

# Palazuelo and the basque art

Thoughts on *Image*



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**BILBOKO ARTE  
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There are three paintings by Pablo Palazuelo (Madrid, 1915-2007)<sup>1</sup> in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum collection, each quite different from the other two. Acquired in reverse chronological order, the most recent, *Umbra* (1972) was bought first, in 1973; the second, *Rhyme IV* (1958), in 1998; and the third, *Image* (1955), in 2004. All three paintings are landmarks in the artist's development. For the present essay, although concentrating on the oldest, *Image*, I shall also refer rather more briefly to *Rhyme IV*, as well as other works by Palazuelo, because my purpose is to establish the scope of his influence on avant-garde Basque art in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite being quite beautiful, *Umbra* falls outside the period in question.

## An early masterwork

*Image* [fig. 1] was acquired from the Galería Nieves Fernández —today NF— in Madrid, where it had been in deposit since April 1987, after its acquisition from the Maeght gallery in Barcelona, which in turn had bought it from the prestigious Galérie Maeght in Paris in 1986<sup>2</sup>. The painting had been in the latter's possession almost before the paint had dried, so to speak, as the artist had links with the gallery since 1949; indeed, his first individual exhibition, consisting of 19 paintings, was staged at Maeght in February and March 1955. In the exhibition catalogue, *Image* figures as number 16<sup>3</sup>. Although the date of execution is given there as 1955, the year that appears on the painting itself, a book on Palazuelo published by Maeght in 1980<sup>4</sup>, which includes an illustration of the painting, describes the gestation as being rather longer, possibly in two phases, giving the dates as 1953-1955. The Bilbao Fine Arts Museum Guide, published in 2006<sup>5</sup>, and

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1 In almost all the bibliography on Palazuelo his year of birth is given as 1916. Only the catalogues for the 1995 anthological exhibition in Madrid and Valencia, and the exhibitions in Barcelona and Bilbao in 2007 give the date (8 October) and the year 1915. This is the date found on his birth certificate, according to José Rodríguez-Spiteri Palazuelo, the artist's nephew and director of his Foundation, who, on 13 September 2006, informed Teresa Grandas, cocurator of the 2007 exhibitions, to whom I am grateful for supplying the information. Madrid/Valencia 1995, p. 247; Barcelona/Bilbao 2006, p. 306.

2 Galería NF archive (formerly Nieves Fernández), Madrid, which still has a bill dated 23 April 1987. According to the Galerie Maeght archive, Paris, the work went from the artist's studio to the Marguerite and Aimé Maeght Collection, Paris (1955-1981); from there, as a legacy to the Paule and Adrien Maeght collection, Paris (1981-1986); and from there to the Galería Maeght Barcelona.

3 *Derrière le miroir*, no. 73. Paris : Galerie Maeght, 1955.

4 Esteban/Palazuelo 1980, p. 30. A Spanish version was published simultaneously in Barcelona.

5 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum... 2006, p. 184.



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1. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Image*, 1955  
Oil on canvas, 126 x 90 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 04/843



2. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Psello*, 1955  
 Oil on canvas, 96 x 100 cm  
 Private collection

the catalogue of the retrospective exhibitions mounted that year, held at the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA) and the Guggenheim Bilbao<sup>6</sup>, give the date as 1955. The abundant selection of works included in the exhibitions enabled visitors to follow the initial stages of Palazuelo's oeuvre for the first time.

Presented in 1955 at the Pittsburgh Museum's Carnegie Institute Festival, where three years later Palazuelo won the main festival prize, the painting was included in the inaugural exhibition at the Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul-de-Vence<sup>7</sup>, in 1964. From 3 December 1986 to 3 January 1987 it was part of an exhibition entitled *Souvenir d'en France*, at the Centre Culturel Gérard Philippe in Brétigny<sup>8</sup>. It was shown at another exhibition called *Mil novecientos once, mil novecientos sesenta y siete* at the Galería Nieves Fernández in Madrid in 1991<sup>9</sup>. Finally, it was also included in the 2007 Barcelona and Bilbao exhibitions mentioned above.

*Image* was painted in Paris, where Palazuelo lived from 1949 on; after moving several times, he eventually settled in 1951 at 13 de la rue Saint-Jacques, opposite the church of Saint-Séverin<sup>10</sup>. In 1955 he presented a further four paintings in the Maeght exhibition, *Psello* [fig. 2] and *Solitudes I, II and III*<sup>11</sup>, which have much more to do with each other than they might have, even taken individually, with *Image*. The earliest painting included with them was from 1949, a Klee-influenced work entitled *Sur noir*. This indebtedness to Klee

6 Barcelona/Bilbao 2006, p. 80.

7 Galería NF archive, Madrid. I have been unable to confirm his participation in these last two exhibitions through other sources.

8 Galerie Maeght archive, Paris.

9 Madrid 1991, p. 19.

10 Barcelona/Bilbao 2006, p. 307.

11 *Derrière le miroir*, no. 73. Paris : Galerie Maeght, 1955.

[fig. 23] has been sufficiently acknowledged and the artist himself has talked on more than one occasion of how his predilection for Klee's output grew the more familiar he became with his work<sup>12</sup>. This point is important because it establishes that, from his earliest works, for Palazuelo geometry —he has used the word *transgeometry*<sup>13</sup>— was not only useful to him in creating compositions of pure forms in an objective, interchangeable way, but that it also generated vitalist, intuitive, subjective and irrationalist compositions saturated with a sense of magic and mystery. But in 1955 the influences at work on the artist had changed and Klee, at least the explicit Klee, was relatively distant by that time.

Presiding over the composition of *Image* is a violent diagonal almost pointing to the upper right angle of the painting. Another, less forced diagonal emerging from the base moves to meet the first one, forming between them a Mars violet arrowhead. Another, smaller, almost parallel triangle looks as if it is about to be shot from a tensed bow, helping to animate the movement of the whole thing. This circular fragment helps the diagonals to shape a centrifugal movement that is detained in its upward surge by other arrowheads pointing to the lower left angle, thus underscoring the distribution of forces performed by the curved form. But what most acts to detain this preponderant movement is the play, or dance, of three closely associated forms (which I shall talk about later in more detail) that do not quite touch each other and which take up the upper third of the canvas to create a sort of low wall or dyke. Of the three, the one furthest to the right is another descending acute triangle, which seems almost a mirror image of the one formed by the diagonals; indeed, part of it confronts the other, although another part continues on its way almost to the edge of the painting. Before reaching the farthest point, it undergoes a small torsion.

*Image* is unique, different from its contemporaries. For one thing (although in this it is not unique) the formal development affects the entire space homogeneously, shunning the emphasis given in other works from around the same time to the opposition between a formal, compact nucleus and a vacuum, in which the geometrical argument "occurs" in a space of a value different from its own: the value of a vacuum, an infinite cloister, oceanic. In *Image*, while the faceted forms break away from a basic plane, the plane itself actually loses presence in the face of the tumultuous composition; it does not come across as visually or conceptually opposed, but rather simply as a necessary platform for the forms to be seen, just as shadows need a wall to reveal themselves. And despite its tactile feel, *Image* doesn't have that naturalistic, organic quality of other works produced the same year, like *Psello*, the first three *Solitudes* or *Orange*, which may bring to mind aircapes or crystallizations of quartz or rock crystal. What gives it that tactile quality are its sumptuously warm colours, carried by some quite sensual material. *Image* is an abstract work, conceived with forms remote from nature, like Palazuelo's works between 1950 and 1953, although in this case, with all due reservations, one might suggest there is a hint of a return to Cubism, the other works partaking of a more resolved spatialist abstraction. And I say with all due reservations, because, although the agglomeration of form in *Image* seems to recall the process of facetting and fragmentation of the object (in a reverse process of genesis and accumulation), most of its forms are typical of post-war spatialism, even if many are rooted in Cubism and pre-war geometric movements. The world of Ben Nicholson (1894-1982) [fig. 10], Mortensen (1910-1993), Magnelli (1888-1971), Vassarely (1908-1997), so similar to the 1950-1953 paintings (these being perhaps more obviously cold and geometric, and slightly modified by the influence of the cosmic visions of Kandinsky (1866-1944) or of the multiple Suprematism of Malevich (1878-1935) in some works from 1953) was overwhelmed by descriptions of what might be termed the geometry of nature, of conglomerates directed by a natural growth, resembling (despite being depicted through angles and straight lines) patches of arable land, frozen or crystalline landscapes, even microscopic visions, whose likeness to some

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12 Palazuelo 1995, p. 13.

13 Ibid., p. 34.

abstract forms struck a number of art critics forcibly at the time. Indeed, in 1958, one of these paintings, *Psello*, was included in 1958 in an exhibition at the Kunsthalle, Basle, which later led to the publication of a book entitled *Kunst und Naturform. Form in Art and Nature. Art et nature*, dealing with the relationship between abstract art and scientific photography<sup>14</sup>.

Some of the features of *Image* isolate it from his contemporary paintings, partly associating it with some works from the previous year, such as *Alto*, without losing its family links with paintings produced in the same year, particularly as regards the morphology of its planes and the way the planes give mutual support or fit with each other. Perhaps what most sets it apart is the overall composition, the image of the whole, the peremptory order imposed by the whipped-up storm of diagonals; this despite the undoubtedly geometric nature of angles and arches. The point is that this painting does not convey the sensation of natural development so characteristic of other paintings produced at this time.

On the occasion of Palazuelo's first exhibition at Maeght, art critic Julien Alvard spoke of Marcel Duchamp, referring to the "sliding of vibrations [...], the same chromatic economy, the same development of forms that fly off into each other"<sup>15</sup>. In fact, *Image* can best be associated with Duchamp's older brother Jacques Villon. Palazuelo's approach encompasses many concerns that coincided with those of members of the Puteaux group that created the Section d'Or<sup>16</sup> (the name given to the divine proportion known to the Pythagoreans), and which both brothers belonged to; the group was interested in the mathematical aspects of artistic creation, as well as movement and motion, an interest that brought them close to the Futurists. Palazuelo himself talked about what he read in his early years in Paris, of "old treatises on the ancient sacred geometries and hermetic numerologies, of books on the Pythagoreans and the Neo-Platonists, studies on alchemy and Tantrism..." He continued: "All that simply made me more interested in numbers and geometry, reinforcing my conviction that geometry [...] manifests itself in the deep layers of Nature, as an expression of the number in motion, as those hermetic scholars the Pythagoreans proclaimed, and as modern electronic microscopes have at last shown us"<sup>17</sup>. The artist would also justify the dynamic element in his work, fully revealed here, not so much through movement in itself as through something more essential, consubstantial to the creation of forms, to its generative capacity, its transformation and multiplication, and as a derivation of his philosophical convictions and esoteric predilections. His interest in diagonals, which shape *Image*, would remain within him until very late in his career, finding in the phallic diagonal of *Umbra* [fig. 3] one of its clearest, purest expressions.

Palazuelo's geometric leanings at the time he painted *Image* certainly did not derive from orthogonal-oriented static Cubism, but from the Cubism that had embedded a dynamic, sometimes imperious factor in its structure, with concurrent or crossed diagonals, galvanizing curves and the constant use of acute and oblique angles, all present in the painting under discussion here. There is a rewarding comparison to be made between *Image* and a work by Jacques Villon in the Philadelphia Museum of Art entitled *Jeune femme* (1912) [fig. 4], which was shown in Paris at the famous exhibition at the Galerie La Boétie in October of that year. Starting from the fragmentation of a three-dimensional figure, Villon's painting retains the sensation of volume and the need to respect, although minimally, some characters of reality, which in fact makes it more illusionist. But if we make an effort to simplify and take one last step towards abstraction, we might well find a result very similar to *Image*. What I have just said about Palazuelo's painting applies equally to

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14 Basel 1960, p. 63; Palazuelo 1995, p. 66; Barcelona/Bilbao 2006, p. 309.

15 Julien Alvard. «Les dernières toiles de Palazuelo», *Derrière le miroir*, no. 73. Paris : Galerie Maeght, 1955.

16 Daix 1982, p. 89; Pierre 1968, pp. 191, 195 and 202.

17 Pedro del Corral. «Pablo Palazuelo : "Pintar es peligroso"», *ABC Cultural*, no. 105, 5 November 1993, p. 38.



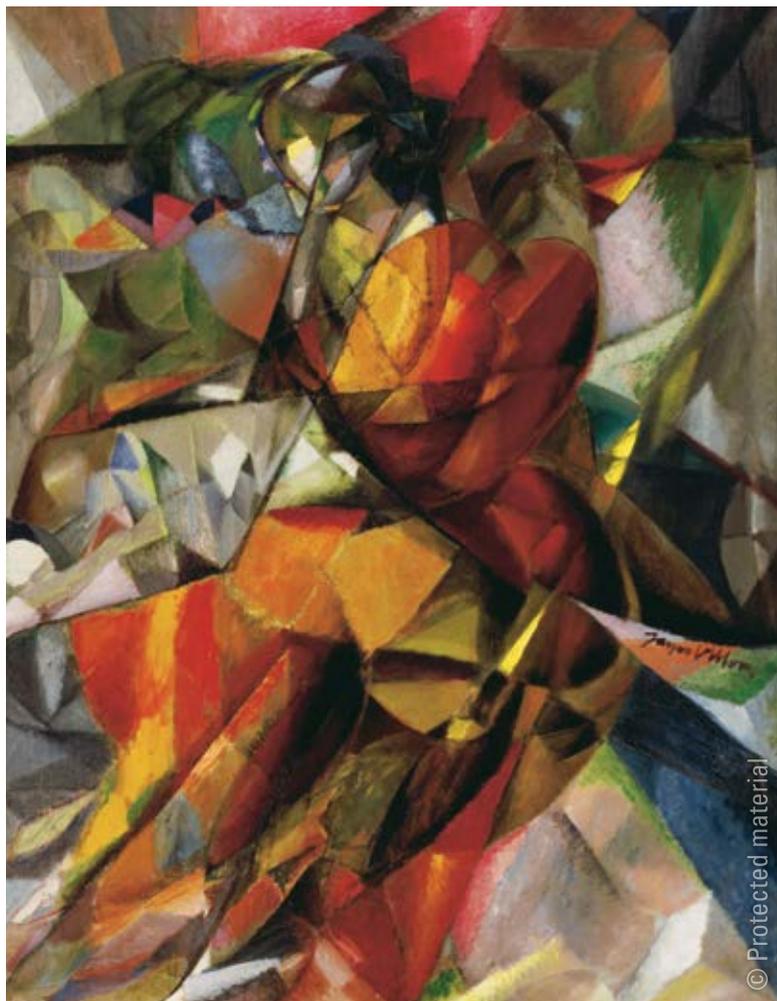
3. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Umbra*, 1972  
 Oil on canvas, 230 x 144.8 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 82/316

Villon's. Palazuelo's work is flatter and more refined, more abstract, more inorganic or "inorganized", being geometric in conception, although the compositional, formal resources are essentially the same. But with a number of other paintings by Villon (*La femme assise* (1914) or *Torse* (1919), to give just two examples), the same comparison can be made.

In an essay written for Palazuelo's 1955 exhibition entitled *Empédocle chez Palazuelo*<sup>18</sup>, writer Georges Limbour describes the artist's enthusiasm for the Agrigento-born philosopher. Limbour tells how, during a visit to Palazuelo's studio, he recited from memory a fragment of Empedocles (number 17 compiled by Simplicius) that begins: "I have to tell you of a double process: sometimes the One is formed from the Multiple; at others it divides, and from the One emerges the Multiple. Mortal things have a double birth and their destruction is also double: the reunion of all things provokes the existence and the death of one; the other grows and expands when the elements separate. And these elements never cease their continuous change"<sup>19</sup>. Then he picked out his edition of Empedocles, to whom he came after reading Hölderlin's poem *Empedocles* (in which the poet exalts the philosopher for the supposed manner of his death, throwing himself into the crater of

18 Georges Limbour. «Empédocle chez Palazuelo», *Derrière le miroir*, no. 73. Paris : Galerie Maeght, 1955.

19 Llanos 1968, p. 161.



4. Jacques Villon (1875-1963)  
*Jeune femme*, 1912  
Oil on canvas, 146.8 x 114.7 cm  
Philadelphia Museum of Art  
The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection  
Inv. no. 1950-134-190

Mt. Etna to demonstrate he was a god), and continued reading. This testimony illustrates, as do the artist's own repeated confidences, his interest in esoteric texts and writings that conveyed some philosophical thought poetically, Empedocles, associated with Parmenides and the Pythagoreans, being the last pre-Socratic philosopher to write in verse. In Empedocles' case, the idea of the cosmic cycles that lead from a unitary element encompassing all of reality, the Sphere, a likeness of the Parmenidean Being, to its disintegration in the Multiple, the equivalent of the generation of forms, must have taken root in Palazuelo's mind, together with the idea of the continuous change undergone by the formal elements, as the artist often returned to it; it is also true, however, that Empedocles is by no means the only philosophical source to find accommodation in Palazuelo's mind over the years. I will shortly show how these ideas, undoubtedly transmitted by Palazuelo, also greatly influenced the work of Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002). The fact is that the profound, mysterious, imposing lyricism Palazuelo's work gives off from that moment, when his most personal or at least his most widely disseminated style began to materialize, originated in a radiant revelation of the primitive genesis of forms, of a genuinely poetic intensity and dimension that goes far beyond the mere combination of simple geometric elements or, at the other extreme, any naturalistic reference.

There are number of things I'd like to stress about the complicated, non-linear path the artist took to arrive at this style, a style fully revealed in Madrid at the 1973 exhibition at the Galería Iolas-Velasco. The exhibition featured work largely from the 1960s that was already well known in Paris through several exhibitions



5. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Rhyme IV*, 1958  
 Oil on canvas, 41 x 81 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 98/158

held during the decade. The most obvious feature is that his forms had become more curved, more organic. Another no less important factor is the constant presence of drive, of dynamism, which introduces a sense of temporality, patent in *Image* although resolved in a different way. One always has the feeling that the forms were created on a kind of itinerary (many of the works produced between 1958 and 1961 recall pathways with cracks opening at the edges), that they come in succession, although Palazuelo himself would probably prefer to say one came “in” the other, that a form is born from the others, as if they had started on the eternal change referred to in Empedocles’ verse and the mixture, or agglomeration, had engendered the change<sup>20</sup>. A third thing is the strong sensation we get from these paintings of cosmic unity breaking up and a multiplication ordered by some powerful force taking place before our eyes. In some of them, the composition is presided over by a main form, which appears to be, in its plenitude, the last surviving witness to the lost unity and, therefore, generator of the other forms that outline and profile it. The supremacy of a form that presides matriarchally over the multiplicity of the rest was something seen previously in *Psello* [fig. 2], and relatively, but sufficiently clearly, in *Solitudes I*. The relationship begins to show itself on terms of equality in another painting at the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum, *Rhyme IV* (1958) [fig. 5], in which an essential harmony between all the formal planes is appreciable; the sense of itinerancy is not lost or stifled, but the equilibrium achieved is notable.

## Palazuelo and Chillida

After placing *Image* in relation to Palazuelo’s other paintings of the time, I would like to explain the painter’s influence on Basque art of the 1950s and 60s, perceptible in a series of aesthetic propositions appearing in *Image*. The influence is mainly noticeable in the work of Chillida, Oteiza (1908-2003) and Balerdi (1934-1992).

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 162.



6. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
 Model for "Sonorité jaune" by W. Kandinsky, 1950  
 Gouache on paper, 32 x 50 cm  
 Private collection

These three artists all produced major oeuvres, Chillida's being of an international scope greater than Palazuelo's own, but it is licit to think that his work would not have been as it was without the stimulus of the other artist. And although Palazuelo's work left its mark on other artists, his profound connection with Chillida, and the aesthetic hold the latter had on other Basque artists, gives this particular relationship especial significance.

When Eduardo Chillida arrived in Paris in 1948 he struck up a firm friendship with Palazuelo. Both lived in the Cité Universitaire and when Chillida returned to Paris in 1950, to Villaines-sous-Bois, to the north of the city, Palazuelo hired a studio close by. Then in 1951, Chillida went home to San Sebastián, settling in the nearby town of Hernani, where he set about developing his abstract work in iron. When Palazuelo discovered Chillida's work of three years, in 1954, he networked to ensure the Galería Clan in Madrid staged Chillida's first individual exhibition<sup>21</sup>. Palazuelo said that when he met Chillida in Paris, he had been painting for years, while "Chillida had just started, not long before coming to Paris, to model figures." And he claimed to have played a major role, subsequently acknowledged by Chillida, in steering him towards abstraction, often through long smouldering discussions that occasionally flared angrily<sup>22</sup>. In the three years from 1948 to 1950 Chillida's catalogue includes eleven sculptures<sup>23</sup>, all of them figurative, with very simplified forms, revealing the acknowledged influence of archaic Greek art<sup>24</sup>. All except one: *Metamorphosis* (1949), it seems to me, may justly be considered an abstract work. In any case, the abstract work in iron, which was to mark the beginning of an original oeuvre in continuity, would really begin in 1951 with *Ilarik*.

21 Esteban 1971, p. 183.

22 San Sebastián 1992, p. 455; Ugarte 1995, p. 37; Palazuelo 1995, pp. 22 and 23.

23 Esteban 1971, p. 201.

24 Ugalde 1975, p. 68.

By then, largely inspired by Paul Klee, Palazuelo had produced some very elaborate geometric constructions noticeable for the dynamism in the composition, the use of straight but vibrant lines, in relation to the closed forms—as precursors of the cracks or grooves that would soon appear, in more organic work—and the profusion of acute angles. In 1950, Palazuelo was fully immersed in geometric abstraction, or spatialism.

Chillida's first two abstract sculptures, *Ilarik* in iron and *Relief* in lead, both from 1951, are two constructive, geometric works, despite the singular presence of the hammered material and of the imperfection of the edges. But it wouldn't be until *Comb of the winds I* [fig. 7], prepared between 1952 and 1953, that he would produce something that, in its movement and morphology, could really approximate to Palazuelo's artworks, particularly such pieces as *Model for "Sonorité jaune" by W. Kandinsky* (1950) [fig. 6]. In a collage corresponding to a Chillida sculpture, *Untitled (Study for Comb of the winds I)* (1952) [fig. 8] I see a simplification of Palazuelo's gouache. But again, in any case, here Chillida's work was fully immersed in spatialism. As it was, with clear reminiscences, in the iron doors [fig. 9] he made for the Arantzazu basilica in Gipuzkoa, and in some other sculptures, such as *From Within* (1953), which was shown in the Denise René gallery in Paris, shrine of cold or geometric abstraction, in December 1954-January 1955 in the *Premier Salon de la Sculpture Abstraite*<sup>25</sup>.

Although the doors for Arantzazu are very closely linked to the work of Ben Nicholson [fig. 10], particularly in the use of the circle in the rectangular forms, the refined design, with long forms and a kind of fuzzy orthogonality, which produce a continuous sensation of movement, of instability, of transit, are not too far from Palazuelo's understanding of geometry. It's hard to tell if at this or any other moment there were direct influences from other works, and how such influences might have occurred, although it is true that Chillida travelled regularly to Paris from Hernani<sup>26</sup>, making it more than likely that he knew what Palazuelo was doing. In any case, works such as *Comb of the Winds I* and the doors of the basilica of Arantzazu made a huge impression on several other Basque artists then close to Chillida, including Oteiza and, later on, Balerdi. Oteiza worked on the Arantzazu project from the early 1950s, and Balerdi was a regular visitor to the church site and accompanying decoration. We need to remember that at that time both were figurative artists, and that pretty soon they started to produce abstract geometric works linked to Chillida and Palazuelo or at least stimulated by them. Although the doors had an undoubted, though short and very specific influence on Balerdi, Palazuelo's influence was more persistent.

The first sculpture in which Chillida followed a procedure completely his own, one that would facilitate some of his best works and which evidences one of the cornerstones of his artistic philosophy, was *Irons of Tremor I* (1955). Here he cut into and twisted several sheets of iron, which he then heated to fuse, achieving an apparent intimate continuity of the material over its entire length, as if it were a single sheet that had evolved in space with what we might call calligraphic inspiration. The temporal development I have mentioned in the paintings and drawings of Palazuelo has been transmitted to the sculpture produced by Chillida, which mimics the way some forms, separated by lines or grooves, open up to others, as if an initially continuous plane had crackled, had been represented on paper or on canvas, and then taken into a third dimension as unfoldings with tears and torsions in the iron. All this is achieved at a similar rhythm, although rather more tortured in the sculptor's work—there's a certain torment in Chillida's revelations that is lacking in Palazuelo, more aristocratically distant and sensual—and the same awareness of original unity. Some of these aspects are already present in works by Palazuelo from 1954, such as the gouache

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25 Bordier 1954; Ugalde 1975, p. 97; Las Palmas de Gran Canaria 2001, p. 404.

26 San Sebastián 1992, p. 458.



7. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)  
*Comb of the Wind I*, 1952-1953  
 Iron, 81 x 47 x 62 cm  
 Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid  
 Reg. no. AS04703



8. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)  
*Untitled (Study for Comb of the Wind I)*, 1952  
 Collage, 28 x 38 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Deposit, Carreras Múgica Gallery, Bilbao  
 Dep. 2456



9. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)  
*Doors*, 1954  
 Iron. 3 double sheets, 237 x 211 cm (each one)  
 Arantzazu Basilica, Gipuzkoa



10. Ben Nicholson (1894-1982)  
*1945 (two circles)*, 1945  
 Oil and pencil on panel, 48 x 45.5 cm  
 The Pier Arts Centre Collection, Orkney, United Kingdom



11. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Blue*, 1955  
 Gouache on paper, 30 x 49 cm  
 Private collection, Madrid

*Study for "Sonorité jaune" by W. Kandinsky*, the oil painting *Alto*; another gouache, *Untitled*, linked to the painting; and a drawing entitled *Corola* dated 1954-1955. But a gouache from 1955, *Blue* [fig. 11] is quite revealing. It's not just that the overall development resembles a sketch for a Chillida sculpture; there are also some odd coincidences in some quite unusual elements, like the long thin mast pointing to the void almost at the centre of the composition which is echoed by the sort of plough handle in *Irons of Tremor II* (1956) [fig. 12], which was in Chillida's first exhibition at the Maeght in Paris in 1957 (now in the Bilbao Fine Arts Museum) and which recurs in a number of other sculptures from this decade. This feature is also to be found in Palazuelo's 1956 gouache *Les nuits et les levants de l'aurore (Saint-Jean-de-la-Croix)* [fig. 13] and the upper part of *Image* [fig. 14]. Although lacking this sort of indicator of cosmic solitude or of the infinite, *Ikarandi* [fig. 16], from 1957, perhaps Chillida's masterpiece from this phase of his career, best re-enacts in three dimensions a development that seems to grow from a central generating form, a hexagon in this case.

However, much of Chillida's work in those years was based on a sort of spatial calligraphy, a fine, continual gestural corpus having less to do with geometry than with informalism, an antagonistic art movement, one of whose most widespread forms of expression was the gestural flourish obtained quickly or "one-off" (a quality which, in Chillida's case, would only be applicable to the drawings), and often based on the artist's own calligraphic activity, or inspired by the sort of coded calligraphies typical of the Far East. He actually called one of these 1957 sculptures *Gesture*. But, beside these linear, irregular sculptures, Chillida produced others based on more voluminous trunks or sheets of iron of a certain thickness, that could come to acquire a more constructive aspect, being the ones that are closest to Palazuelo's work: I refer to *Ikarandi* and *Irons of Tremor III*, also from 1957. The sense of continuity, however, was common to all of them. One might add



12. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)  
*Irons of Tremor II*, 1956  
Iron, 28.5 x 63 x 25 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 03/44



13. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Les nuits et les levants de l'aurore (Saint-Jean-de-la-Croix)*, 1956  
Ink on paper, 77 x 106.5 cm  
Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght, Saint-Paul, France



14. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Image*, 1955  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Detail



15. Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003)  
*Homage to the 4th International (Homage to Tatlin)*, 1958  
 Coppered steel, 36 x 39 x 23 cm  
 Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza Fundazio Museoa, Alzuza, Navarre

that although cold or geometric abstraction and warm or expressionist abstraction—including the different expressions of informalism— can accommodate an ideal theoretical definition, very few artists became an unequivocal part of either, with many debating between the two options.

Almost from the very beginning of his oeuvre, we find a special sensibility in Palazuelo to the adjacentness of forms, to the limits between them and of forms with the edge of the canvas; it can best be described as an extreme modesty about actually touching each other or invading the other's territory, a modesty that gives the works an oddly erotic motif. Chillida inherited it, so much so that his poetical hypersensitivity to limits crops up in some of his titles, as in *Rumour of Limits* or *Of the Edge*, and is certainly a factor in the mutual closing-in of the tentacles of his sculptures as they strain towards an impossible contact. In discussing *Image I* I have described the play made by three forms in the upper third of the painting's surface [fig. 14], the approach to which is an example of the expressive tension created by the phallic appendices' intangibility. They are also elements similar to the indicators of infinity we saw in works such as *Blue* [fig. 11] and some of Chillida's works. Taken together, they can't help but remind us of the way Oteiza shaped the void in some of his metaphysical boxes [fig. 15]. Palazuelo's composition can be taken as a projection into their plane. Asked about his connections with Oteiza's boxes, Palazuelo replied: "Some people say they've got something to do with me. And yet I've never thought directly about Oteiza's work"<sup>27</sup>. Most likely he was referring to his sculptures, and in the answer he hints at a possible influence of Oteiza on him. This has nothing to do with the much earlier issue at hand, as, except for one executed in 1954, Palazuelo's sculptures were not displayed to the public eye until 1977, although he had actually been working on them for the previous ten years<sup>28</sup>.

27 Palazuelo 1995, p. 23.

28 Barcelona/Bilbao 2006, p. 311.



16. Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)  
*Ikaraundi*, 1957  
 Iron, 32 x 68 x 150 cm  
 Private collection, Paris

## Palazuelo and Oteiza

Born in Orío, not far from San Sebastián, Jorge Oteiza began to make a name for himself in the early thirties, although in 1935 he left for South America, and he was more or less lost to European art until his return in 1948<sup>29</sup>. In 1950 he won the competition to provide the sculptures for the basilica in Arantzazu, Gipuzkoa, being built at the time. For the project he produced a Henry Moore-style figurative sculpture for the façade above the doors Chillida had been commissioned to make<sup>30</sup>. But suddenly, in 1955, he began to work on an abstract, constructive geometric work, which he continued to 1958, the year he decided he had reached the ultimate conclusion in his development of sculpture —not just his, but of sculpture in general— and announced that he was giving up his visual and artistic explorations, although he did in fact continue to produce pieces.

In principle, there is no very clear direct relationship between Palazuelo and Oteiza. But there are similarities, as we have just seen. There's a sort of family likeness, beyond the spirit of the times, about some of the directions both artists took. If, for instance, we put *Rhyme IV* [fig. 5] and *Vacuums in a chain* (1958) [fig. 17] side by side, the latter one of the few works by Oteiza where we can talk of temporal development, we will find common interests. A formal coincidence could only be established in Palazuelo's more purely geometric works, as Oteiza's world is strictly geometric, with straight or curved lines far removed from things organic or any other naturalistic deviation, constructed in a succinct material, embodying only spatial ideas. But there are similarities. The planes of many of the void boxes or the facets of many of Oteiza's black stones can be found

29 Madrid/Bilbao/Barcelona 1988, p. 279.

30 Viar 1989; Bilbao/San Sebastián 1993, vol. I, pp. 61 and 63.



17. Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003)  
*A Series of Empty Spaces*, 1958  
 Steel and marble, 41 x 115 x 37 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 82/314

in Palazuelo's early paintings, from 1950 and 1951. This doesn't mean to say that Oteiza necessarily knew Palazuelo's work, which he might have done, although from 1954 he was certainly familiar with Chillida's doors for Arantzazu, which featured such forms. But if we observe the profile of the vacuums or voids, of the visual galleries that Oteiza's more complex boxes provide, we find something similar to the design of some of Palazuelo's more rectilinear limits [figs. 18, 19 and 20].

Even so, the rather more considerable relationship between Palazuelo and Oteiza is channelled through Chillida. One might say that it was Palazuelo who led Chillida to abstraction, and specifically geometric abstraction. Palazuelo it was who conveyed a particular way of understanding the generation of forms that deeply moved the sculptor. To this understanding Chillida added a profound intuition for matter and material, an intuition that was decisive in the development of his sculpture. But the spatialist, geometric or para-geometric Chillida of the early sculptures, and recurrently in later works, conveyed geometric abstraction to Oteiza, at least in the emptied metal works, through his doors at Arantzazu and in sculptures such as *Comb of the Winds I* and others. But, curiously, it might not have happened that way at all. Oteiza could perfectly well have accessed spatialism directly through the work of any of its great names, such as Ben Nicholson, as he became interested in the circle inscribed in a square, and actually produced public sculptures with such motifs: his *Homage to Father Donosti* (1957), and *Homage to Father Donosti in Relief* (1959) [fig. 21], in the Banco Guipuzcoano in San Sebastián, and other solid sculptures in which the circular boreholes establish a similar visual play. Oteiza knew Nicholson's work, as the latter had been working with such resources since the 1930s, and actually argued in favour of it at the 1958 Sao Paulo Biennial, at which Oteiza was an award winner<sup>31</sup>. It is also highly probable that he was aware of Danish sculptor Robert Jacobsen's (1912-1993)

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31 Alzuza (Navarra) 2007, p. 55.



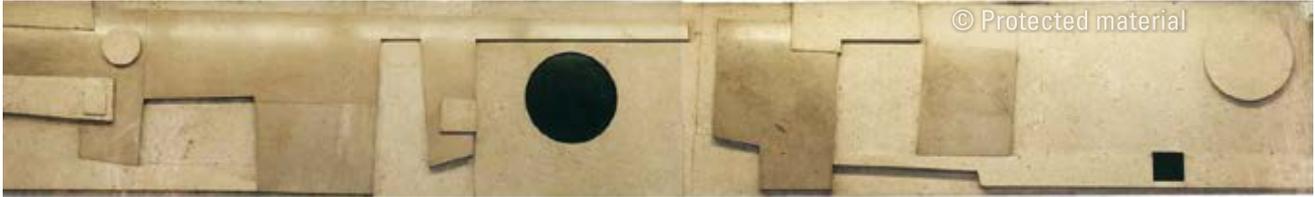
18. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Smara V*, 1970  
Oil on canvas, 105 x 76 cm  
Private collection, Paris



19. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Derrière le miroir, no. 184*, March 1970



20. Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003)  
*Portrait of Armed Basque Soldier called Odiseo*  
(*Variation on Homage to Mallarmé, 1958*), 1975  
Steel, 44.5 x 50.5 x 53.8 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 82/313



21. Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003)  
*Relief Homage to Father Donosti*, 1959  
 Stone, 140 x 900 cm  
 Banco Guipuzcoano, Donostia-San Sebastián

spatial boxes, on display at Denise René since his arrival in Paris in 1947. But sheer proximity—in the work at Arantzazu— would seem to have been a more powerful contact than most others, particularly perhaps as a catalyst. Part of the sequence of works Oteiza produced in 1957 was such a close, one-by-one derivation of sculptures Chillida had made a few years previously that the origin of the influence hardly seems open to doubt. Above all, coming as it does at the beginning of the experiments with the empty or voided boxes, one should underscore the indebtedness of works such as *Void Construction with Three Positive-Negative Units* and *Void Construction with Four Flat, Positive-Negative Units* [fig. 22], both from 1957, to *Comb of the Winds I*<sup>32</sup>.

## Palazuelo and Balerdi

Born, like Chillida, in San Sebastián, the painter Rafael Balerdi met the former in 1955, and the two became firm friends almost immediately. This friendship was decisive in Balerdi's move towards abstraction. Balerdi went to Paris for the first time in October 1956, and probably met Palazuelo through Chillida, gaining access to his studio soon after arriving<sup>33</sup>. That Palazuelo was a major reference for Balerdi's own oeuvre is clear as much from his conversations as from his works, and from their friendship in Madrid in the 1960s; however, although Palazuelo returned to the Spanish capital in 1963, he did not settle there definitively until 1969<sup>34</sup>. Balerdi in the meantime lived in Madrid from 1962 to 1973<sup>35</sup>. But the fact is that Palazuelo's painting could well have influenced Balerdi's from late 1956. However that might be, Balerdi had already experimented with the clearest geometric abstraction in a number of murals he painted for the Universidad Laboral in Tarragona [fig. 23] in the summer of 1956, before leaving for Paris. The murals seem to have taken their inspiration from Chillida's doors for the Arantzazu basilica, possibly the only spatialist work he knew outside of books at the time, as it is most unlikely that he would have seen anything similar in Madrid, where he lived for some months in 1955 and 1956<sup>36</sup>. But Paul Klee also had a big influence on Balerdi when the latter was coming to

32 Viar 1989, pp. 306-307. The sequence of corresponding sculptures I refer to, with Oteiza's work named first, is: *Void construction with four flat positive-negative units* (1957) with *Comb of the winds I* (1952-1953); *Phase prior to the de-occupation of the sphere*, *Dynamic conjunction of two pairs of lightweight curved elements* and *From the series of the de-occupation of the sphere* (the three from 1957) with *Music of the spheres I*, *Music of the spheres II* (both from 1953), *Three I* (1952) or *Music of the constellations* (1954); *Nucleus contracting* (1957) with *Katezale* (1956). Note 2 of this essay quotes the authors who might be considered Oteiza's precursors and refers to Kosme María de Barañano's interesting article: «Oteiza, escultor (y 3)», *El Correo Español-El Pueblo Vasco*, Bilbao, 19 July 1988.

33 Bilbao/San Sebastián 1993, vol. I, pp. 145 and 151. The suggestion that Balerdi might have met Palazuelo in Paris in 1956 or in the immediately following years contradicts what I said in an essay of mine on Balerdi, which I based on talks with artist. Now I'm more inclined to think that, on this point at least, Balerdi's memory was playing him false, as it did so often. Bearing in mind Chillida was friends with both, it really is most unlikely that Balerdi did not visit Palazuelo while in Paris.

34 Barcelona/Bilbao 2006, p. 310.

35 Bilbao/San Sebastián 1993, vol. I, p. 265 and ff.

36 *Ibid.*, pp. 139 and 143.



22. Jorge Oteiza (1908-2003)  
*Empty Construction with Four Flat Units, Positive-Negative*, 1957  
 Iron, 31.5 x 45.5 x 29.5 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Deposit by the Basque Government  
 Dep. 141

grips with abstraction. Two surviving paintings from around 1956 and a number of drawings bear witness to this. One of them, *Obscure Geometry I* [fig. 26], actually looks a lot like a Palazuelo painting, *Composition Abstraite* [fig. 25], 1950, in the way it amplifies and simplifies Klee's architectural representations [fig. 24]<sup>37</sup>.

A series of similar paintings Balerdi produced between 1956 and 1958, using a dark palette basically comprising earthy colours, inspired in Goya's black paintings<sup>38</sup>, have features too close to Palazuelo's paintings for them not to be taken into account, despite the diffusion of forms and the chiaroscuros, very much in line with lyric abstraction. The bodies in these paintings depicted as points of crystal or polygons, together with the hidden fragmentation of the basic plane, although a long way from profiled drawing, recall the works of Palazuelo we have already seen. One of them, *Dense*, was included in the 1958 Pittsburgh Museum Carnegie Institute art exhibition<sup>39</sup>, the one where Palazuelo's *Mandala* won an award. Apart from a number of other angular forms, a hexagon presides over the composition of Balerdi's *Essential Earth* (c. 1957-1958) [fig. 27], rather like the hexagon in Chillida's *Ikaraundi*, with a small embedded form similar to *Psello* [fig. 2] and *Solitudes I*. Curiously, Balerdi called a painting from around 1957 *Alborada (Aubade)*, a title used by Palazuelo for a 1952 painting, although this may be a coincidence brought about by the lyrical effusions of the time. The colours used in these paintings by Balerdi, which I have linked to Goya, are also similar to Palazuelo's palette, as is the thick, pasty way the paint is applied, with no very clearly drawn frontiers being established (although certainly lighter in Palazuelo).

37 Ibid., pp. 109 and 115.

38 Ibid., p. 163.

39 Ibid., p. 149.



23. Rafael Balerdi (1934-1992)  
*Tarragona II*, 1956  
Industrial paint on wall, 138 x 364 cm  
Old Universidad Laboral, Tarragona

For some time after, Palazuelo-style motifs recurred constantly in Balerdi's paintings. Although Balerdi became infatuated with gestural informalism in 1960, over the next fifteen years he worked on a formalist, crystallized body of painting full of organic forms, in which orderings similar to the ones Palazuelo had developed (labyrinthine agglomerations of amoeba-like elements and sinuous lines) frequently appeared from the early sixties on [figs. 28 and 29]. Phallic forms crop up again and again, sometimes penetrating in interstices, in the work of both artists [figs. 30 and 31]. Balerdi also has his own way of pointing up limits. And there are some intimate, rarely seen drawings of his, difficult to date accurately but which I judge to be from the late 1950s, which bear witness to the long shadow Palazuelo cast over the younger artist's work [figs. 32 and 33]. Even so, it is true that it would be virtually impossible to find two more contrary spirits than the ones we intuit from the oeuvres of Balerdi and Palazuelo: Palazuelo, essential, ultimately rooted in the sign; Balerdi, Monet's heir, subjugated by appearances. The coincidence of some artistic resources in both painters is, however, quite evident.

## Conclusion

I think it was well worthwhile to point out the links between these four artists, largely because their work marked Basque and Spanish art indelibly in the nineteen-fifties and sixties. Friends whose friendships went through the inevitable rough passages, at certain times they influenced each other quite forcefully. They were chosen to take part in similar international art festivals, some winning the highest awards. All of them received support from the leading Spanish art collector of the age, the Navarra-born, Madrid-based industrialist Juan Huarte, and his brothers, who, among other cultural initiatives, sponsored the journal *Nueva Forma* (New Form)<sup>40</sup>, the place to look to for anyone interested in finding out more about the work of all four, particularly through the essays of the journal's directors, architect Juan Daniel Fullaondo and art critic Santiago Amón. All four sought to shroud their oeuvre in philosophical speculation, something that reinforced the essentialist quality of their creations. For a few short years, the influences, coincidences and development of ideas were continuous. Besides, a certain spirit of the age facilitated the immediate understanding and

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., pp. 143 and 145.



24. Paul Klee (1879-1940)  
*Architektur mit der roten Fahne*, 1915  
 Watercolour and oil on chalk background, 31.5 x 26.3 cm  
 Zentrum Paul Klee, Bern  
 Livia Klee Donation



25. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Composition abstraite*, 1950  
 Oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm  
 Musée national d'art moderne-Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris



26. Rafael Balerdi (1934-1992)  
*Dark Geometric I*, c. 1956  
 Oil on canvas, 89 x 114 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 04/20



27. Rafael Balerdi (1934-1992)  
*Land Alive*  
 Oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm  
 Private collection, San Sebastián



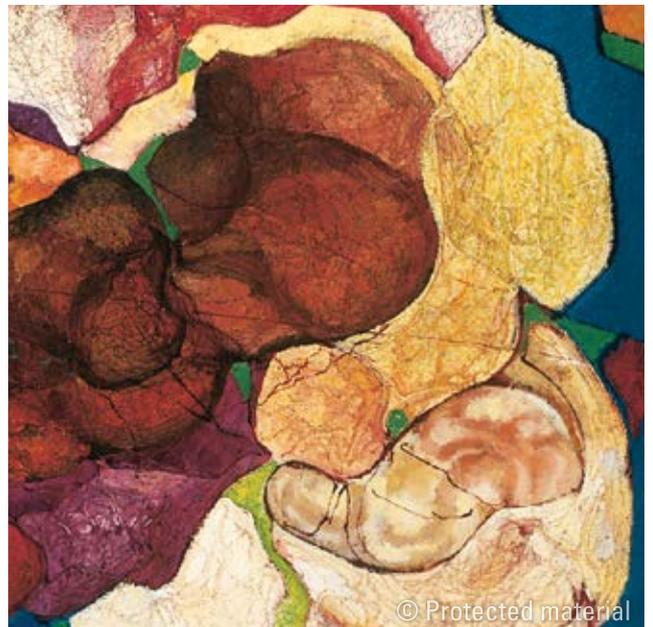
28. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Untitled*, 1959  
 Gouache on paper, 78 x 58 cm  
 Private collection, Madrid



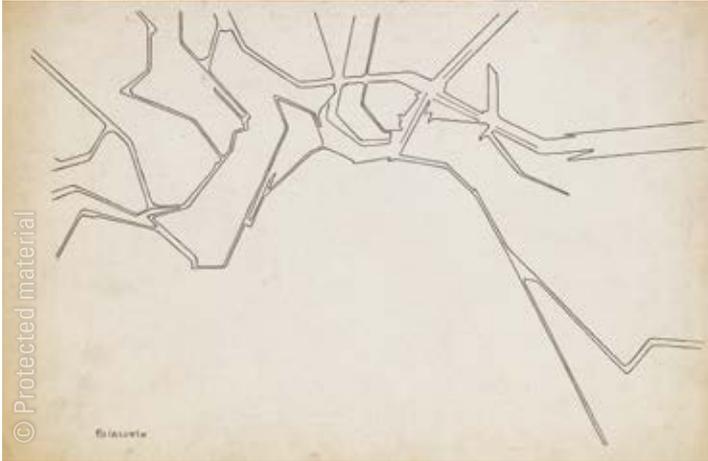
29. Rafael Balerdi (1934-1992)  
*The Giants*, 1972  
 Oil on canvas, 130 x 195 cm  
 Private collection, Madrid



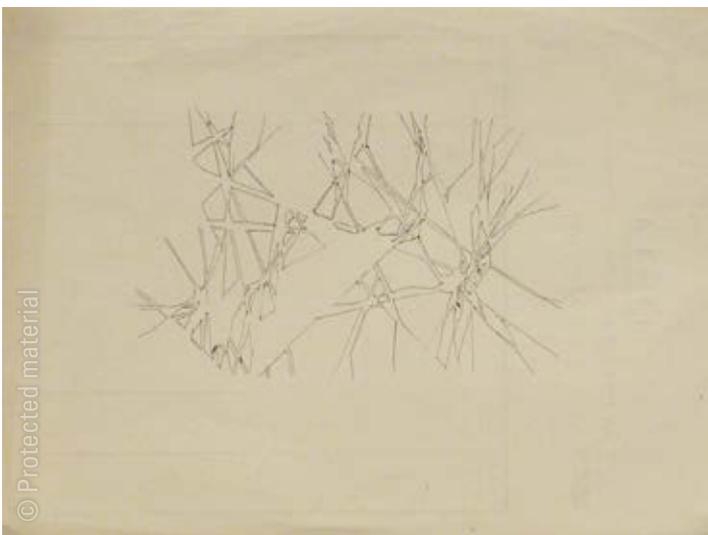
30. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Omphale II*, 1962  
 Oil on canvas, 277 x 207 cm  
 Fondation Marguerite et Aimé Maeght, Saint-Paul, France  
 Detail



31. Rafael Balerdi (1934-1992)  
*Venice*, 1964-1972  
 Oil on canvas, 130 x 195 cm  
 Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
 Inv. no. 07/408  
 Detail



32. Pablo Palazuelo (1915-2007)  
*Untitled*, 1954  
Ink on paper, 31 x 47 cm  
Collection Sylvie Baltazart-Eon, Paris



33. Rafael Balerdi (1934-1992)  
*Untitled*  
Ballpoint pen on paper, 21.2 x 27.6 cm  
Bilbao Fine Arts Museum  
Inv. no. 08/61

assimilation of the latest discoveries and developments. 1948 was a key year for three of these artists. By then fully at home with abstraction, Palazuelo upped sticks and took himself off to Paris. Chillida dated his earliest, figurative sculptures in that year. Oteiza returned from Argentina after thirteen years in Latin America, and his art career took on new life. Relations between them became more complex and interesting in the fifties, a time of profound influences. After 1958, only Balerdi, the youngest of the four, found stimulus in what Palazuelo was doing, although the influence no longer touched the core, the roots of his style. With his late interest in the systematic creation of sculpture, Palazuelo himself recovered connections with Chillida and Oteiza. But by then the fertile exchange of ideas and the radical transformations of style were things of the past.

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