

MARÍA FREIRE: SU OBRA EN EL CONTEXTO DEL ARTE ABSTRACTO- GEOMETRICO RIOPLATENSE Y BRASILEÑO CON REFERENTES EUROPEOS (1950-1980)

Gabriel Peluffo Linari on María Freire

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Abstract-concrete art in the Río de la Plata region was nourished by contributions from Europe, particularly through publications, artists, and intellectuals who had arrived on South American coasts during the lead-up to World War II. At the same time, this movement found its initial controversial impulse in the artist and theorist Joaquín

Torres García, whose discourse implied a critical reconsideration of European avant-gardes by artists "from the South," and therefore lent support to the traction these avant-gardes were gaining in the early 1940s.

Since 1938, Torres García had drawn attention to the works of Amédée Ozenfant, Jean Arp, Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, and others in the Argentine newspaper *La Nación*, while on both shores of Río de la Plata publications were arriving that revisited the recent history of modernity in European art. However, the specific group of concrete artists that had been meeting in Buenos Aires since 1944—mainly composed of Argentine and Uruguayan artists¹—had, from its conception, a contentious relationship (rife with both attraction and repulsion) with Torres García's school. Among the Uruguayan members there were some who were briefly associated with Torres García's school, like Carmelo Arden Quin and Carlos María "Rhod" Rothfuss—but the newer group from Río de la Plata intended to move beyond that line of thinking, evading links to figurative schemes or to the esotericism of philosophical/religious theories.



Fig. 1. María Freire, *Máscara* (Mask), ca. 1938. Glazed pottery, 10 x 5 x 4 1/2 in. (25 x 13 x 11 cm). ISLAA Library and Archives

Fig. 1. María Freire, *Máscara*, ca. 1938. Cerámica esmaltada, 10 x 5 x 4 1/2 in. (25 x 13 x 11 cm). Biblioteca y Archivo de ISLAA

Fig. 2. María Freire, *Máscara roja* (Red Mask), ca. 1948-50. Plaster, 10 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 3 1/2 in. (26 x 11 x 9 cm). ISLAA Library and Archives

Fig. 2. María Freire, *Máscara roja*, ca. 1948-50. Yeso, 10 1/4 x 4 1/4 x 3 1/2 in. (26 x 11 x 9 cm). Biblioteca y Archivo de ISLAA

Fig. 3. The first non-figurative exhibition, 1946. ISLAA Library and Archives

Fig. 3. Primera exposición de arte no figurativo, 1946. ISLAA Library and Archives

Tomás Maldonado, who founded the Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción of Buenos Aires in 1946, wrote a manifesto titled "Torres García against Modern Art," in which he said, among other things: "In Torres García's doctrine, the word 'Universal' reeks of medieval scholasticism... Torres García is incapable of appreciating the profound and emotional sense that throbs in a white, washable surface painted with lacquer..."² This concretism

was thus born wedded to the cult of forms that come from industry and opposed to all sentimental or metaphysical biases in art.

Invention, pure perception, and structure are three conceptual axes on which concrete art from Río de la Plata was based in 1950. The group became known through the magazine *Arturo*, and in 1944 Rothfuss published "The Frame: A Central Problem of Contemporary Visual Art,"³ where he stated that the rectangular frame was a bad habit from the Renaissance and proposed instead a painting-object whose irregular edges result from the expansive forces that struggle within the internal structure of each piece.

Even when European avant-gardes were indisputably and visually seductive to artists from Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, the adoption of those ideas and formal proposals was not understood as mere mimesis; rather, those methodologies were seen as instruments of language that were able to react to things that were happening locally.

The concrete-inventionist artists from *Arturo* magazine (which, again, divided into two groups in 1946: Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención and Movimiento Madí) carried with them a progressivist optimism inspired by the strengthening of Argentina's industrial infrastructure and by the fantasies promised by global technological development during the postwar period, within both the capitalist and socialist systems.⁴ Also in Brazil, particularly in São Paulo, there was a similar optimism regarding the new horizons of industrial growth that Uruguay played a small part in, especially with the development of the country's manufacturing industry, which resulted from import substitutions due to World War II.

Beyond this context, which enabled local artists to expand their visual sense to include a geometric-rationalism, there was indeed an influx of information about the avant-garde coming from foreign publications. In the case of Argentina, this knowledge also came from contact with transatlantic exiles such as German photographer Grete Stern, who brought her own experiences with the Bauhaus, or Austrian psychoanalyst Marie Langer, whose work accompanied that of social psychologist Enrique Pichon-Rivière, both cofounders of Argentina's school of psychoanalysis.

The core of the concrete art movement, which had started to hold meetings in Buenos Aires, convened frequently at Pichon-Rivière's home.⁵ There they discussed the psychic aspects of artistic production, which led them to consider Surrealism⁶ and to reformulate the idea of rationality in the legacy of avant-gardes. The group also became interested in the field of design, due to their proximity to Stern and her photographic practice.

In Rio de Janeiro, first-wave geometric artists, like Almir Mavignier and Ivan Serpa, worked from 1946 to 1948 in the program "Arte y Terapia" at the Centro Psiquiátrico Nacional Pedro II, coordinated by Dr. Nise Da Silveira and heavily influenced by French psychiatrist Henri Wallon. Moreover, Serpa, cofounder of the concrete art group Frente, had also

worked in a similar vein on a painting course for children at the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro (MAM). Based on these experiences, Pernambucan art critic and essayist Mário Pedrosa, ideologist of the group, published his 1949 thesis, "On the Affective Nature of Shape in the Work of Art." Abstract-concretism from Rio de Janeiro thus emerged committed to the emotional dimension of subjectivity in the conflictual framework of modernity, which highlighted its uniqueness in comparison to the strict rationalism of concrete art in São Paulo.

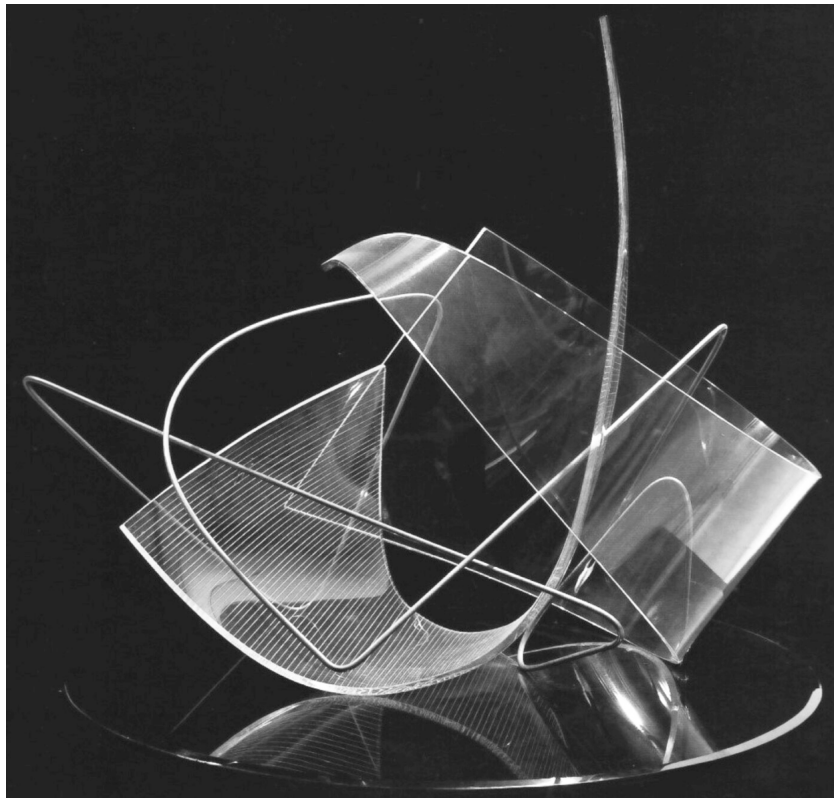


Fig. 7. Maria Freire, *Untitled*, ca. 1953. Acrylic and bronze, h: approx. 29 1/2 in. (75 cm). Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 7. Maria Freire, *Sin título*, ca. 1953. Acrílico y bronce, a: apróx. 29 1/2 in. (75 cm). Herederos de Maria Freire



Fig. 8. Maria Freire, *Transformable*, ca. 1952-53. Poly wood, variable dimensions. Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 8. Maria Freire, *Transformable*, ca. 1952-53. Madera polioromada, dimensiones variables. Herederos de Maria Freire

IN URUGUAY, FREIRE BEGAN HER
FIRST INVESTIGATIONS INTO
ABSTRACT ART WHILE DIRECTING A

WORKSHOP FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS.

In Uruguay, María Freire (Montevideo, 1917–2015) began her first investigations into abstract art while directing a workshop for high school students from 1945 to 1950. In tandem with that, she also organized exhibitions and debates around emotional and conceptual issues within modern art.

These facts confirm that the gestation of Geometric Abstraction, and with it, local concrete art, took place because of local conditions that encouraged new ways of experiencing aesthetics in the social realm. In Europe Geometric Abstraction sought, according to some traditional historiography, to keep the idea of rationalist progress alive, especially in the face of the devastating effects of the Great War. However, in 1940s Latin America, abstract-geometric art followed the promising horizon opened up by the accelerated industrialization of countries like Argentina and Brazil and the aesthetic influence of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung's work, which were considered liberatory tools for the modern subject.

This approximation toward concrete art meant a radical departure from art that was tied to national identity, which appeared not only in local landscape painting, but also and especially in the social realism of David Alfaro Siqueiros, Demetrio Urruchúa, and Candido Portinari that emerged in Río de la Plata.

In the case of Uruguay, the first experiences geared toward Geometric Abstraction were based on two of the country's long-established pedagogical models. The first was the so-called *escuela planista*, or "planar school," which was active between 1920 and 1940. This school attempted the pictorial representation of volumetry and chiaroscuro through color planes in the form of rigidly cut-out facets, which implied an analytic operation of not only color, but its geometric backing. Torres García's workshop encouraged the study of forms in their most elemental structure, but its doctrinal orientation took a more philosophical and existential approach. Thus, it rejected other positions that were merely formalist or aesthetic.

The second approach came from a method of teaching sculpture that aimed to look at the internal geometry of objects and bodies, as well as their structural principles. This was taught by Argentine sculptor Luis Falcini at the *Círculo de Bellas Artes* in Montevideo. It was also espoused by European schools where Uruguayans with fellowships studied—mainly the programs of Antoine Bourdelle and Anton Hanak, the latter a proponent of the direct carving process which required a structural study of form.

María Freire began her studies under the Uruguayan sculptor Antonio Pena—disciple of Hanak in Vienna in the mid-twenties—who, according to the artist, taught her "to build and maintain a shape in space through geometry."² Later on, Freire taught drawing courses in the city of Colonia del

Sacramento in Uruguay, where she met Rothfuss in 1950 and, through him, encountered news of the concretist avant-garde in Buenos Aires. During that decade, aside from traditional portraiture, she made variations on the subject of the mask. She frequently visited the replica of Michelangelo's *Head of a Faun* at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Montevideo (now called Museo Nacional de Artes Visuales), and, based on this, made some studies in polychrome plaster. Some of these have been preserved, dating from between 1938 and 1940 (fig. 1).

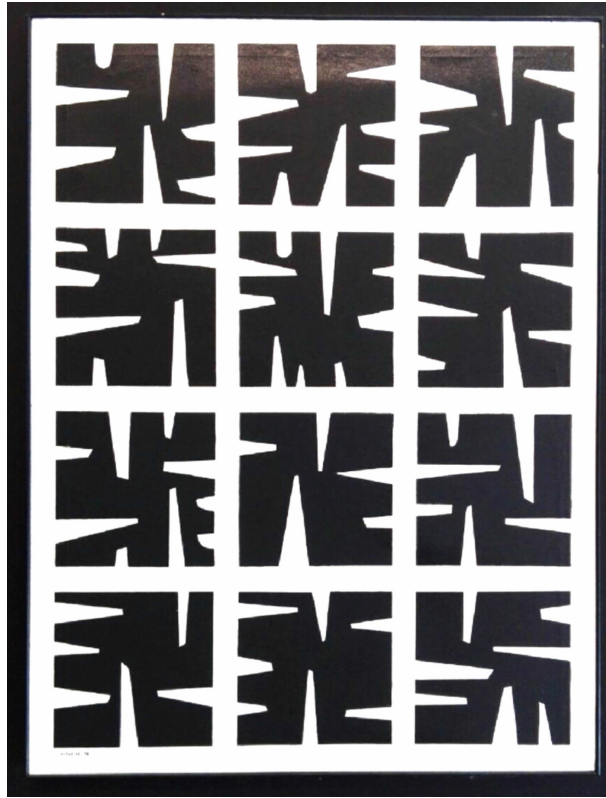


Fig. 11. Maria Freire, *Sudamérica (South America)*, 1958. Watercolor on paper, 7 1/2 × 4 15/16 in. (19 × 12.5 cm). Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 11. Maria Freire, *Sudamérica*, 1958. Acuarela sobre papel, 7 1/2 × 4 15/16 in. (19 × 12.5 cm). Herederos de Maria Freire

Fig. 12. Maria Freire, *Sudamérica (South America)*, 1958. Acrylic paint on canvas, 32 11/16 × 27 9/16 in. (83 × 70 cm). ISLAA Library and Archives

Fig. 12. Maria Freire, *Sudamérica*, 1958. Pintura acrílica sobre tela, 32 11/16 × 27 9/16 in. (83 × 70 cm). Biblioteca y Archivo de ISLAA

Fig. 13. Maria Freire, *Sudamérica (South America)*, 1961. Watercolor on paper, 7 1/2 × 4 15/16 in. (19 × 12.5 cm). ISLAA Library and Archives

Fig. 13. Maria Freire, *Sudamérica*, 1961. Acuarela sobre papel, 7 1/2 × 4 15/16 in. (19 × 12.5 cm). Biblioteca y Archivo de ISLAA

During the late forties and early fifties, the magazine *Art d'aujourd'hui* was starting to be distributed in Montevideo, and through this Freire became familiar with Russian Constructivism and Dutch Neoplasticism. She was also able to see works by Piet Mondrian, Kazimir Malevich, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart, Hans Hartung, Alexander Calder, and Henry Moore, most of whom she would later be able to meet personally during a trip to Europe.

The Argentine magazine *Nueva Visión*, founded in 1951 under the direction of Tomás Maldonado, was also for the artist an unavoidable source of information on abstract-geometric art and the topic of form in relation to issues surrounding art and design.⁸ But it wasn't only foreign publications that were fundamental to the changes the artist imprinted on her work; so was, in a decisive way, her encounter in 1952 with Uruguayan painter José Pedro Costigliolo,⁹ with whom she would have a prolific relationship and make decisive contributions to Uruguayan art during the second half of the 20th century.

FROM THEN ON, FREIRE'S SCULPTURAL AND PICTORIAL WORK WAS BASED ON AN ELEMENTAL GEOMETRY DEVOID OF ALL FIGURATIVE VESTIGES.

From then on, Freire's sculptural and pictorial work was based on an elemental geometry devoid of all figurative vestiges. In her sculpture, she frequently privileged the articulation of component parts and a transformation of form in space. Freire states that her intention at the time was to return form to the constructive dignity it had in the twenties: "I would use geometry, but I was not making geometry: I was making space and time as a plastic feeling, not a geometric one. It was a made-up geometry, but used by me in a plastic way."¹⁰

In 1952, the first non-figurative art exhibition opened in Montevideo under the direction of Freire, Costigliolo, Rothfuss, and Antonio Llorens. This group represented "hard" geometrism in the local abstract art scene, especially when compared to other artists who practiced an abstraction rooted in figurative modes. Around that time Freire exhibited two sculptures—one of them with clearly articulated black iron bars and the other with chrome-plated iron rods that formed squares, triangles, and a rotating inner circle (fig. 2).

In other works exhibited at the *2nd Non-Figurative Art Exhibition* held in 1953, and the exhibition *19 artistas de hoy* that took place in 1955, she used resources that the national industry was able to provide her. This is the case, for example, with *Proyecto para una fuente* (fig. 3), which is part of a group of pieces made from enameled sheet metal with the support of Kraft Imesa, a metallurgical company based in Montevideo. She also turned to the DuPont car dealership in Uruguay to make some of her projects with acrylic sheets (fig. 4).¹¹ She took cardboard models to those factories so the technicians could make them with corresponding materials. She also did this so the work took on industrial characteristics, not only because of the formal perfectionism with which it was conceived, but also because it was a mechanical product of industrial technology.

Another aspect that can be linked to the industrialist imaginary was her early adhesion to Costigliolo's pictorial procedures: pyroxylin lacquer paint applied with a paint sprayer using openwork stencils. With this system, any trace of manual or artisanal gestures disappeared, achieving results closer to the coldness and anonymity of industrial objects.¹² The traditional prestige of craftsmanship was eclipsed by the intellectual value of imagination applied to a universe of abstract forms, the likes of which could be made through industrial procedures or manual techniques that would yield results similar to industrial perfection.

Freire brought the Uruguayan team into the 2nd São Paulo Biennial (1953) and later, to the 4th Biennial (1957), where she received the prize of honor. In 1956, she traveled with Costigliolo to São Paulo to do a joint exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna and met, among others, Lothar Charoux, member of the concrete group Ruptura, founded by Waldemar Cordeiro in 1952. Freire and Costigliolo's exhibition coincided at that time and place with the *1st National Exhibition of Concrete Art* (which included both concrete art and poetry), which Augusto de Campos—essayist and creator of the São Paulo group of concrete poetry—helped organize, and who sixty years later would say: "I am under the impression that Maria Freire approached concrete and geometric art when the movement was already consolidated among us,"¹³ which is undoubtedly true. The following year, Freire exhibited at the MAM in Rio de Janeiro, where she met Serpa and Décio Vieira.¹⁴

At the *2nd Non-Figurative Art Exhibition*, held in 1953, Maria Freire presented a transformative figure made of painted wood that comprised four interlocking trapezoids (fig. 5), as well as a high-relief enamel on wood (fig. 6). Freire never hid her admiration for Vordemberge-Gildewart's work,¹⁵ which explained the formal coincidences between her high-relief from 1953 and a work by the latter published in the magazine *Art d'aujourd'hui* in January 1950. There were other similarities between her paintings from that time and Vordemberge-Gildewart's Dutch period (fig. 7), which supported the idea that there was an early intellectual link between Maria Freire and the German artist. When she visited his workshop at the Ulm School of Design in 1959, she admitted that his work had been a reference both for her and Costigliolo in the fifties.¹⁶ In that sense, it could be stated that, for a number of reasons, concretism in Uruguayan art, mainly represented by Freire and Costigliolo, was always closer to Vordemberge-Gildewart's spatial style than to Max Bill's "Die gute Form."¹⁷

The fact that Bill won a prize at the 1st São Paulo Biennial in 1951—and later arrived in Brazil himself¹⁸—may indicate the influence he had in the region, especially on abstract artists from São Paulo.¹⁹ While he was also influential in Rio de Janeiro, it was fundamentally the lyrical vision of Calder—exhibited at the MAM in 1948—that was best received by the concrete art circle when it first materialized around Serpa and Pedrosa.²⁰

Vordemberge-Gildewart and Bill shared the same intellectual sources, but Bill's formal imaginary assumed that the "good form," which resulted from geometric-mathematic matrices, was all-embracing, and that its functionality encompassed environmental design in general. For his part, Vordemberge-Gildewart's formal thinking, while apt for teaching design, moved within geometric structures with more of a spatial than object-based logic, more rhythmic than formal, with a conceptual essence and a functionality that enhanced the poetic dimension of abstract art.

During her tour around France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain, Germany, and England, Freire had direct contact with artists Nikolaus Pevsner, Calder, Vordemberge-

Gildewart, Moore, Hans Hartung, and Ángel Ferrant, among others.²¹ This experience allowed her to familiarize herself with the concrete art scene in Europe during a time when Informalism and Abstract Expressionism were gaining momentum. The United States's foreign policy support for Abstract Expressionism and the tension this new international style created by spurring informalist movements in France and Spain seemed to indicate that the purist aesthetics of concrete art were entering a crisis of faith. Freire, however, was less worried about geometric purism than she was about the problem of form, not only because of its structure but also its symbolic connotations. The research she did at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and at the Musée du Louvre, in addition to visits to different historical centers and meetings with different artists, allowed her to perceive certain historical constants in Western art, present in Romanesque frescos, medieval blacksmithing, Gothic stained glass, the Byzantine capitals of Ravenna churches, and also in contemporary works. The tradition of the geometric schemata and rhythm persisted across different periods throughout history. Reflections about these experiences led her to make a series of paintings she called *Sudamérica*.²² The idea is a form-sign, a unit (generally with a serrated profile) reiterated in sequence with slight formal alterations.²³ The artist reflected that the forms may have come from her attraction to locks and keys made by medieval blacksmiths at the then-called Musée des Antiquités Nationales in Saint Germain-en-Laye, France:

"It was then that I felt more strongly the presence of the sign, with the real value of thought. . . I found in medieval locksmithing the germ of a primal feeling of geometric abstraction that seemed to be waiting for the precise historical moment to become independent of its function."²⁴

The first sketches from that series are made with gouache and date from 1958 in Rome (fig. 8).²⁵

Upon returning to Montevideo in December 1959, she encountered major changes to the artistic milieu, which had started to assume the influence of very dissimilar artists like Victor Vasarely, Alberto Burri, Manabu Mabe, and the Spanish group led by Antoni Tàpies. Many of Freire's Uruguayan colleagues were already practicing diverse forms of abstraction²⁶ through the use of palette knives, graphology, calligraphy marks, and surfaces with raw material—but they were far from geometric abstraction. Neither Freire nor Costigliolo were strangers to that context: "I strayed from concrete art," said Freire, "but not from abstraction" (fig. 9).²⁷

During those years, expressionist drawing, the happening, audience participation, and institutional critique all shaped a cultural field where more orthodox abstract-geometric art started to lose its revolutionary character, especially when it was absorbed by other modes of visibility and other artistic practices. Furthermore, the abrupt downfall of the weak Uruguayan economy and the rise of unique social conflicts contributed to an eventual loss of trust in the techno-rationalist model, bringing politics to the forefront.

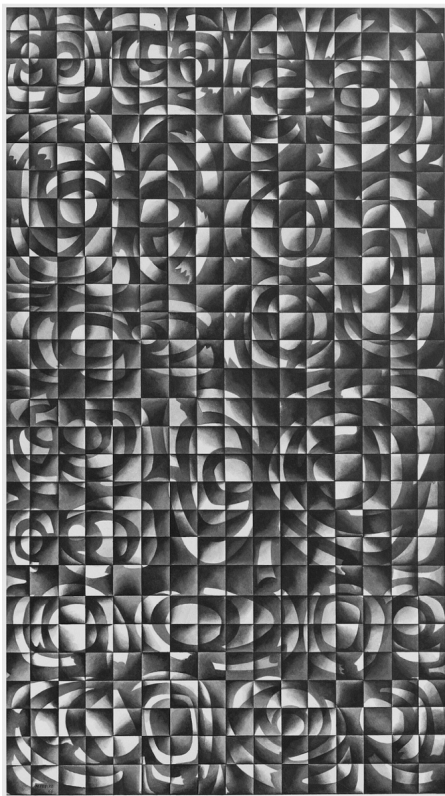


Fig. 16. Maria Freire, *Composición* (Composition), 1966. Ink on paper, 33 7/16 × 18 7/8 in. (85 × 48 cm). Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 16. Maria Freire, *Composición*, 1966. Tinta sobre papel, 33 7/16 × 18 7/8 in. (85 × 48 cm). Herederos de Maria Freire



Fig. 17. Maria Freire, *Composición 17 de julio* (July 17 Composition), 1968. Acrylic paint on canvas, 70 7/8 × 53 9/16 in. (180 × 136 cm). Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 17. Maria Freire, *Composición 17 de julio*, 1968. Pintura acrílica sobre tela, 70 7/8 × 53 9/16 in. (180 × 136 cm). Herederos de Maria Freire



Fig. 18. Maria Freire, *Córdoba II*, 1968. Acrylic paint on canvas, 35 7/16 × 26 3/4 in. (90 × 68 cm). Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 18. Maria Freire, *Córdoba II*, 1968. Pintura acrílica sobre tela, 35 7/16 × 26 3/4 in. (90 × 68 cm). Herederos de Maria Freire

Between 1964 and 1965, Freire was once again studying the subject of modules, although this time with important morphological changes in their origins and outcome. Compact shapes were replaced by continuous linear gestures in pencil or brushwork, producing a tension between skeins of spiral shapes and the orthogonal frame that contained them. This series—which Freire titled *Capricornio*—returned to the idea of the modular sequence but at the fringes of concrete art and its former geometric designs. The sign as a full form disappeared: “the structure came up developing rhythm over the plane with an impulse of continuity and discontinuity based on the sensuality of the curved line” (fig. 10).²⁸

Early in 1966 this idea of a “sequence” was momentarily replaced by that of “plot,” since the artist fragmented the plane that supported the series’s structure into small squares. That same narrativity was clearly present in the 1966 painting *Composición* (fig. 11), and it has played a key role in her works since the early seventies.

From 1967 onward, Freire worked on *Córdoba*—a series titled for the Argentine city where she lived in at the time—which, over the following three years, underwent different variations. The series brought back some of the prominence of the form-sign, but in a more complex visual field. In some cases (fig. 12), Freire returned to the double plane (in which both front and back were shaped) that she used in her series *Capricornio*, but with a new formal twist, as now both planes could be seen alternatively as figure and

ground.²⁹ There are paintings from this series that contain anthropomorphic references and other formal devices that have surrealistic resonance (fig. 13), gestures that were discussed in the original concretism debates in Río de la Plata, and also afterward, when Argentine Julio Llinás founded the magazine *Boa*, in 1958.³⁰

The line separating *Córdoba* and Freire's subsequent series *Variantes* (fig. 14) is very blurry in terms of dates and pieces. There is a continuous metamorphosis from one to the other—later paralleled by the transition from *Variantes* to *Vibrantes* in the mid-seventies. It can also be noted that in Freire's painting between 1975 and 1990, the form-sign collapsed and gave rise to plot, which was structured both chromatically and geometrically. This process ended with the series *Vibrantes* (fig. 15), which dismantled the form itself, eliminating the problem of the form-content relationship (which she fleetingly resumed in the last decade of the century) but affirming the idea of structure in the context of a more labile conception of Constructivism.

The series *Vibrantes* is dedicated to Austrian artist Herbert Bayer³¹ and it extended into another, shorter series called *Radiantes*. This followed the same concept regarding the harmonic combination of geometric structure and color gammas, but it introduced oblique lines, creating instability in the constructive design (fig. 16).

Freire's 1976 trip to São Paulo offered some inspiration for her work in *Vibrantes*, as she found that many of her colleagues from the group Ruptura were working in the field of Op art thorough chromatic studies. One of them was her old friend, Cahroux, from whom she got detailed information about his "optical" paintings exhibited in 1974 under the title *Vibração*.

Once Freire used color in that series, she encountered problems of contiguity and chromatic harmony, but she was not interested in the phenomenon of perceptive illusionism. In Brussels, she visited an exhibition with kinetic works by Italian-Argentine Gregorio Vardanega, who in his early days was linked to Madí and was close friends with Arden Quin. On her second trip to Europe, in 1966, she learned about chromatic-luminescent play through the work of Argentine Luis Tomasello. However, Freire never gave up on her interest in maintaining structure in the traditional Constructivist way, which she used as the basis for her color harmonic series,³² although the series *Vibrantes* is closer to the *Colorítmos* made by Venezuelan Alejandro Otero than it is to Carlos Cruz-Diez's *Fisicromías*. What is remarkable about this is that the illusion of movement and the ambiguities of the visual field were not even among the issues that Freire took on. This is a conceptual matter related to the distance separating her from kinetic art, particularly that practiced by Venezuelan artists.

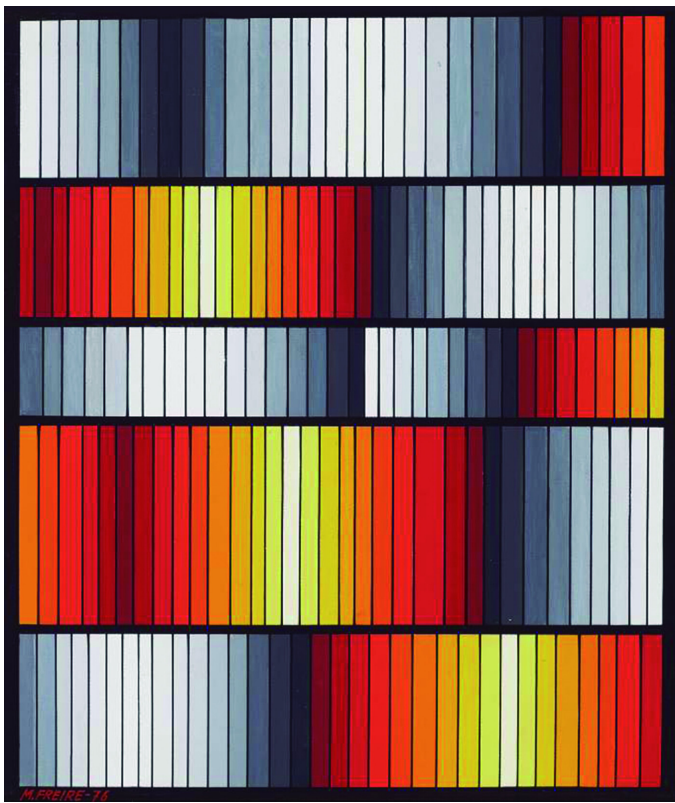


Fig. 20. Maria Freire, *Vibrante n.º 4* (Vibrant no. 4), 1976. Acrylic paint on canvas, 35 7/16 × 29 1/2 in. (90 × 75 cm). Estate of Maria Freire

Fig. 20. Maria Freire, *Vibrante n.º 4*, 1976. Pintura acrílica sobre tela, 35 7/16 × 29 1/2 in. (90 × 75 cm). Herederos de Maria Freire



Fig. 21. Maria Freire, *Radiante* (Radiant), 1986. Acrylic paint on card library and Archives

Fig. 21. Maria Freire, *Radiante*, 1986. Pintura acrílica sobre cartulina. Archivo de ISLAA

AS THE NINETIES APPROACHED, FREIRE REVISITED PREVIOUS STAGES OF HER WORK, FROM WHICH SHE CREATED A RENEWED SOURCE OF REFLECTION WITH HER SERIES *AMÉRICA DEL SUR*.

As the nineties approached, Freire revisited previous stages of her work, from which she created a renewed source of reflection with her series *América del Sur*, in which she went back to the sign but reformulated it in a totemic style, and *El oro de los tigres*, in which she returned to the form-ground concept used in *Capricornio* (fig. 17). The former is a symbiosis of archaic structures and ornamental elements in the style of a ritual piece. Those ornamental elements of Baroque origin were incorporated into the vertical dominance of the totemic geometric structure type "H."

These works, along with other paintings and drawing she made in the early 21st century, closed the cycle of essential aesthetic tension that was present throughout María Freire's work: the subconscious, the dreamlike, the passionate and intuitive, all filtered through a comprehensive Constructivism, both geometric and organic (fig. 18).

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1. The "inventionist" group that held sessions in Buenos Aires edited, in 1944, the only issue of the magazine *Arturo* and, two years later, broke into two different currents: Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención, comprising the Argentines Tomás Maldonado, Ennio Iommi, Alfredo Hlito, Lidy Elena Prati, and Raúl Lozza, among others; and Movimiento Madí, led by Argentine Gyula Kosice and Uruguayan Carmelo Arden Quin, who were later joined by Uruguayans Rhod Rothfuss, Rodolfo Ian Uricchio, Antonio Llorens, and Valdo Wellington.
2. Tomás Maldonado, "Torres García contra el arte moderno," *Boletín de la Asociación Arte Concreto Invención* 2 (December 1946): 1.
3. Rhod Rothfuss, "El marco, un problema de la plástica actual," *Arturo* 1 (Summer 1944): 36.
4. Most of the Argentine members of the 1944 inventionist group were enrolled in the Communist Party (or were close to it).
5. Vicente Zito Lema, *Conversaciones con Enrique Pichon-Rivière sobre el arte y la locura* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Cinco, 1985).
6. During the mid-fifties, there was still an ongoing debate about Surrealism in the inventionist ranks. Argentine critic Aldo Pellegrini published an article in which he attempted to show how budgets for the creative activity fueling Surrealism and concretism were similar: "Arte surrealista y arte concreto," *Nueva Visión* 4 (1953): 4.
7. Interview with the artist conducted by the author on May 27, 2003.
8. Verónica Devallé states: "*Nueva Visión* is not only an architecture magazine, but also a text that is open to the problem of form found in concrete art, in one sense a pivot from where to study this mode of production that is clearly new and perceived as powerful. In it, we find a new concept of space, a new troubling of what we consider visual language (called originally visual culture) today and the unsettling question of form given sense." In "Hacia la síntesis de las artes: *El proyecto cultural y artístico de la revista Nueva Visión*," *Anclajes* 13, no. 1 (2009): 65.
9. Costigliolo was trained by the planar school from Montevideo which grew out of the Círculo de Bellas Artes, but from the 1950s onward he became a pioneer of abstract geometric art in Uruguay.
10. María Freire, interviewed by the author, May 27, 2003, Montevideo.
11. María Freire, interviewed by the author. Ms. Susana Freire—niece of the artist, currently based in Brazil—states that they once visited "a factory to look for flat transparent acrylic sheets, so that a technician could put them inside some barrels in a liquid that would soften them. In the meantime, María would tell them the curvature she wanted." Susana Freire, email to the author, July 22, 2017.
12. Van Doesburg, in his 1930 publication *Art Concret*, said: "La technique doit être mécanique, c'est-à-dire exacte, anti-impressionniste." ("Technique must be mechanical, meaning exact, anti-impressionist.")
13. Tania Rajczuk Dombi, "Poema-pintura e pintura-poema: diálogos entre Augusto de Campos e María Freire," in *Arte concreta e vertentes construtivas: teoria, crítica e história da arte técnica (Jornada ABCA) — Comunicadores* (Mina Gerais: Editora ABCA, 2018), 358.
14. This contact with important Brazilian colleagues, while initially indirect due to the work of Walter Wey, cultural attaché of the Embassy of Brazil in Uruguay, happened through Brazilian artist Livio Abramo, whom Freire met in Montevideo in 1955.
15. Freire had the chance to see works by Vordemberge-Gildewart at the São Paulo Biennial in 1953 and the following year at the Comisión Nacional de Bellas Artes in Montevideo, as part of the exhibition *Pintura Contemporánea de los Países Bajos*, in which there were also works by van Doesburg, Mondrian, and others.
16. "We had studied Vordemberge-Gildewart through his works at the 2nd São Paulo Biennial (1953), in Montevideo (1954), and later on in The Hague and Amsterdam. In *Nueva Visión* we would read his essays; that is why we wanted to meet him." María Freire, travel journal, 1958–59, 149.
17. Bill's ideas were transmitted from Buenos Aires through the magazine *Nueva Visión* and through a book on his work published by Tomás Maldonado in 1955.
18. His ties with Brazil were formed by the end of the forties, when French-Brazilian artist Samson Flexor (leader of the Atelier Abstração) came into contact with Bill, who, after that first meeting, would travel in 1950 to do a show at the MAM in São Paulo.
19. With many of them as students or faculty he created the program Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, which brought artists Geraldo de Barros, Alexandre Wollner, Almir Mavignier, Mary Vieira, and Argentine Tomás Maldonado to Germany. The Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI), founded in 1963 in Rio de Janeiro, was also modeled after Ulm.
20. The artists that comprised the group Frente included, among others, Aluísio

Carvão, Lygia Clark, Rubem Ludolf, Abraham Palatnik, Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, Décio Vieira, and Franz Weissman.

21. The relationships Freire had with prominent artists in Europe generally arose in a very spontaneous (and sometimes casual) way. For example, she met sculptor Alexander Calder unexpectedly on a street in Paris on March 5, 1959 and subsequently visited his exhibition at Galerie Maeght.

22. She started this series in 1958 in Europe, but continued working on it when she returned to Montevideo.

23. In 1953, at the 2nd San Paulo Biennial, Freire had been able to see the series of collages and paintings that Lygia Clark had been making since 1952, which also feature consistent form-signs done in modular series.

24. María Freire, "Autobiographical Notes," M. F. archive, Montevideo, Museo Blanes, 1996: 5. Hereinafter: M.F. – A.N.

25. Other indicators suggest the series was started in France. The first chance she had to exhibit part of it was in Brussels at Galerie Les Contemporains in May 1959.

26. This is true for Washington Barcala, Juan Ventayol, Oscar García Reino, Amalia Nieto, and Manuel Espínola Gómez, among others.

27. M.F. – A.N., 5.

28. M.F. – A.N., 6.

29. For the artist, the *Córdoba* series represented a "search for greater synthesis of composition, greater individualism for each form, [so that] the constructivist codes began to recuperate their lost presence." M.F.– N.A., 6.

30. *Boa* was aligned with the European magazine *Phases*—active in Buenos Aires and Montevideo in 1958—the aesthetic program of which aimed to unite the techniques of surrealism with those of non-figurative art. The magazine brought back avant-garde ideas inherited from Grupo CoBra (Paris, 1948-51), thus promoting expressive freedom and experimental art.

31. "This whole series is a tribute to Herbert Bayer, who motivated my imagination with his light and shadow games." María Freire, "*Reflexiones de la artista*," *María Freire: Exposición retrospectiva*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Montevideo: El País, 1998).

32. "I start by fragmenting the plane with an orthogonal structure. It is not always the same: on its horizontal dimensions, I widen and narrow the strips that cross over to create the space. The second stage, which is fundamental, is integrating the color. With the color, I want to reach a state of condensing the sensations that the painting needs. . ." María Freire, notebook "Melhoramentos," handwritten in ink n.d. (ca. 1980). Museo Blanes, Montevideo, M.F. archive.

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1. El grupo «invencionista» que sesionó en Buenos Aires editó en 1944 el único número de la revista *Arturo* y dos años después derivó en dos tendencias diferentes: la Asociación Arte Concreto-Invención, integrada por, entre otros, los argentinos Tomás Maldonado, Ennio Iommi, Alfredo Hlito, Lidy Elena Prati y Raúl Lozza, y el Movimiento Madí, liderado por el argentino Gyula Kosice y por el uruguayo Carmelo Arden Quin, al que se sumaron los uruguayos Rhod Rothfuss, Rodolfo Ian Uricchio, Antonio Llorens y Valdo Wellington.

2. Tomás Maldonado, «Torres García contra el arte moderno», *Boletín de la Asociación Arte Concreto Invención* 2 (diciembre 1946):1.

3. Rhod Rothfuss, «El marco, un problema de la plástica actual», *Arturo* 1 (verano de 1944): 36.

4. Buena parte de los integrantes argentinos del grupo invencionista formado en 1944 pertenecían a las filas del Partido Comunista (o eran cercanos a ellas).

5. Vicente Zito Lema, *Conversaciones con Enrique Pichon-Rivière sobre el arte y la locura*. (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Cinco, 1985).

6. Al mediar la década de 1950 se continuaba debatiendo sobre el surrealismo en filas invencionistas. El crítico argentino Aldo Pellegrini publicó un artículo en el que pretendía demostrar que los presupuestos en torno a la creación sobre los que descansa el surrealismo y el concretismo son similares: «Arte surrealista y arte concreto», *Nueva Visión* 4 (1953): 4. Pellegrini realizó en 1952 la exposición *Grupo de Artistas Modernos de la Argentina*, con obras de Claudio Girola, Alfredo Hlito, Enio Iommi, Tomás Maldonado, Lidy Prati, Hans Aebi, José Antonio Fernández-Muro, Sarah Grilo y Miguel Ocampo.

7. Entrevista a la artista realizada por el autor el 27 de mayo de 2003.

8. Verónica Devalle afirma que «*Nueva Visión* es, antes que una revista de arquitectura, un texto abierto a la problemática de la forma, que encuentra en el arte concreto—en primera instancia—un pivote desde donde indagar el horizonte de producción que se sabe nuevo y que se intuye potente. En ella encontramos una nueva concepción del espacio, una problematización de aquello que hoy consideraríamos lenguaje visual (llamado allí cultura visual) y la inquietante pregunta por la forma hecha sentido». En «Hacia la síntesis de las artes: El proyecto cultural y artístico de la revista *Nueva Visión*», *Anclajes* 13, nº. 1 (2009): 65.

9. Costigliolo se había formado en la escuela planista montevidéana cultivada

en el *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, pero a partir de la década de 1950 se convierte en pionero del arte abstracto geométrico en Uruguay.

10. María Freire, entrevista por el autor, 27 de mayo de 2003, Montevideo.

11. María Freire, entrevista por el autor. Susana Freire —sobrina de la artista y residente actualmente en Brasil— relata que en una ocasión fueron «a una fábrica a buscar unas láminas de acrílico transparente que eran planas, para que un técnico las colocara dentro de unos latones con un líquido que las ablandaba mientras María le iba diciendo qué curvatura era la que deseaba.» Susana Freire, correo electrónico al autor, 22 de julio de 2017.

12. Van Doesburg, en su publicación *Art Concret* de 1930, ya dictaminaba: «La technique doit être mécanique, c'est-à-dire exacte, anti-impresionniste». («La técnica debe ser mecánica, es decir, exacta, anti-impresionista».)

13. Tania Rajczuk Dombi, «Poema-pintura e pintura-poema: diálogos entre Augusto de Campos e María Freire», en *Arte concreta e vertentes construtivas: teoria, crítica e história da arte técnica (Jornada ABCA) — Comunicadores* (Mina Gerais: Editora ABCA, 2018), 358.

14. Estos contactos con importantes colegas brasileños, si bien estuvieron propiciados indirectamente por la labor de Walter Wey, agregado cultural de la Embajada de Brasil en Uruguay, se concretaron mediante la mediación del artista brasileño Livio Abramo, que conoció a Freire en Montevideo en 1955.

15. Freire tuvo oportunidad de ver obra de Vordemberge-Gildewart en la Bienal de São Paulo de 1953, y, al año siguiente, en la Comisión Nacional de Bellas Artes de Montevideo, donde tuvo lugar la exposición *Pintura Contemporánea de los Países Bajos*, en la que también se expusieron obras de van Doesburg, Mondrian, y otros.

16. «A Vordemberge-Gildewart lo habíamos estudiado en sus obras, en la 2ª Bienal de Sao Paulo (1953), en Montevideo (1954) y luego en La Haya y en Ámsterdam. En *Nueva Visión* leíamos sus ensayos, por eso queríamos conocerlo». María Freire, libro de viaje, 1958-59, 149.

17. Las ideas de Bill fueron difundidas desde Buenos Aires a través de la revista *Nueva Visión* y del libro dedicado a su obra que Tomás Maldonado publicó en 1955 en dicha editorial.

18. Sus lazos con Brasil surgieron a finales de la década del cuarenta, cuando el artista franco-brasileño Samson Flexor (líder del Atelier Abstração) entró en contacto con Bill, quien, después de ese primer vínculo, viajó en 1950 para exponer en el MAM de São Paulo.

19. Con varios de ellos concibió el programa del Hochschule für Gestaltung de Ulm, que llevó a los artistas Geraldo de Barros, Alexandre Wollner, Almir Mavignier, Mary Vieira, y al argentino Tomás Maldonado a la Escuela de Ulm. Por otra parte, la Escola Superior de Desenho Industrial (ESDI) de Río de Janeiro, fundada en 1963, se concibió también bajo el modelo de Ulm.

20. Los artistas que integraron el grupo Frente fueron, entre otros, Aluísio Carvão, Lygia Clark, Rubem Ludolf, Abraham Palatnik, Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, Décio Vieira, y Franz Weissman.

21. Las relaciones establecidas por Freire con artistas de primera línea en Europa se produjeron, en general, de manera muy espontánea y en ciertos casos de manera casual. Al escultor Alexander Calder, por ejemplo, lo encontró imprevistamente en una calle de París el 5 de marzo de 1959 y a partir de ese encuentro visitó su exposición en Galerie Maeght.

22. Esta serie la comienza en 1958, en Europa, pero continúa desarrollándola cuando regresa a Montevideo.

23. En 1953, en la 2ª Bienal de San Paulo, Freire había podido ver la serie de collages y pinturas que Lygia Clark realizaba desde 1952, consistentes también en formas-signo dispuestas en series modulares.

24. María Freire, «Notas autobiográficas», Archivo M. F., Montevideo, Museo Blanes, 1996: 5. En adelante: M.F. – N.A.

25. Otros indicadores permiten suponer que la serie fue iniciada en Francia. Lo cierto es que la primera oportunidad que tuvo de exponer parte de ella fue en Bruselas, en Galerie Les Contemporains en mayo de 1959.

26. Es el caso de Washington Barcala, Juan Ventayol, Oscar García Reino, Amalia Nieto, y Manuel Espínola Gómez, entre otros.

27. M.F. – N.A., 5.

28. M.F.–N.A., 6.

29. Para la artista, la *serie Córdoba* representa una «búsqueda de mayor síntesis en la composición, mayor individualidad para cada forma, [de modo que] los códigos constructivos comienzan a recuperar su presencia perdida». M.F.– N.A., 6.

30. *Boa* estaba alineada con la revista europea *Phases* —llegó a presentar exposiciones en Buenos Aires y Montevideo en 1958— cuyo programa estético consistía en la búsqueda de unión de las investigaciones del surrealismo con las del arte no-figurativo. La revista retomó ideas de vanguardia legadas por el Grupo CoBra (París, 1948-51), promoviendo la libertad expresiva y el arte experimental.

31. «Toda esta serie es un homenaje a Herbert Bayer que motivó mi imaginación

con sus juegos de luces y sombras». María Freire, «Reflexiones de la artista», *María Freire: Exposición retrospectiva*, Museo de Arte Contemporáneo (Montevideo: El País, 1998).

32. «Comienzo por fragmentar el plano con una estructura ortogonal. No siempre igual: en sus dimensiones horizontales realizo ensanches y estrechamientos de las bandas que cruzan y crean el espacio. La segunda etapa, fundamental, es la integración del color. Con el color quiero llegar al estado de condensación de sensaciones que necesita el cuadro [. . .]» María Freire. Museo Blanes, Montevideo, Archivo M.F. Cuaderno «Melhoramentos», manuscrito a tinta s.f. (ca.1980).

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