

BLACKGALLERY

María FREIRE

1917 - 2015
Montevideo, Uruguay

A pioneer in geometric abstraction in painting and sculpture, is a reference in Latin American concrete art. Her work, extensive and rich as her career, surprises with the research she carried out, developing her own language of abstract figures. Her disruptive work, her indomitable character, and her active presence in the delivery of knowledge – as critic and teacher – made her transcend, through a unique and key creation to understand the ways in which the birth of contemporary art in her country and the region was prepared.

María Freire received her education at the Círculo de Bellas Artes and the Universidad del Trabajo, both in Montevideo (1938-1943). She was first influenced by African and Oceania sculpture, which fueled her interest in the formal and plastic possibilities of tribal artistic expressions. Towards the end of the 1940s, she created a series of bronze heads reduced to their geometric structure. At the beginning of the following decade, she decided to focus exclusively on abstract art. She continued developing her three-dimensional work, producing metallic sculptures of simple, suggestive forms, often extending from the folding of a single bar.

In 1952, Freire founded, with her companion José Pedro Costigliolo, the group *Arte No Figurativo*. It promoted aesthetics similar to those championed by contemporary Argentine and Brazilian groups, but *Arte No Figurativo* avoided their political posturing and belligerent attitude. Flat backgrounds characterized her paintings from the mid-1950s, on which she constructed pictorial spaces with delicate geometric forms and diagonal lines that frequently evoked earlier sculptural works.

Freire moved to Europe with Costigliolo in 1957 traveling there for two years. They visited museums and met with the main exponents of geometric abstraction. She was particularly impressed by the crafts of the Middle Ages and, in 1958, she made a series of paintings inspired by medieval keys and locks in which the palette, already reduced in previous works, became almost monochromatic. Freire showed these works at the *Galerie Les Contemporains* (Brussels, 1959). Interestingly, the public interpreted the series of works as symbolic creations with pre-Columbian roots, which is why the artist entitled it, ironically, *Sud America*.

In 1960, she returned to Montevideo, and during the first half of the decade, Freire practiced abstract painting. She also returned to sculpture, modeling with mud the forms of the series *Sud America*. The works of this period had a certain freedom of expression and emotion that was unusual in her other work.

In the middle of the decade, Freire returned to painting and produced the series *Capricornio* and *Minotauro*. These evolved in a way like sequels to *Sud America*, but this time the

symbolic forms, which, like the previous ones, were organized in bands deprived of any meaning, showed great dynamism on flat backgrounds that were not always monochromatic. This evolution continued in the early 1970s with *Córdoba*, characterized by Freire's return to rigidity, and *Variantes*, a series in which the color became the most important element.

This irruption of color replaced the sign as the fundamental element in her work and gave rise to chromatic compositions in sequences of modulation, very much like Op Art. These were the *Vibrantes*, which kept her busy for the rest of the 1970s, and the *Radiantes*, which she made in the following decade.

Since the end of the 1980s following the death of Costigliolo in 1985, Freire has dedicated herself to revisit her own works from the series inspired by keys and locks, with titles like *América del Sur*, *El oro de los tigres*, and *Última serie*. Despite the reference to works from the past, she continued experimenting with color, form, and movement.

She participated in the San Pablo Biennial of 1953 and 1957 where she won the Honor Prize and at the Venice Biennale in 1966. In 1996 she was awarded the Figari Prize for her career. Her work integrates the permanent collections, among others, of the MoMA in New York City, the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid, the MALBA in Buenos Aires, the National Museum of Visual Arts in Uruguay as well as in private collections in the world.

"I did not choose abstraction; abstraction chose me because I am a person of the 20th century."

"If there is someone who believes in the universality of art, it is me."

"I don't believe in mediocre and folkloric nationalisms. I believe that man is a universal being in his thought and in all his actions."

"We were part of a South American movement; we were all united by the same ideal: to take art to a plane of absolute abstraction. I became totally independent from the visual point of view of nature and kept the expression that I can find inside my mind, my spirit, a world as rich as the outside, but full of unprecedented possibilities."

"Art above all is structure, it always has an order, a composition, which must be moved on a plane. And in that plane a communication is established between the linear and the plane and that communication forms the space. And the space is filled with color. And color is so important, it is the essence of art, the same work done in one color or another with the same structure, has a different expressiveness. Because, as Delaunay said, "color is the soul of the painting."

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