

# Juana Francés and her Importance in International Informalist Art

Dr. Natalia Molinos  
Comunidad Valenciana Art Critic Association  
[nataliamolinos@gmail.com](mailto:nataliamolinos@gmail.com)

تاريخ الاستلام: ٢٠٢٣/٧/٩

تاريخ القبول: ٢٠٢٣/٨/٣

## ABSTRACT

This academic article examines the figure of Juana Francés, her significance and contribution to the international Informalist Art movement. Francés work has been analyzed to highlight her importance in the context of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century artistic avant-garde. This study explores her distinctive style and influences which has received and impacted on the development of international Informalist Art. This article is based on my doctoral dissertation which is about the artist in under study. The dissertation was published in 2010 by the University of Alicante.

**Keywords:** Juana Francés, Informalist Art, gensture, experimentation

## خوانا فرانسيس وأهميتها في المدرسة التجريدية العالمية

ملخص البحث:

تتناول هذه المقالة الأكاديمية شخصية خوانا فرانسيس ودورها وإسهاماتها العالمية في حركة الفن في المدرسة التجريدية. تم تحليل أعمال فرانسيس؛ لتسليط الضوء على أهميتها في سياق الطليعة الفنية في القرن العشرين. تستكشف هذه الدراسة أسلوبها المميز وفنونها التي تأثرت وأثرت على تطور الفن التجريدي العالمي. يستند هذا المقال إلى أطروحة الدكتوراه الخاصة بي والتي تدور حول الفنانة موضوع بحث الدراسة. تم نشر الأطروحة في عام ٢٠١٠ من قبل جامعة اليكانتي.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** خوانا فرانسيس، الفن التجريدي، إيماءات، التجريب

## INTRODUCTION

Informalist Art, a movement that emerged in Europe in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by its gestural and expressionistic approach, breaking away from established artistic conventions. Juana Francés, a Spanish artist born in 1924 played a crucial role in spreading this movement on an international scale. She was one of the pioneers of abstract and experimental art of the so-called “Second Avant-gard”. Her transition from figurative to informal abstraction in the 1950s marked a milestone in the evolution of Spanish art and thus, she is one of the few women artists who have walked on this path. Her

innovative approach to techniques and materials, such as the incorporation of sand and experimentation with encaustic technique, established her as an avant-garde artist of her time. Her work reflects a constant exploration of texture, color, and composition, making her a relevant figure in the history of Spanish art as well as in the European and international scene. Although not yet so recognized, she participated in important collective and solo exhibitions in various countries, especially in her informalist period, being the only woman artist in the emblematic “El Paso” group. Her involvement in events like the São Paulo Biennial and the Venice Biennale, as well as her recognition in international galleries and museums, confirm her as an important asset in the global art scene.

Born in Alicante on July 31, 1924, and dying in Madrid on March 9, 1990, Juana Francés's life unfolds from the Second Spanish Republic, through the Spanish Civil War, post-war period and Franco's dictatorship, to the democratic transition in Spain and its subsequent consolidation. Globally, events such as World War II, the subsequent division of the world into two ideological blocs, the emergence of philosophical currents like existentialism, and the popular revolutions of May '68 in France marked a significant cultural and social change in a short period of time. These events served as the breeding ground for Juana Francés's work and influenced many transformations in art which also affected our painter.

In her hometown of Alicante, Francés was a talented child who began drawing in a self-taught manner, as we can appreciate in her teen year while copying beloved actors's photos from cinema magazines. Of course, she was inevitably influenced by the local artistic environment of the time, as Gastón Castelló or Emilio Varela - who introduced avant-garde art to Alicante- had a strong presence in the city's artistic activities and events, especially during the Las Hogueras de San Juan<sup>1</sup> festival. Throughout her childhood and youth, our artist must have seen posters of popular festivals and monumental sculptures, which may have unconsciously influenced the conception of the stylized figures of her early stage. From her upbringing in Alicante, she always kept the love for the sea and the beach. This love would be translated into her paintings once in Madrid, far from the sea, where in her second artistic phase she began using sand in her artworks as a tribute, which marked her work until the end of her life.

After the Spanish Civil War, Juana Francés moved to Madrid and enrolled in the Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando. Two professors had a special

---

<sup>(1)</sup> Annual festivities of the city similar to Fallas of Valencia, in which artists participated with illustrations for posters, and the design of the monuments that are burned at the end of the festivities.

impact on her: Daniel Vázquez Díaz, whose class "Mural and Fresco" aligned perfectly with the artist's taste for texture and also seems to have influenced the use of color and compositional approach in her early works, and Juan Adsuara, from whom she learned the techniques of shading and volume.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

First period: hieratic figuration. After her studies at the School of Fine Arts, between 1950 and 1953/4, Juana Francés went through her first artistic period characterized by a hieratic figuration. Her paintings showcased apparent simplicity, featuring idealized figures with symbolic undertones. She worked with neutral backgrounds and soft colors, displaying a preference for geometry and texture. However, beneath the conventional appearances, there was already a concern for pictorial procedures and mural work, shared by other artists of the time, such as Antoni Tàpies, who had recently started working in this manner. Francés used multiple layers of paint applied with brushstrokes or a palette knife, which she then scratched with a horseshoe nail or rubbed, allowing glimpses of the underlying layers. Starting from 1951-52, she experimented with the encaustic mural technique, anticipating renowned artists like Jasper Johns (American) and Modest Cuixart (Spain), who would use it from 1955 onwards. Juana Francés's use of this technique -originally designed for a hard support-, on a soft support indicated her emphasis on technical experimentation and the support itself, which played a crucial role in her transition towards informal abstraction, highlighted her avant-garde nature.

In terms of themes explored during this stage, the sense of solitude portrayed in her "families" and characters, as well as the frequent presence of empty frames or windows revealing a "dark/black" reality, seem to foreshadow her third stage, "Homínidos y pintura tridimensional" (Hominids and Three-Dimensional Painting).

This period also marked Juana's first gallery exhibitions and travels abroad, expanding her exposure to art beyond national borders. She had the opportunity to travel to Paris in 1951 and 1953 through scholarships, broadening her artistic horizons. She also extended her second trip to include Italy. Upon her return to Spain, she participated in the legendary "Abstract Art Course" held at the Menéndez y Pelayo Summer University in Santander. This course had a profound impact on the young artists present and contributed to the significant emergence of abstraction in Spain. Also, she participated in exhibitions as well as in the Hispanic-American Art Biennials held in Madrid and Barcelona, and was selected for the Venice Biennale in 1954, two of the most important international art events at the time.

## METHODOLOGY

Experimental phase.- During my research for the doctoral thesis which I conducted on Juana Francés, it was interesting to note a period of experimentation between her first and second artistic stages. Like many other artists of her generation, she was undergoing a conscious process of transitioning to a new language: the shift towards abstraction. This form of representation, which today may seem instinctive and belonging to the realm of emotion or psyche -particularly in its "informal<sup>2</sup>" or "non-geometric" aspect - was a deliberate decision for artists of that time, signifying a break from traditional academic teachings.

This period of experimentation lasted for two years (1954-1956), during which the artist worked either exclusively or concurrently with the final phase of her first stage, clearly leaning towards abstraction but still searching for the desired language and technique. These pieces are only found in her legacy and therefore not numerous, but they are sufficient to grasp the doubts that arose for our painter in her decision to change her language. Some works feature abundant material and geometric incisions, created with mural techniques such as encaustic technique, in an attempt to capture both visual and tangible wood-like textures. In others, she explores a certain abstract and surrealistic figurative style, foreshadowing her third stage. These paintings do not present date or signature, indicating that the artist did not consider them to be of sufficient quality for exhibition - in fact, I did not find any that were exhibited during those years. However, she kept them until her passing, suggesting their importance to her in some sense. This gap in the chronology of her exhibitions, along with the author's own statements in her writings where she declares the end of her first stage in 1954 and the beginning of the second in 1956, reaffirms the notion of these two years as a period of experimentation, as well as the seriousness of her intentions towards a new path in abstraction and her commitment to it. (illustration#2)

Second stage. Abstraction, informalism. This period lasted, with variations, until 1963, and is characterized by abstraction without a form and by the introduction of new materials. It was a new style that is now called "informalism" or "abstract expressionism" but which at that time in Europe was

---

<sup>(2)</sup> "Informalismo" is a term created by the Spanish art critic Juan Eduardo Cirlot referred to the art in parallel with American Abstract Expressionism that was being developed in Europe (Spain, Italy, France...) after the II World War that included not only not shaped painted forms but new materials inside the painting (such as sand, textiles or others). Another Spanish Art critic, Moreno Galván, called this art "aformalismo" and in France, Michel Tapié called it "Art Autre" (other art).

called “informalism”, “aformalism” or “art autre” (other art). In 1956, she completely abandoned figurative representation and began exploring a new artistic language. This period can be divided into several sub-stages, reflecting a logical evolution that ultimately constitutes a new artistic phase.

The first moment of this second stage is characterized by **Gestural Abstraction without sand**, which can be located within a brief period in 1956. These works are clearly abstract, featuring large masses of gestural color that tend to use a limited palette of tonalities. The artist applies thick layers of paint, emphasizing texture, but does not introduce any other material elements. However, in the same year, she decided to incorporate sand into her paintings, giving them a prominent role that often contributed to the overall light of the composition. These works were based on contrasts of light and darkness and retain a profound gestural and emotional quality. The second moment of this new stage, characterized by **Gestural and Material Abstraction with sand**, was developed between 1956 and 1960. This phase has been highly valued by critics and the general public. Juana Francés introduced sand as an homage to her Alicante roots, but the challenges of working with fine beach sand led her to discover river sands, which allowed her to experiment with different thicknesses and colors. The palette of this period darkens, with minimal whites against blacks, ochres, browns, and, following her involvement with the El Paso group (where she spent only a few months but which marked a significant event in art history) in 1957, touches of rust colour. Moreover, she chose to bind the pigments not with oil but with other materials, becoming one of the innovative artists who began using acrylic not only in Spain but also around the world (her “El Paso” colleagues continued to use traditional oil paint, even up to the present day).

Texture assumes great importance, and sand provides not only color but also three-dimensionality and relief. The support itself becomes a significant element, often visible in the work. The use of different fabrics in terms of quality and weight reintroduces textural and color elements, and importance is given to empty spaces - both in unpainted areas of the support and through the openings in the mesh of burlap, which become hollow spaces that transcend the two-dimensionality of the artwork (similar to Fontana's incisions). Furthermore, the sand forms explosions and dynamic images that clearly connect with her later series in the 1980s, such as "Underwater Backgrounds" and "Comets." These are pure abstractions, where the artist seeks to express her inner self through expressive and informal techniques: drips, surface scratches (present since her first stage), splashes, etc. All these elements contribute to her painting being not only abstract and expressive but also informal in its treatment and aesthetic.



However, the artist remains true to herself and does not stagnate in a style that garnered praise from national and international critics. She begins to introduce additional colors, and gradually the sand she incorporates becomes thicker, while other materials and found objects are introduced: fragments of brick, ceramics, glass, as well as plastics, buttons, brooches, etc. The collage formed by the initial sand now transforms into an assemblage that converges towards the interior of the composition. These works gradually start to exhibit figurative references, particularly landscapes emotionally linked to the artist. This represents the third moment within her second stage, characterized by **material informality with figurative references**, which develops between 1961 and 1962. Some critics interpreted these works as more decorative, but the reality is that the painter was taking steps towards a new stage. Slowly, within these landscapes, rounded forms began to appear, and with the placement of found objects in specific locations, a sense of a face was suggested. This leads to the fourth and final moment of her second stage: an **informal abstraction with hints of anthropoid forms**, which she explores between 1962 and 1963.

Third stage, hominids and three-dimensional painting, the man and the city. With the artwork dated in 1963 "Es diferente" (It's Different), whose second title is "Man and the City-2," the artist seems to become aware of the transition to a new stage, the third one, where she returns to figurative painting while still using technical and aesthetic resources from abstract expressionism, informalism, and rigorous perspective and geometry. This third stage spans over twenty years, focusing on the "anthropos," as the artist calls it, a human being who is ceasing to be human and transforming into an object, a machine-like entity composed of fragments of all the technical and technological elements that surround them, which have ultimately seemed to dominate them. This individual-object-machine is alone and imprisoned, gazing at us through windows or boxes, unable to communicate with other beings trapped in spaces like theirs, with the only hope of being understood by the viewer. There is a certain social criticism, a pessimism about the human condition, but also humor and tenderness—as deduced from certain comments and drawings by the artist—sometimes expressed through color and other times through the caricaturization of personalities, understanding them as prototypes of people.

However, it is not just a concern for the individual as a human being, but also for contemporary society, especially that of large cities, which dehumanizes, leads to anonymity, and ultimately to loneliness. The artist uses certain images that become symbols: the telephone, the television, the traffic light, glasses, among others. (illustration #3)

In this long third stage, we cannot precisely speak of sub-stages as the

theme remains the same throughout the entire period: the "anthropos." However, a typological evolution can be observed, not only of the "anthropos" but also of the structure that contains it. The hominid evolves from an innocent yet monstrous being, composed of discarded materials already present in her second stage—construction materials, found objects, etc.—to a being created from technological and industrial waste—such as cables, industrial and electrical parts, etc.—while incorporating new objects that provide not only aesthetic characteristics but also symbolic ones: pieces from old watches, antique or modern lenses. These waste materials from a society that has cast them aside are used in the creation of new beings.

As mentioned above, the structure in which the hominid is situated also evolves. This third stage is the most clearly three-dimensional in her entire trajectory, where the artist achieves a work that combines painting and sculpture—or three-dimensionality—in equal parts. The basic black color of the support is at times replaced by vibrant reds, yellows, or blues, and the materials also vary. At certain points, the artist works with plastics, methacrylates, and steels, corresponding to the idea of a more technological "anthropos." The simple framed canvas gradually transforms into a box that contains this being, eventually becoming a more complex structure housing several others within it, incorporating light and movement, or even becoming a space in itself. Her larger pieces, which occupy an entire wall, and her Participation Towers can now be classified as contemporary installations, encompassing all the conceptual elements they bring.

Fourth stage. Return to abstraction, exploration of paper. Underwater backgrounds and comets. After these long twenty years of work on Man and the City, connected with existentialism and a pessimistic view of human reality, it is not surprising that the artist grew weary, both in terms of the subject matter and its execution. Juana Francés begins her fourth stage, the last ten years of her life, with a shift towards pure abstraction in the early 1980s. It is a lyrical abstraction that will constitute the final stage of her artistic and personal journey, represented by her Comets and Underwater Backgrounds. This stage is related to the abstract informalism developed in the mid-1950s, both in form and content, especially in its early sub-stages before transitioning to figurative references. During this period, we can identify two distinct moments. (illustration #4)

From the early 1980s until 1985, when her partner Pablo Serrano passed away, Francés focuses on works on paper. She resumes her longstanding interest in paper-based artwork, aiming to elevate it to the same level as canvas-based works. The gouache is washed repeatedly, refining the paper to the point where

it becomes fused with the supporting board, ultimately creating a new material. Moreover, these washes create the appropriate atmosphere for the abstract themes of her Underwater Backgrounds and Comets, contributing to the expected mobility of these environments, especially in the case of the Underwater Backgrounds, where the optical play is not only more evident but is occasionally reinforced with wedge-shaped boards that enhance the sense of movement in the painted motifs. The success of this endeavor was not fully appreciated. From my point of view, Juana Francés was ahead of her time in this exploration - currently, many young artists express interest in non-traditional painting supports such as paper, as well as in graphic works. Therefore, these works should be reevaluated and critically appreciated, considering both the pursuit of optical effects and the techniques used, such as the gouache washes, and the pioneering use of markers and inks from the graphic arts field.

Starting from 1986 a change occurs, not so much in the themes but in the techniques. The artist leaves behind the use of paper and returns to working with large-sized canvases, perhaps as an expressive necessity following the loss of her partner, from who she was inseparable. Comets and Underwater Backgrounds continue to be lyrical, but now they incorporate similar emotional interests as seen in her second stage of informal abstraction. It is a quick and action-oriented painting style that bears the physical presence of the artist and an almost violent need to communicate the passion for her work, for painting. In this final stage, the sensation conveyed remains vital, dynamic, and energetic, yet it also conveys a great sense of harmony in the forms and movements. The explosions no longer disrupt the boundaries of the canvas as in her second stage; they are now contained within their limits, and there is no need for grandiosity.

## RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Assessment of her stages. Throughout Juana Francés' artistic stages, we find several recurring elements that showcase the overall direction of her creative character. Her relentless exploration is visible both in the treatment of the support material and the artistic techniques employed. From the beginning, she places great importance on texture and matter - whether it be fabrics, paper, boards, or acrylics - including those of the support itself. In her first stage, she works on soft supports using techniques traditionally associated with rigid ones. Additionally, in this initial stage, she uses different qualities of fabric - from coarse burlap or hessian to finer canvases - requiring various treatments that are often left visible, creating an "empty space" between colors that transforms the support into a pictorial and material element, contributing textures and tonality to the artwork. This concept of absence-presence, common in contemporary



sculpture, adds texture and color to her work. This "empty space" is present, in a more or less noticeable manner, in both her fabric-based works and on paper throughout most of her artistic trajectory.

The preparation and finishing of her paintings are also unconventional. She rarely prepares the canvases in the traditional manner, instead generally applying paint or material (with glue) directly onto the fabric. This conscious use of the support as part of the artwork, the innovative techniques employed, such as the inclusion of sand or the early use of acrylics, become evident especially from her second stage onwards. She was one of the pioneers, both nationally and internationally, in exploring these lines of work. Furthermore, Juana Francés is one of the first to introduce non-pictorial materials into her work, starting with sand and later incorporating used and found objects such as construction materials and plastics. She innovates and incorporates these elements, which connect with Dadaism, Arte Povera, and Pop Art, transforming them into assemblages or assemblies towards the end of her second stage, culminating in the cities created in her installations, her Participation Towers, in her third artistic stage. These new materials bring about a change in the execution of the artwork, which can no longer be as fast or gestural; requiring more planning and circumspection.

Conceptualism is another element that defines Juana's work. There is always a reflection in her pieces, even in the more gestural ones, confirming a prior intellectual development in terms of both composition and themes. Of all her stages, the lightest in this regard is the last one, probably due to a mastery of technique that allows her more freedom in other aspects. From my point of view, it represents the most poetic stage of her entire trajectory. The problematic nature of space and time is already hidden in the unreal perspectives of her early compositions, causing a certain unease in the viewer. The different planes of vision presented within a single composition are striking and reminiscent of the experiences of Cézanne, Braque, or Picasso. The same effect is produced by her paintings with figures placed in a room that reveal the cubic space of the enclosure, often presenting the angle formed by two walls in the background, completely altering the perspective and causing a somewhat unsettling optical effect for the viewer. It involves the use of a space between reality and fiction, an intellectual work developed by the artist throughout her entire trajectory.

This fictitious space and time are corroborated by the artist's use of light, which is entirely dependent on her needs. The capture of light on objects, the contrast between light and shadow, and the internal light within the artwork are

common throughout her artistic journey. This concern for the play of light seems to stem from an observation of its effects in nature. It is particularly evident in her stage of abstract informalism and in the Underwater Backgrounds and Comets of her final stage, where her interest in capturing the impression of light and forms to produce an optical effect for the viewer can be appreciated. In this way, she continues the scientific legacy initiated by the Impressionist painters.

The three-dimensionality of her work emerges from her early pieces. Even while still within the parameters of traditional painting, in the scratches, layering of paint, density of brushwork, and experiments with mural techniques such as encaustic painting, one can perceive the artist's preference for texture and relief. This development becomes even more pronounced in her second stage, reaching its peak in the third stage with her Participation Towers, which are contemporary installations, and continuing in the fourth stage, whether through the optical illusions created in her gouache works on paper or through the material charges and textures in her paintings.

## CONCLUSION

As conclusion, the artistic trajectory of Juana Francés demonstrates an artist who did not settle into her success but continued to work and explore in an evolution that always oscillated between rationality and lyricism. Juana dedicated herself to her art, from the introspective world of her early stage to the emotional and spiritual communication of her abstract informalism phase or the underwater backgrounds and comets of her later period, to her concern for the destiny of human beings in her stage of “Man and the City”. Without aiming to please everyone, she remained true to herself and her inner needs. She knew that an artist and their work may not be understood at a given moment, but time ultimately puts things in their rightful place.

Through her innovative artistic approach and notable participation in the Informalist art movement, she left a significant mark on the international art scene through her work and its importance within the 20th-century avant-garde. Francés demonstrated how experimentation and creative freedom can break barriers and contribute to the development of contemporary art. Her legacy endures as a testament to her valuable contribution to international Informalist art.

## REFERENCES

- 1) Antequera, Josep Lluís y Llúcia Romero (2016). Una Estètica Inconformista. Mila Gómez I Vitoria. Centre d'Estudis Mario Silvestre, Ayuntamiento de Alcoy: Alcoy.
- 2) Archer, Michael. Art Since 1960 (2003). Thames & Hudson: London.
- 3) Díaz Sánchez, Julián (1997) La oficialización de la vanguardia artística en la
- 4) postguerra española: el Informalismo en la crítica de arte y los grandes relatos. (tesis doctoral) Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras; Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. Departamento de Historia y Teoría del Arte: Madrid.
- 5) Espí, Adrián y Dionisio Gázquez (2001). Pintores Alicantinos 1900-2000. Diputación de Alicante: Alicante.
- 6) Lengerke, Ch. von, (2005) “La pintura contemporánea. Tendencias en la pintura desde 1945 hasta nuestros días”, en Los maestros de la pintura occidental, Taschen:.
- 7) Molinos Navarro, Natalia (2010). La pintora alicantina Juana Francés: estudio crítico de su obra. (Tesis doctoral). Universidad de Alicante: Alicante.
- 8) Molinos Navarro, Natalia (2012). “Juana Francés. Evolución continua, pasión investigadora”, dentro de Juana Francés. La Colección, IAACC Pablo Serrano: Zaragoza.
- 9) Molinos Navarro, Natalia (2020). “Juana Francés, precursora de nuevas generaciones” en Los caminos de modernización de los artistas de Alicante desde 1950. Del refugio interior y el exilio exterior a la globalización, Universidad de Alicante: Alicante.
- 10) Roche Cárcel, J.A. (2020). Los caminos de modernización de los artistas de Alicante desde 1950. Del refugio interior y el exilio exterior a la globalización, Universidad de Alicante: Alicante.
- 11) Rodríguez Ruíz, Mario (2001). Las exposiciones de pintura en Alicante (1950-1975). Reconstrucción de la actividad expositiva en la ciudad de Alicante a través de su repercusión en la prensa local. (Tesis doctoral) Universidad Politécnica de Valencia: Valencia.
- 12) Sancet Bueno, Maria Pilar (2005). Juana Francés, una intelectual de su época. (Tesis doctoral) Universidad de Zaragoza: Zaragoza.

- 13) Victoria, Salvador (1988). El Informalismo español fuera de España. Biblioteca aragonesa de Cultura: Zaragoza.
- 14) VVAA. Juana Francés, 1924-1990 (1995). Catálogo Exposición Homenaje. Ayuntamiento de Alicante, Consellería de Cultura, Instituto de Cultura Juan Gil-Albert, Fundación Cultural C.A.M.: Alicante.