, without requiring their positions to be identical or to derive from one another.

From the journey of the gaze to material transformation

Tiempo en el Espacio, of 1952, brings the discussion to a specific painting. In its reproduction in the 1957 publication, a horizontal field brings together thin lines, rectangular planes, and vertical accents. The diamond, arc, and triangular figures establish differences of direction and visual weight. Attention can follow the lines and pause at the larger figures, or reconstruct correspondences between separate areas. [1, digital p. 8]

The title invites consideration of a temporal dimension, but the composition provides a visual reason for doing so: its relationships are discovered in succession. What first appears as a set of isolated elements may subsequently be perceived as a network of correspondences. Darie's interpretation finds observable support here. The journey depends both on the painter's decisions and on the viewer's attention; it permits variations without changing the painting's material arrangement.

Tensión Espacial, of 1957, intensifies this experience. The color plate distinguishes two dark, elongated, pointed forms set against a light transverse shape and red and ochre planes. Visual concentration emerges through proximity, overlap, and opposing directions. [1, digital pp. 12–13] The stability of the support contains an organization of tensions. Calling it stable does not mean calling it serene: the distance between two contours or the contrast between two planes can hold the gaze in an expectation that remains unresolved.

Darie's works introduce other material conditions. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston holds an untitled work from the *Estructuras pictóricas* series, dated 1956 and made in casein on a wood construction. Its record describes raised planes over an orthogonal organization. [6] Relief makes depth a property of the object. Comparison with Carreño requires distinguishing that actual thickness from the effects of overlap that a painted surface can produce.

In *Escultura transformable*, around 1955, at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, painted wooden elements are joined by hinges and require the viewer's participation to activate the work. [7] Articulation adds a possibility different from successive contemplation: changing the elements' positions alters their spatial relationships. Time is also inscribed in the actual transformation of the object.

The distinction sharpens the meaning of composition. In the Carreño paintings examined here, the artist establishes an arrangement that the viewer explores and interprets. In a transformable structure, the artist also determines the conditions of variation: elements, joints, and possibilities of movement. The viewer's intervention develops a field of decisions that has already been constructed. That freedom has a form and material limits.

This difference does not establish a scale of value. Physically modifying an object does not guarantee an experience more intense than looking at a painting. Nor does the permanence of a composition ensure greater depth. Each work must be judged by the precision with which it articulates its possibilities. The contrast reveals two ways of giving form a duration: through the discovery of relationships within a stable arrangement, or through their material reorganization.

The mural and the space shared with architecture

Carreño's mural reproduced in the 1957 publication broadens the comparison. Its historical caption reads: "Mural realizado en una residencia particular, La Habana, 1954." [1, digital p. 14] The mural is my property and forms part of my collection. Its place in this analysis reflects the interest of a work that allows us to examine the relationship between pictorial organization and a documented architectural destination.

The reproduction shows a horizontal field of rectangular planes, connecting lines, arcs, diamonds, and opposed triangles. A strongly developed vertical form finds a smaller echo within the ensemble. Reiteration introduces recognition; changes of size and position produce differences. The result can be read as an asymmetrical balance built through correspondences that never become uniform repetition.

The residential destination places that organization in relation to a lived space. The plate supports an analysis of its composition; reconstructing viewing distances, illumination, and exact relationships with the building would require documentation of the installation. The distinction matters because the word mural establishes an architectural relationship, but does not by itself describe how the work was experienced in that interior.

Architecture nevertheless opens another dimension of the shared problem. The encounter with a composition intended for a wall can vary with the position and movement of the person inhabiting the place. That variation belongs to the relationship among body, painting, and surroundings. In a transformable structure, articulation also allows the object's configuration to change. These are different ways of connecting visual order to the space of experience.

Universality, learning, and the limits of a promise

Darie's essay sustains an aspiration to universality. Design appears as the common denominator of a language capable of communicating beyond represented subject matter; the space of the painting is even connected to cosmic space. [1, digital p. 12] This expansion of the argument offers Carreño's painting a legitimacy that exceeds individual taste. Invented form aspires to express an order and produce an experience that can be communicated.

The strength of this proposal lies in what it asks us to recognize: a work can communicate without describing an episode, a character, or a landscape. Interpretation shifts toward

proportions, rhythms, and chromatic relationships. The viewer finds meaning through perceptual activity, and that activity deserves to be considered a complete intellectual and sensory experience.

Its limit emerges when an aspiration is confused with a guaranteed property of language. A geometric relationship does not necessarily produce the same response in every viewer. Darie himself addresses a viewer “susceptible to this type of beauty,” a formulation that presupposes a particular disposition. [1, digital p. 12] Between the announced universal reach and actual reception lies a space of learning, familiarity, and discussion.

Their editorial collaboration acquires further critical significance here. If looking requires the development of capacities, publishing arguments and holding public discussions are part of building an audience. The social dimension of these proposals can be sought in that mediation and in the forms of experience they offer. Asserting that a work is universal, human, or participatory calls for examining who can gain access to it and what real possibilities of engagement it establishes.

Material participation also requires precise assessment. Hinges allow specific variations rather than unrestricted intervention. Darie’s viewer acts within designed possibilities; Carreño’s viewer develops paths of attention that cannot be reduced to passive reception. This double observation avoids identifying activity exclusively with manual movement and recognizes different degrees of initiative in the encounter with a work.

The relationship between Carreño and Darie is especially valuable because it allows geometric abstraction to be considered through this plurality. Their documented collaboration and the 1957 essay reveal a shared intellectual territory; paintings, reliefs, and articulated structures reveal different material decisions. Their common confidence in invention does not cancel those differences: it gives them a problem on which to work.

Darie recognizes in Carreño a painting whose construction makes emotion possible and whose stability contains a temporal experience. Carreño, in defending the human scope of concrete art, offers arguments for understanding geometric invention beyond an accusation of coldness. Between them, a fundamental question becomes visible: how can a constructed form acquire meaning in another person’s experience? The answers remain open in the works, where looking, relating, and transforming are actions with different consequences.

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Fuentes consultadas: Archivos Sarracino Gallery.

References and document locations

References to [1] follow the sequence of the 23 pages in Binder1.pdf, held in the Sarracino Gallery Archives. References [3], [4], and [5] use printed pagination. Interpretations of the paintings and mural are based on their reproductions in the 1957 publication. Material information about Darie's works comes from the records of the institutions that hold them. English quotations from Darie's 1957 essay are translations of the Spanish text; the historical mural caption is retained in its original language.

[1] Darie, Sandu. "Mario Carreño en la aventura plástica de este siglo." In *Carreño 1950–1957*. Havana: Instituto Nacional de Cultura, February 1957. Text on digital pp. 4, 8, 12, and 17; works discussed on digital pp. 8 and 12–14; institutional information on digital pp. 21–22. Sarracino Gallery Archives.

[2] Darie, Sandu; Mario Carreño; and Luis Martínez Pedro. "Presentación." *Noticias de Arte*, year 1, no. 1, September 1952, p. 3. Consulted in the transcription in Abigail McEwen, "Arts magazines and the cosmopolitan vision of Cuban modernism, 1952–1961," International Research Forum for Graduate Students and Emerging Scholars, University of Texas at Austin, 2009, note 2, digital pp. 536–537 of the collected papers. [Read the transcription in the University of Texas repository.](#)

[3] Darie, Sandu. Letters to Gyula Kosice of June 3 and July 14, 1955. In "Letters 1949–1958," *Cold America: Geometric Abstraction in Latin America (1934–1973)*. Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2011, p. 473; digital p. 479. Consulted in the English transcription published in this edition; the essay paraphrases these passages. [Read the letters at Fundación Juan March.](#)

[4] Carreño, Mario. "Algunas consideraciones sobre la pintura abstracta constructivista." *Revista de Arte*, second series, nos. 13–14. Santiago: Universidad de Chile, Instituto de Extensión de Artes Plásticas, p. 15; digital p. 16 of volume MC0036205. [Read the original page at Memoria Chilena.](#)

[5] "Lo abstracto y lo concreto. Foro a través de la pintura de Mario Carreño." *Revista de Arte*, second series, nos. 13–14, pp. 16–21; digital pp. 17–22 of volume MC0036205. The essay refers to the interventions identified as Ramón Vergara and Mario Carreño. [Read the published transcript of the forum.](#)

Bibliographic note on [4] and [5]: the dating is inconsistent. The bibliography in *Cold America* dates nos. 13–14 to 1958; the Biblioteca Nacional de Chile record places the beginning of the digitized group in 1959. The verified issue numbers and pages are retained here, without resolving that discrepancy through an assumed date. [Memoria Chilena bibliographic record.](#)

[6] Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Sandú Darié, Sin título (from the series *Estructuras pictóricas*), 1956. Casein on wood construction; object no. 2018.86. [Collection record.](#)

[7] The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Sandú Darié, *Escultura transformable*, ca. 1955. Painted wood; object no. 2017.288. [Collection record and description of the hinged construction.](#)