

Loló Soldevilla Thought Abstraction and Modernity

From Non Objectivity to Cuban Concrete Art

Lecture



Paris, 1950.

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Introduction

To approach Loló Soldevilla today requires a reconsideration of some of the categories through which twentieth-century Cuban art has traditionally been narrated. For many years she was remembered mainly for her participation in geometric abstraction, Galería de Arte Color-Luz, and her association with the Ten Concrete Painters. All of this is correct, but incomplete.

An exceptional document preserved in the Sarracino Gallery Archives -the catalogue of her 1952 exhibition- reveals something deeper. Before Cuban concretism constituted itself as a group, before Color-Luz, and before the collective program of the Ten, Soldevilla had already developed a precise intellectual position concerning the autonomy of art, the functions of form and color, the organization of space, and the relationship between creation and modernity.

We are therefore not dealing simply with an artist who adopted the language of abstraction. We are dealing with an artist who thought through abstraction. That distinction is fundamental to understanding her position within Cuban art.

I 1952 A document written in the present

The extraordinary value of the 1952 catalogue lies in the fact that it is not retrospective. Soldevilla is not looking back decades later and explaining what she believes she once intended. She is writing while the transformation itself is still taking place.

The text begins with an interpretation of the long history of Western art. For centuries, she argues, art remained attached to the representation of nature: people, objects, landscapes, and recognizable elements of the external world. She then constructs a genealogy of rupture that includes Kandinsky, Mondrian, Robert Delaunay, Jean Arp, Malevich, Picabia, Brancusi, Vantongerloo, Sonia Delaunay, Kupka, Theo van Doesburg, and others.

This enumeration should not be read merely as a list of influences. It constitutes an intellectual declaration of affiliation. Soldevilla positions her work within an international genealogy of artists who challenged the traditional dependence of the image upon representation.

She also makes a revealing terminological distinction. What is commonly called abstract art, she argues, should more properly be described as non-objective art. To abstract may imply beginning with an object and simplifying or transforming it. Non-objective art instead aspires to produce a plastic reality that does not depend upon an external referent.

II It is It does not represent

The most powerful statement in the catalogue occurs when Soldevilla writes: "The real fact here is the painting, the wall, the work itself. It is; it does not represent." An entire theory of the image is condensed into that sentence.

The artwork is no longer understood as a window opening onto another reality. It does not need to depict a landscape, a person, or an event. It does not need to justify its existence through something beyond itself. The work constitutes its own reality. Color is color. Form is form. Space is a relationship generated within the work.

This autonomy explains another central assertion: every work of visual art must possess value in itself, while form and color should attain the highest possible degree of purity. Purity does not merely mean technical neatness. It means removing elements that distract from specifically plastic relationships.

The central question of painting consequently ceases to be what does it represent and becomes how is it organized: associations among forms, spatial relationships, angles, tensions, drawing, color, and the total structure of the surface. Soldevilla describes this process as an inexhaustible dialectic. Geometry is not a closed vocabulary for her, but a system capable of producing almost infinite relationships.

III Space movement and the fourth dimension

Another particularly suggestive passage connects painting with what Soldevilla calls a fourth dimension. This need not be interpreted as a strict scientific theory. Within her argument, the expression appears to signify the liberation of pictorial space from conventional perspective.

The organization of planes must avoid perspective in order to allow freedom of movement, development, and organization. This introduces a decisive concern in her later work: space not as illusion, but as active structure.

Traditional perspective organizes the surface in order to simulate depth. In the system Soldevilla describes, space no longer seeks to deceive the eye. It becomes a field of forces. Forms advance, recede, interrupt one another, establish equilibrium, and produce tension without abandoning the material reality of the plane.

This concern helps us understand her later movement toward collage, relief, constructions, and experimentation with light and actual space. Painting begins to approach the object, and the object begins to engage the space occupied by the viewer.

IV Reason and poetry

There is a frequent danger when interpreting geometric abstraction: reducing it to calculation, precision, and rationality. The 1952 catalogue demonstrates how inadequate such an interpretation would be for Soldevilla.

Her thinking brings together order, geometry, purity, construction, and control of composition; but also fantasy, poetry, spirituality, movement, and infinity. One of the most revealing sentences in the document declares: "Composition governed by the will, form by the spirit."

Reason organizes, but it does not replace imagination. Geometry disciplines, but it does not abolish poetry. At the conclusion of the text, signed simply "LOLÓ," the artist imagines a universe in which fantasy and poetry might come together within an order of forms, space, and color.

This declaration alters the image of a strictly rationalist Soldevilla. Her geometry does not eliminate subjectivity; it reorganizes it. The tension between formal rigor and poetic resonance is one of the keys to her originality.

V Paris as intellectual formation

To understand how Soldevilla arrived at these positions, we must consider the Paris she encountered from the late 1940s onward. Yet it would be too simple to say merely that Paris influenced her. The more productive question is what Soldevilla did with Paris.

The catalogue identifies artists then active in that environment, among them Jean Dewasne, Alberto Magnelli, Edgar Pillet, Auguste Herbin, and Victor Vasarely, while referring to the circle surrounding Art d'Aujourd'hui. Even more revealing is the recorded lecture program: the problems of abstract art, Mondrian and Neo-Plasticism, Constructivism, color theory, Kandinsky's writings, Delaunay, and the transition from figuration to abstraction.

This was not merely a matter of seeing abstract paintings. Soldevilla was participating in an intellectual laboratory. She read, listened, debated, attended studios, encountered artists, followed publications, and confronted different theories. Her Parisian experience should be understood as a genuine intellectual formation within postwar European culture.

The 1950 photograph of Paris accompanying this lecture does not portray the artist. Its purpose is documentary: to evoke the historical and urban environment in which that formation took place without replacing it with an imagined image.

VI A mediator between cultural systems

Soldevilla did not merely carry something Cuban to Paris or something Parisian back to Cuba. She acted as a mediator between cultural systems. This movement back and forth is essential to understanding her historical role.

Cuban concretism cannot be explained as a delayed and passive importation of European models. Its formation involved multiple circuits between Europe and Latin America, as well as networks of artists, journals, exhibitions, studios, and debates. Soldevilla was one of the nodes within that network.

The 1952 catalogue provides early evidence of this mediating role. An international genealogy, immediate Parisian experience, and a pedagogical address to the Cuban public coexist within its pages. Soldevilla does not simply present works; she presents a vocabulary, a history, and a set of problems through which a new artistic possibility might be understood.

VII From abstraction toward Concrete Art

An important historical distinction must be maintained. It would be anachronistic to claim that the Soldevilla of 1952 was already articulating exactly the program that the Ten Concrete Painters would adopt several years later. Her vocabulary still belongs largely to abstraction and non-objective art.

Yet many fundamental principles are already present: the autonomy of the art object; the priority of form and color; the rejection of representation; the deliberate organization of composition; the elimination of anecdote; the autonomy of plastic space; and the conception of the artwork as a created reality rather than the reproduction of another reality.

The movement toward Concrete Art therefore demonstrates considerable conceptual continuity. When her work expands toward collage, constructions, relief, and light, the pictorial problem moves toward materiality and space without abandoning the questions formulated in 1952.

Her later activity as a promoter of abstraction extended a personal investigation into the institutional field. Soldevilla did not merely produce works within the movement: she helped create the cultural conditions through which that movement could circulate, be discussed, and gain recognition.

VIII A connected Cuban modernity

Another simplification must also be avoided: the idea that Cuban geometric abstraction was merely a peripheral derivation of European models. Cuban artists operated within far more complex transnational networks.

Several had lived or worked outside Cuba, and connections existed with European and Latin American movements. It is more accurate to understand Cuban concretism as a Cuban formulation within an international modernity.

Soldevilla's importance lies precisely in her ability to inhabit those intersections. Her art and thought do not deny international connections; they transform them into the substance of an independent position. That position is articulated from Cuba while engaging directly with the transformations of the twentieth century.

IX The mural and the expansion into space

The catalogue devotes attention to the mural, a genre traditionally associated with figuration. Soldevilla argues that abstraction finds extraordinary possibilities there: planes, clean lines, and geometry can acquire monumental force.

This observation shows that her thinking was already moving beyond the limits of easel painting. Geometry could occupy a wall, enter into dialogue with architecture, move into space, and organize the viewer's physical experience.

This expanded conception helps explain her later interest in relief, constructions, light, and certain forms of kinetic experimentation. The mural is not a secondary topic, but an opening toward a broader spatial scale.

X Her position within Cuban art

Soldevilla's position within Cuban art can be understood through four inseparable dimensions.

First, the artist: her production brought together painting, collage, sculpture, construction, relief, and experiments involving light and movement. Although her body of work was not enormous, her inquiry was sustained and experimental.

Second, the intellectual: the 1952 catalogue demonstrates that she possessed her own discourse concerning non-objectivity, the autonomy of the artwork, space, formal purity, and modernity.

Third, the mediator: her circulation between Paris and Havana connected artistic environments at a time when cultural information did not travel at today's speed.

Fourth, the promoter and institution builder: her intervention extended beyond her personal production and helped create spaces for the circulation and legitimation of Cuban geometric abstraction.

Separating her art from her intellectual and cultural activity considerably reduces the true scope of her achievement. The four dimensions must be read together.

XI Legacy and influence

Any discussion of influence requires caution. A direct relationship cannot always be established between a work by Soldevilla and the later production of another artist. Her deeper legacy may therefore be understood as structural and intellectual.

She helped transform the conditions under which abstraction could be produced, exhibited, discussed, and understood in Cuba. She contributed to legitimizing an artistic possibility that, in the early 1950s, still had to defend its right to exist within a visual culture accustomed to representation.

The catalogue itself demonstrates this pedagogical ambition. Soldevilla does not merely present her work. She explains to her audience why art can cease to represent the visible world and remain meaningful.

Her legacy consists not only of a repertoire of geometric forms. It also lies in widening the field of what could be thought: what an artwork might be, how it could organize space, and what place abstraction could occupy within Cuban modernity.

XII Conclusion

Let us return to 1952. The Ten Concrete Painters do not yet exist. Color-Luz does not yet exist. Many of the works through which we now recognize the mature abstract artist have not yet been made. And yet the essential ideas are already present.

The artwork must possess value in itself. Form and color possess autonomy. Traditional perspective can be abandoned. Anecdote is no longer necessary. Space can be organized as a new reality. Painting is under no obligation to represent.

The phrase "It is; it does not represent" may be considered one of the intellectual keys to Soldevilla's entire trajectory. But another declaration is equally important: the desire to create a universe in which fantasy, poetry, forms, space, and color might come together.

Between these two ideas lies the essence of her project. On one side, the rigor of construction; on the other, the freedom of imagination. Geometry and poetry. Intelligence and sensitivity. Soldevilla understood that these forces did not have to exclude one another.

Her importance should not be reduced to membership in a group or the introduction of a particular formal vocabulary. Her deeper historical significance lies in helping change the way

art itself could be thought about in Cuba. Artist, intellectual, cultural mediator, promoter, and experimenter, Loló Soldevilla helped establish the foundations of a Cuban modernity connected to the major international transformations of the twentieth century.

More than seventy years later, the 1952 catalogue still allows us to hear something extraordinarily valuable: Soldevilla's own voice, speaking in the present tense, explaining why she had decided to leave the world of representation behind in order to construct a new one.

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Sources consulted: Sarracino Gallery Archives.