A retrospective response to **The Magical Universe of Joan Miró: the Artist's Link to France and its Collections** at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, 18 September to 7 December 2002.

UNPACKING MIRÓ'S BOX OF TRICKS

Federico Freschi

If Miró's legion of biographers, critics and apologists are to be believed, the enigmatic Catalan artist's reputation as a 'modern master' and his consequently stellar status in the art historical firmament of the twentieth century seems to rest on three things: first amongst these is his prolific output, comprising a vast outpouring of work in a variety of media executed over nearly eight decades of artistic life. Second is his immense influence, both on his contemporaries in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s, as well as on the New York School of the 1940s, and the subsequent (some might say consequent) entrenchment of a certain kind of lyrical abstraction as the *sine qua non* of mainstream modern art. The third, and probably most significant factor is his fantastical and highly idiosyncratic artistic vision, the putative 'Magical Universe' of the title of the Standard Bank Gallery's recent exhibition. Indeed, this exhibition effectively reinforced all three these ideas, not least in its uncritical acceptance of the notion of Miró as 'one of Europe's most important artists', a selection of whose works had, at great expense and inconvenience, generously been 'curated specifically for … Johannesburg' (Catalogue 2002:8, 9). Notwithstanding both such clumsy attempts at hagiography as well as some rather dubious works on display, the exhibition was nonetheless compelling.

This article was prompted by a desire to look beyond the hype and mystification that inevitably seems to surround the large-scale showing of the work, especially in South Africa, of a 'modern European master' in order to come to terms with precisely why Miró's work has such enduring appeal. To this end, I argue that it is the very open-ended nature of Miró's work and its consequent ability to elicit infinite metaphoric play that ensures its continued interest, or, to put it differently, that Miró's work is perhaps best understood in the context of the kind of postmodern reading that sees the act of interpretation as fundamental to constructing meaning, as opposed to deterministic modernist readings that aim to find closed meanings based on the artist's biography, on his ostensible use of symbols, and/or on the formal qualities of the works themselves.[1] Thus although not strictly a review of the exhibition, the article pursues this idea in relation to a number of critical strands suggested by both the show and its catalogue, including problems around issues of artistic integrity and commercialism, Miró's fraught relationship to Surrealism, as well as the notion of 'primitivism' and references to child art in his work. Finally, it suggests that harnessing the very open-ended qualities of Miró's work as a curatorial strategy might have gone a long way towards eradicating a lingering taint of neo-colonialism (the European Light of Civilisation shining in Darkest Africa …) that, despite the best of curatorial intentions, clung indelibly to the edges of the show.

Miró, Maeght and Money

With the exception of a few of the works lent by the Bouquinerie de l'Institut in Paris as well as unnamed 'important private collections' (Catalogue 2002), the bulk of the exhibition drew from the holdings of the Maeght Foundation[2] in the south of France (thus the 'link to France and its collections' of the exhibition's subtitle). The show therefore consisted largely[3] of work executed after the Second World War, by which time Miró was already an acknowledged and, indeed, highly acclaimed international artist.[4] The period(s) and different media of work thus represented notwithstanding, the exhibition therefore effectively represented the lifelong themes, images and imagery that had first propelled Miró into the forefront of the Surrealist Movement in the 1920s[5] and which, *mutatis mutandis* continued to do so until his death in 1983. Thus, while the exhibition made no claims to providing the kind of critical and formal 'sweep' required of a true retrospective, it was undoubtedly – at least in terms of the formal content and iconography of the works on show – representative not only of the Maeght Foundation's holdings, but also more generally of Miró's entire *oeuvre*.

Indeed, it is this very reworking of themes and images that have caused more than one commentator to argue cynically that Miró (and the same might be said of Dalí, Chagall, and other prolific, popular 'masters' of the mid-twentieth century) was perhaps more concerned with capitalising on the commodity status of his ever-increasing output than with engaging in the rarefied pursuits of High Art. In this respect Richardson (2001:188) argues that Miró's prolific output and experimentation with media other than painting (including

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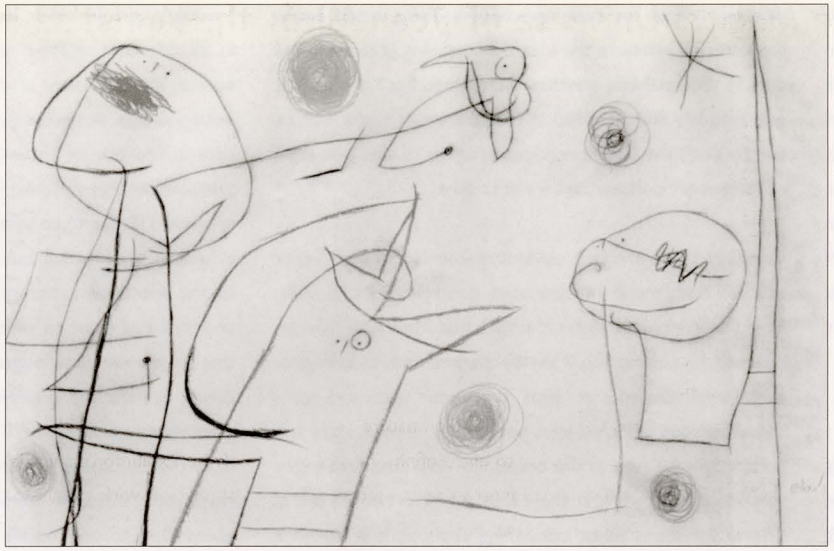

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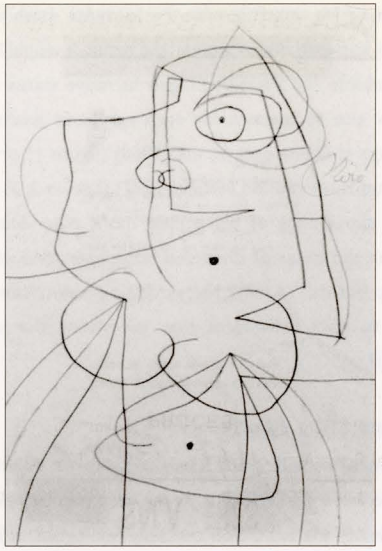

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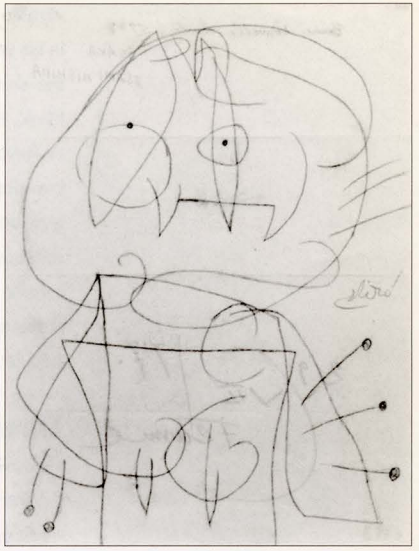

1 Joan Miró, *Personnages et oiseau dans la nuit*, 1976. Charcoal and wax crayons on paper, 51.6x79.5cm. ©Fondation Maeght, St Paul

2 Joan Miró, *Femme*, 1977. Graphite on paper, 24.6x17cm. ©Fondation Maeght, St Paul

3 Joan Miró, *Femme*, 1977. Graphite on paper, 23.9x18.3cm. ©Fondation Maeght, St Paul

ceramics and tapestry) after the Second World War was largely conditioned by the 'colossal rise in his prices', which were in turn driven by his Paris dealer, Aimé Maeght, who 'tended to turn his artists [Maeght also represented, *inter alia*, Chagall, Giacometti and Calder] into lucrative little factories churning out products that were recognisable to the point of self-parody (Richardson (2001:188).

In other words, having deservedly established a reputation as a legitimate 'master', Miró the mature artist was not above producing work that may be considered at best gratuitous and at worst meretricious, knowing that it would be assured of substantial commercial value as long as it contained that most coveted of logos, the artist's signature. As Danto (1997:107) puts it,

> In this regard [Miró] bears a resemblance to Chagall who was a great artist when he was in tension with the ideologues of the School of Paris, but who simply manufactured Chagalls when the tensions eased and commerce took over.

The debate around the relationship between the quality and authenticity of an artwork and commercial art dealing is a complex one, and it is not my intention to enter into it here. Nonetheless, I would argue that some of the works on show certainly posed some difficult questions around their intrinsic artistic merit (formal or otherwise) as opposed to their status as autographs (and thus imbued, willy-nilly, with something of the mystical status of a relic). This, of course, begs the question around one of the fundamental tenets of art dealing, collecting and curating, namely what constitutes value in an artwork in the first place, if it is not, indeed, the individual mark of, or intervention by, the 'master'? Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) and Manzoni's *Merda d'artista* (*Artist's Shit*) (1961) are classic examples of this kind of solipsistic relationship between the artist and his product, where the very fact of his intervention – Duchamp's transformation of the everyday and simultaneously deflating bourgeois cultural pretensions by the simple act of renaming a urinal and placing it in a different context; Manzoni capitalising on the commercial alchemy that can transform his own excrement into the 'gold' of avant-garde notoriety – constitutes the artwork, rather than the resulting object *per se*. This combination of radical reductionism and privileging of the conceptual over the material is a typical manifestation of that branch of modernism that expressed itself in terms of a nihilistic (and, in retrospect, touchingly naïve) belief in the possibility of a point zero, of a sweeping away of all received traditions, conventions and codes of representation in the service of who-knew-what kind of future.

Miró's modernism is, however, of the more formal (and indeed formalist) variety, one that recognises the dialectic between the past, the present and the future, and as such locates itself comfortably within the established discourses of the avant-garde without necessarily engaging them polemically. In short, looking at this exhibition one would have been forgiven for thinking that Miró, without ever engaging in the furious discourses and critical debates around the very modernism that he – however unwittingly – had been instrumental in promoting, spent a great deal of his

mature artistic life tinkering with the formulae established in his youth, knowing that whatever the result, it would bear the unmistakable and therefore highly lucrative status of 'a Miró'. How else to account for such egregious examples as *Personnage et oiseau dans la nuit* (1968) (figure 1) or the two drawings, both entitled *Femme* (1977) (figures 2, 3) that give every appearance of being little more than doodles scribbled on the backs of discarded notepaper (and which cannot help but call to mind the sardonic pronouncement, attributed to Kurt Schwitters, that 'everything the artist spits is art')?

Interpreting Miró

However, notwithstanding any issues and debates regarding the intrinsic merit (or lack of it, as the case may be) of the work on display, the exhibition certainly reinforced, at least on a formal level, the consistency of style and iconography that is so characteristic of Miró's work. For Miró's work is nothing if not easily recognisable – armed with even the most basic knowledge of modern art, casual visitors to art museums would probably be able to identify his particularly idiosyncratic language, characterised as it is as much by a certain whimsical charm and playfulness in its crudely drawn and sculpted characters as by the use of brilliant, primary colours and incongruous juxtapositions. However, while the characteristic nature of the work may aid in identification, it does not necessarily allow for satisfactory interpretation and/or assimilation by an audience confronted with the elusive and often contradictory criteria that define 'mastery'. In other words, the oft-recurring and seemingly random interplay of forms, lines and blotches and recognisable but puzzlingly combined three-dimensional forms presented as 'masterworks' by a twentieth-century 'master' inevitably raises a number of questions regarding how meaning relates to the work in and of itself. Typically, interpretative strategies fall either into one of two camps: the iconographic or the formalist. Both strategies employ biographical data in order, in the case of the former, to find intense iconographic significance in even the most innocuous-seeming details, and in the latter to promote the idea that meaning is to be found only in the aesthetic qualities themselves. Both camps flirt outrageously with the notion that the work might well be (surely not!) the unselfconscious progeny of that *bête noire* of serious art criticism, 'art for art's sake.'

Certainly, there are two obvious elements in Miró's work that aid both these interpretative strategies: Firstly, unlike later generations of abstract artists that Miró may have influenced, his abstraction is always characterised by recognisable, literal elements or 'signs' that recur again and again: the ubiquitous birds, women, heads, suns, moons, stars and *personnages* (as well as the occasional dog) that first began to populate his work in the 1920s. As Miró himself put it, '[f]orm for me is never something abstract. It is always a token of something … never an end in itself' (Schmalenbach 1987:52).

Thus, since they declare themselves so obviously as signs, these elements or ciphers are clearly designed to be 'read' at some semiotic level, and will therefore reward the viewer keen to infer implicit iconographic meanings. This is particularly applicable at the level of symbolic interpretation,[6] where the relationship between the sign and what it signifies is an arbitrary, conventional and generally unmotivated or even idiosyncratic one (e.g. the recurring image of the 'bird' as symbolic of 'artistic imagination').

Secondly, and also unlike the later abstractionists whose work more often than not went by the catch-all title of 'untitled', Miró's descriptive and often poetic titles allow a certain preliminary – if ambiguous – access. Whether rooted in literary sources or in his own private obsessions, these titles had, for the artist, an important role in animating the work. As Miró put it, 'I invent a world from a supposedly dead thing. And when I give it a title, it becomes even more alive' (Rowell 1987:249).

I would argue, however, that far from anchoring the work in an accessible realm of meaning, autobiographical or otherwise, the ambiguity of the titles tends to reinforce the notion of the elusiveness of meaning rather than to elucidate it. The title of a painting dated 1964, *Vol d'oiseau a la première étincelle de l'aube* (*Bird's flight at the first scintillation of sunrise*) (figure 4), to take an example from the exhibition, is amazingly evocative, but bears little obvious relationship to the seemingly arbitrary arrangement of lines, squiggles and daubs of paint to which it is attached apart from setting the viewer on a frustrating search for visual clues (and calling to mind the uninspired, if well-meaning, prattle of a gallery tour guide, '… here you can see the rays of the sun; here the trajectory of the bird's flight …'). On the other hand, some titles are literal to the point of banality – *Tête et dos d'une poupée* (*A doll's head and back*) (1967) (figure 5), also on show, is just that: a doll's head and body attached to a crushed paint-tin and cast in bronze. (After the poetic flights of fancy of the period immediately pre- and post World War II, Miró's titles became more and more literal, but never to the point of being blandly 'untitled'). It would appear that this equivocation is a deliberate strategy on the part of the artist. On the one hand it serves to create a certain mystique around the object, but, more importantly, it points on the other to the very subjectivity of meaning; the inescapable fact that any artwork, by its very nature, will assume meanings beyond the intentions or expectations of its maker. As Schmalenbach (1987:48) puts it in his discussion of Miró's sculptures, 'an artist who does not state his meanings unequivocally is not looking for unequivocal interpretations'.

However one chooses to approach it, Miró's iconography of signs clearly forms a bridge between the figurative and the abstract, an attempt, as it were, to 'represent the un-representable'. The ensuing 'galaxy of images' (Crump 2002:18) with its dazzling array of constantly mutating forms thus seems simultaneously to invite and yet obstruct interpreta-

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4 Joan Miró, *Vol d'oiseau à la première étincelle de l'aube*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 162x130cm. ©Fondation Maeght, St Paul

5 Joan Miro, *Tête et dos d'une poupée*, 1967. Bronze, Foundry Parellada, Barcelona, 33.5x22.5x18cm. ©Fondation Maeght, St Paul

tion; meanings are at best ambiguous and at worst entirely elusive. The seeming playfulness of the work adds another layer of complexity, asking, as it does, whether such childish exuberance in fact warrants or even requires deeper analysis. Then again, and leaving aside for the moment cynical debates about material gain, the very repetitiveness of themes and images over nearly eight decades creates a lingering sense that the artist was continually grappling with issues lying beyond the reach of a merely superficial reading of obvious signs or self-indulgent play. In this regard, Miró acknowledged his 'great, poetic sense of humour', but was quick to point out that this was rooted in a 'tragic and taciturn nature' (Schmalenbach 1987:48). 'It is possible,' Miró said, 'that any humour comes from my need to escape the tragic side of my being. It may be a reaction, but it is an unconscious one' (Schmalenbach 1987:48).

One could argue that this is something of a *cri de coeur* of an artist who was perhaps not always taken as seriously as he might have liked[7] trying to lay claim to the true 'seriousness' required of an 'important master'. Conversely, one could equally argue that the work itself betokens a degree of seriousness not only in the meditative, questioning quality underlying the implicit humour, but also in the diligent and intelligent application of underlying stylistic 'rules'. Despite being executed in a wide variety of forms and media, Miró's drawn and sculpted lines always conform to a characteristic flow, as indeed do both his two- and three-dimensional compositional devices. This distinctive quality, the ability to 'conjure lines on canvas that appear not to be painted, drawn or incised, but to float on the surface of his coloured grounds like twists of thread' (Richardson 2001:189), betokens a certain formal rigour in the approach to the business of art making which is every bit as serious in its attention to the details of composition, balance and form as that advocated by the Beaux-Arts style academy in which he received his early training.[8] It would seem that, for Miró, representing the un-representable was not an enterprise to be lightly undertaken.

Representing the un-representable: Miró and Surrealism

It is this very attempt to represent the un-representable (*i.e.* the stuff of dreams, the imagination and the unconscious) that links Miró most closely with Surrealism, and despite Miró's disinclination to identify wholeheartedly with the movement, there are many aspects to his work, both formal and iconographic, that can be classified as Surrealist. Principally amongst these one might cite the idiosyncratic editing and veiling of subject matter, the overtly playful and childlike mood of pictures, the codified sexual themes and imagery, and, not least, the exploitation of 'automatic' and 'chance' elements (and of course of 'found' objects in the later sculptures): little wonder then, that Breton described Miró as 'perhaps the most surrealist of us all' (Fer *et al* 1993:77).

Richardson's (2001: 181) characterisation of Miró as a 'reluctant Surrealist' (Richardson is particularly apposite as regards the notion of chance and automatism in his work, generally considered to be the two most salient aspects linking him with the Surrealists). Although the work produced in the general ambit of Surrealism in the mid-1920s consists largely of a seemingly spontaneous, playful and unplanned (and thus 'automatic') production of semi-abstract forms and lines, they were in fact generally developed from preliminary sketches and drawings, many of which include grids for the scaling up of the work onto a larger canvas (Fer *et al* 1993:77; Doepel 2002:91). Indeed, as evidenced by a number of examples from the exhibition in question even the later works, often celebrated for their 'looseness' and spontaneity, show evidence of preliminary sketches in the case of the paintings and gouaches, and erasure in the case of the drawings. As mentioned above, this insistence on a tightly planned pictorial structure bears testimony as much to Miró's academic training, as it does to his lifelong concern with the formal qualities of art making *per se*: Miró's art is nothing if not a (sometimes elegiac, sometimes prosaic) comment on the process of creativity – if not 'art for art's sake' then certainly 'art *about* art'. As he himself put it, 'I have always paid attention to plastic construction and not merely poetic associations. That is what separates me from the Surrealists'[9] (Schmalenbach 1987:50).

Miró's surrealism, such as it exists, is to be found more in his private vocabulary of signs, with its autobiographical, private obsessions, its sublimated sexual themes, its invocation of a dream-like, hallucinatory world.[10] However, this cannot fail to beg the question: why should he engage in the (paradoxical) act of 'constructing' automatism; of, as it were, 'planning spontaneity'? Understanding this paradox requires an understanding of Miró's complex relationship to Surrealism, or more specifically Jouffroy's (1994:26) notion that 'Surrealism, for Miró, contains realism and does not exclude it'. This statement needs to be understood in the light of the underlying concerns of Surrealism, particularly the interest in the unconscious, and the strategies that it employed in

attempting to engage with, and make explicit, the realm of the unconscious. Primary amongst these is the interest in Freud's theories of psychoanalysis and the interpretation of dreams, which by the 1920s were fairly well publicised and increasingly accessible to an audience beyond the Viennese scientific and medical fraternity.[11] Freud's theories of the unconscious mind provided compelling insights into the notion that social relations in modern society were veiled or hidden by what was normally accepted as 'reality'; that beneath the surface of things lie psychic and social forces over which individuals have little or no control (Fer *et al* 1993:180). While the process of psychoanalysis could serve as an external intervention in unlocking the subconscious, Freud argued that dreams revealed the unconscious mind in a way not otherwise possible in waking life (as did daydreams, slips of the tongue – the so-called 'Freudian slip' – and memory lapses). The Surrealists, rallying around Breton's notion of art as the expression of the 'actual functioning of thought' (Fer *et al* 1993:52) found in Freud's theories both inspiration and justification[12] for their interest in 'pure psychic automatism' (Fer *et al* 1993:52) and the exploration of the imagery of dreams; in pushing beyond the accepted conventions of reality and what they saw as the artificial boundaries of rationalism.

A host of formal devices and attitudes that underpin Surrealist art making are in one way or another indebted to Freudian psychology. The notion of the chance encounter for example, whether by 'accident' (*e.g.* Masson's automatic drawing; the *Exquisite corpse*; Ernst's *Decalcomania*) or by means of the juxtaposition of incongruous elements (Oppenheim's fur-covered teacup and saucer; Masson's collages) are strongly reminiscent of the kind of projective techniques[13] used by psychoanalysts as a means to 'unlocking' the unconscious mind. Similarly, the recurrent themes of sexuality and sexual ambiguity, the exploration of the landscape of dreams and nightmares, the references to the subconscious 'primitive' and the almost obsessive, fetish-like attachment to 'found' objects, layered, as they are, with multiple levels of meaning and association, in one way or another resonate with Freudian notions of psychoanalysis and the unconscious.

Although Miró was never concerned directly with Freud's theories, the fluidly abstract work that he produced under the aegis of Surrealism clearly engages with these concerns, evoking, as it does (albeit problematically, as I have shown above) notions of the automatic outpouring of an unfettered unconscious. Certainly, Miró was aware that his creativity surfaced from his unconscious mind: 'The starting point,' he said, 'is altogether irrational, brutal, unconscious; I begin as an animal would' (Schmalenbach 1987:51). In a further acknowledgement of a state of heightened awareness as a fundamental impetus to the creative process he also wrote in the 1920s that his drawings issued from hallucinations brought about by fasting (Schmalenbach 1987:51). Although (and even by his own telling) it does not therefore require much critical effort to claim Miró for the Surrealists, the notions of arbitrariness and chance that lie at the heart of much of the Surrealist project, as well as its implicit social critique, did not sit comfortably with Miró the formalist. An overriding sense of control, coupled with a high degree of aesthetic self-consciousness (and the implicit self-criticality inevitably contained in such an attitude[14]), seems always to have taken precedence over chance occurrences. As Miró put it,

> Some accidental blotches made while cleaning my brush inspired me to a new picture. The second stage, however, is carefully calculated. The first one is free, unconscious; but after that the picture is completely controlled in conformity to the desire for disciplined work that I have had since the beginning (Schmalenbach 1987:51).

It would seem then that the 'realism' which Jouffroy suggests is contained within Miró's surrealism is at least in part the insistence on the formal 'reality' of art making; an awareness of and engagement with the formal properties of the material in terms of a sense of formal rigour that in many ways is the antithesis of chance and spontaneity.

Getting to the Heart of Things: Miró and Primitivism

While the Surrealists' interest in Freud's theories of the unconscious centred largely around that body of work devoted to the interpretation of dreams, Freud's further identification of the unconscious as inherently infantile (*i.e.* forever conditioned by all that is repressed from early life) had profound implications for their engagement with notions of the 'primitive'. Of course the idea of the 'primitive' had been a powerful energising force in the development of modern art at least since Gauguin predominantly for two reasons. The first of these is the notion that the 'primitive' seemed to promise access to a utopian ideal of 'unspoilt nature and uncontaminated humanity' (Jordan & Weedon 1996:320). To many artists this was a pleasing prospect, given burgeoning industrialisation and the relentlessly destructive march of progress that increasingly characterised the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Secondly, the art, artifacts and imagery of Europe's 'others' (Africans, Asians, gypsies, the insane, prostitutes, criminals, children and women,[15] to name but a few deemed by western patriarchal discourse to belong to the realm of 'nature' rather than 'culture') provided reference points for the development of a new formal language that would enable artists to transgress established boundaries of representation. Principal in terms of the latter was a major paradigmatic shift from styles rooted in *perception*, and the slavish attempt at a mimetic recreation of the world as the *sine qua non* of serious-minded art, to styles rooted in *conceptualisation*, where the critical engagement with the underlying ideas and ideals takes precedence over Platonic notions of representation and rationalism. As Herbert Read put it in 1933, '[w]e can learn more of the essential nature of art from its earliest manifestation on primitive man (and in children) than from its intellectual elaboration in great periods of culture' (Rhodes 1994:56).

Miró engages with the 'primitive' at various levels. There are references to folk and peasant art, particularly of his native Catalonia, child art, the subconscious 'primitive' and not least in his abiding interest in the animistic and the atavistic: 'A tree,' he is quoted as saying, 'is also something human' (Catalogue 2002:20). There is evidence to suggest that Miró was interested in both Paleolithic rock painting and the frescoes of Romanesque churches in Catalonia (Dupin 1962: 14), that is, and in different ways, in the 'primitive' antecedents of European art. Formal elements derived from these various 'primitives' abound in Miró's work, not least in the use of uncomplicated, frontal, cartoon-like figures, bold and/or primary colours outlined in black, and a sense of hierarchical rather than naturalistic scale. His relationship to the 'primitive' goes beyond merely formal quotation however, embracing, as it did, the notion that the arts and crafts of Catalan peasants (as well, of course, as the 'primitive' forms of the Catalan Romanesque frescoes) somehow provided a point of entry into the realisation of a worldview, beloved of primitivists everywhere, in which everything is 'simple, pure and without pretension or artifice' (Rhodes 1994:23). In Miró this attitude proved to be surprisingly tenacious, surviving well into the post-Second World War period, by which time it had been largely discredited in serious academic and cultural circles. In a 1959 interview, for example, he said,

> The plate that a peasant eats his soup out of is much more interesting to me than the ridiculously rich plates of rich people. Folk art always moves me. In this art there are no tricks, there is no fakery. It goes straight to the heart of things (Catalogue 2002:16).

This statement is, of course, highly problematic in the extent to which it views the 'otherness' of the peasant through the distorting lens of a Western patriarchal discourse about society and its hierarchies, (and thus implicitly casts the peasant in the role of the 'noble savage'). Such a statement clearly reveals Miró very much as a man of his time and social class (and not least a recognised 'master' of modern art who, whether he liked to admit it or not, was well on his way to joining the ranks of the 'ridiculously rich'), who could overlook with impunity the inherent social and iconographic complexities that underpin the ostensible 'simplicity' of folk art. It also expresses something of his identification with a particularly tenacious idea of his native Catalan as a land of the freedom-loving, rebellious peasant. Typical of this construct is Dupin's (1962:13)description of this mythic creature as being

> Attached to his land and its traditions ... a rude fellow who works hard for his living [and whose] candid cheerfulness and frequently savage humor [*sic*] temper his impetuosity and contradict his rustic simplicity.

Indeed, Miró's art is most frequently constructed in the literature[16] as being somehow essentially 'Catalonian'; deeply rooted in the imagery and attitudes of his homeland, or what Richardson (2001:181) identifies as the 'intense local piety, known as Catalanisme'. The problem with this kind of reading, as indeed with any reading based on biography or autobiography, is twofold: firstly, without the (practically impossible) advantage of intense personal engagement with the artist throughout his/her life, there is simply no way of assessing its relevance or accuracy, while reports from such individuals as may have had first-hand access are inevitably distorted by their own perceptions. Secondly, and more importantly, it operates under the assumption that the artist ultimately determines the meaning of a work, both in terms of its conception and execution. While this is, to a certain extent, indubitably true, the implicit corollary – that the artist therefore continues to exert his/her control over the artwork and how it will be interpreted once s/he relinquishes it to the world – most certainly is not. Miró's 'Catalanisme' may well provide some insight into his particular view of the world and the ways in which he chose to depict it, not least in terms of the appeal to the 'primitive'. However, to construct it as the very *raison d'être* of his primitivism is no more helpful in terms of a serious critical engagement with the work than letting Van Gogh's severed ear dictate an understanding of his work or seeing Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* as simply a fraught response to the (unfounded, as it turns out) concern that he may have contracted syphilis. Ultimately this sort of reading seems to ignore what makes these artists 'great' in the first place – and what sets them apart from legions of aspirant geniuses, temporarily disguised as Sunday painters – namely the ability to transcend the mundane constraints of their own lives and through their work engage society in a complex discourse about its values, beliefs and the ways in which ideas about itself are constructed and manipulated.

Although the inescapable references to child art in Miró's work – the broad, irregular outlines, the simplified figure notations and arbitrary proportions and perspective – similarly engage with notions of the 'primitive', they too cannot be explained away in terms of 'Catalanisme' (unless, of course, one were to conclude that all Catalonians are to be viewed as being simple-minded children, a view at which I daresay even the most ardent exponent of the romanticised view of Miró's Catalonian roots would baulk!). It seems, rather, that he is appealing to something of the spontaneous expressiveness and unselfconscious creativity of child art, which by virtue of its ostensibly 'instinctive' nature is often viewed as less bound by convention and history, and is seen therefore to be closer to an essential, atavistic core of the creative self. In a similar way to that in which he engages with folk art, Miró seems thus to find in the language and imagery of child art a springboard into a sense of primal, creative energy, uncluttered by the codes and conventions of what the Expressionist Emil Nolde called the 'over-bred, pale, and decadent' forms of European art (Rhodes 1994:23). The resulting work is, however, frequently problematic, not least in the extent to which it seems to overlook or ignore the fact that although child art may appear abstract to adult viewers,

to the producer it is as correct a rendering of the subject as his/her motor skills and degree of cognitive development will allow. Even with the best of intentions, an adult working in a self-consciously naïve way to reclaim or reproduce the effects of what appeals to the adult viewer in the first place, namely the charming distortions and abstractions, deliberately subverts this. The resulting work thus becomes at best extremely layered and sophisticated (ironically so, given the presumed pursuit of naïveté and innocence), and at worst, so mannered in its self-conscious technical clumsiness that one might easily understand how a viewer unconvinced by, or suspicious of, the mystification that inevitably seems to cloud any showing of or writing about modern art might well resort to disparaging mutterings along the lines of 'my five year old could do better than that …'. Goldwater (1986: ix) notes that this, not uncommon, criticism is

> the most difficult of all judgments to answer, since it involves the recognition, but not the admiration, of an apparent spontaneity of inspiration and simplicity of technique whose excellence we have come to take for granted.

Given this fundamental problem of self-consciousness, and knowing that he could only hope at best to regain the freshness and intuitiveness of child art only very briefly, and at worst only at a sophisticated and highly structured level, this once again begs the question: why should Miró have contrived at the 'instinctive simplicity' of child art?

One can only speculate: Perhaps he used the references to child art as a formal device (much like 'accidental' devices) to suggest an accessible starting point for sharing or entering into his 'magical universe', leaving viewers to make up their own minds about possible meanings and interpretations in much the same way as they would when confronting the imaginative, idiosyncratic constructions of child art. Or perhaps Miró was inviting his audience to make a conceptual leap – indeed was taking that very leap himself – into the prelapsarian state of childhood, where the dividing line between the real and imagined is very fine, where blotches and scribbles can assume a powerful and intensely personal significance just as easily as a seemingly random blob of pigment can become an important 'personage', a clumsy squiggle the graceful flight of a bird, a scribble of stars an entire universe. In short, reminding us of that inimitable quality of being able to perceive acutely and to feel with enthusiasm that is the joyous preserve of childhood, all-but eroded by the messy business of growing up. As Miró put it, '[t]he older I get and the more I master the medium, the more I return to my earliest experiences. I think that at the end of my life I will recover all the force of my childhood' (Rowell 1987:65).[17]

The Box of Tricks

Debates around, quality, context and meaning aside, Miró's work, as I stated at the outset, remains compelling. Why is this? Bataille described surface of Miró's late paintings as a 'lid' that concealed 'a box of tricks' (Fer *et al* 1993:245), and perhaps the enduring appeal of Miró's work has something to do with the conceptual effort required in prising open this lid. Indeed, it is this very sense of infinite metaphoric play that allows the act of interpretation to become part of the meaning – subconscious meeting subconscious, as it were – and which saves the work from the omnipresent threat of being dismissed merely as solipsistic tinkering.

Nonetheless, from a curatorial point of view one is left with a lingering feeling that there are many other tricks that could or should have been unpacked from this particular box. Glaringly absent, for example, was any real attempt to frame the work critically in a South African context (it was, after all, ostensibly 'curated specifically for … Johannesburg' (Catalogue:8)) in a way that went beyond the problematic coloniser / colonised opposition, or, to put it differently, the presentation of first world art to a third world audience in such a way as to ensure the overriding significance of the former. Admittedly, Alan Crump (2002:19) attempted to forge a relevant connection with the South African context in the catalogue by arguing that

> Miró must have certainly been aware of the tracings and linear copies of Koi San or bushman art which were circulating in Spain as early as 1915 … these visual riches from Southern Africa would have slotted very comfortably into [his] serious preoccupation with Neolythic [sic] art.

But no sooner has he established this potentially interesting (but frustratingly unacknowledged) reference, than he effectively nullifies it by adding that, '[t]his is not to suggest that Miró referred specifically to the art of South Africa but rather absorbed the iconography in a mysterious well within his subconscious, (Crump 2002:19). This leaves us where we started: in silent awe before the enigmatic unfolding of the great master's prodigious subconscious, and no closer to being able either to deconstruct the carefully-nurtured myth of greatness or to frame the exhibition in an accessible and meaningful context. Brenner (2001:100) identified this very problem in her review of the catalogue of the Standard Bank Gallery's previous 'modern European master' exhibition, *March Chagall: The Light of Origins 1949 – 1977* held in 2000:

> In a show billed as having been curated especially for South Africa, there is precious little engagement with the South African context or with the South African viewer. Connections between Chagall and South African cultural production need to be unpacked, rather than merely alluded to.

As with the Chagall show, less emphasis on the 'importance' of the 'master' as one of the 'greats' in the modernist pantheon and more focus on the myriad possibilities suggested by his work might have enabled this exhibition to go beyond the kind of neo-colonialist mentality that frames the ostensible greatness of European culture in such a way that the local is seen as at best eternally

aspirant and at worst entirely wanting.[18]

Reading between the lines of curatorial pomp, however, it seems that the strength and enduring appeal of Miró's work is the way in which it revels in the autonomy of aesthetic imagination; in the freedom from the pretentiousness and smug self-consciousness of 'High Art'. As the artist himself put it,

> If the interplay of lines and colours does not expose the inner drama of the creator, then it is nothing more than bourgeois entertainment. The forms expressed by an individual ... must reveal the movement of a soul trying to escape the reality of the present ... in order to approach new realities, to offer other men the possibility of rising above the present (Catalogue 2002:88).

In the final analysis, *The Magical Universe of Joan Miró* certainly succeeded in showing the extent to which the artist's 'box of tricks' is crammed with complexities and contradictions. Nonetheless, it seems that a curatorial strategy centred on the ostensible 'greatness' of the artist unfortunately allowed the lugubrious mantle of 'bourgeois entertainment' to stifle all the incipient possibilities of his work to imaginatively '[rise] above the present'.

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Notes

1 For typical modernist interpretations that seek to trace direct causal links between, for example, aspects of the artist's biography and his work, see *inter alia* Dupin (1962), Penrose (1970), Weelen (1960), Rowell (1972) and Jouffroy (1994).

2 The Aimé and Marguerite Maeght Foundation in Saint Paul was officially inaugurated in its purpose-built home, designed by the Catalan architect Josep Lluis Sert, in 1964. A monument to the shrewd collecting policy of its founding patron, the dealer Aimé Maeght, the Foundation has considerable holdings of important modern artists, including Bonnard, Braque, Calder, Chagall, Giacometti, Léger and, of course, Miró.

3 The exhibition showed five works executed before 1945, *viz*. three lithographs illustrating Tristan Tzara's *L'arbre des voyageurs* (1930), and two gouaches, *Deux personnages* (1942) and *Paysage, oiseau, étoile* (1943).

4 Following his first successful one-man exhibition in Paris in 1925, two of Miró's paintings were shown in an Exhibition of International Modern Art in Brooklyn, New York. This was followed by a one-man show at the Valentine Gallery in New York in 1930, and a large retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1941 after which his international status was assured, with important exhibitions being staged regularly throughout the art capitals of the world.

5 Miró met a number of individuals associated with Dada on his first trip to Paris in 1920, and started participating actively in Surrealist exhibitions from 1924 onwards (Catalogue 2002:118). This direct association continued until at least 1932 with an exhibition at the 'Salon des Surindépendents' in Paris.

6 For more on symbolic readings on Miró's work, see Rowell and Krauss (1972), Dupin (1987) and Doepel (1985, 2002).

7 Miró is one of the few modern 'masters' who is consistently described in terms of his 'child-like' or 'simple' nature. Goldwater, writing in 1938, suggested that Miró 'continues to have something childlike about him, both as a person and a painter' (Goldwater [1938] 1986: 204). He also quotes Breton as noting "'a certain arresting of his [Miró's] personality at an infantile stage'" (Goldwater [1938] 1986: 204), as well as his contemporary Leiris's comment that, '[there is] "nothing sophisticated about [Miró], as there is with so many other surrealists"' (Goldwater [1938] 1986: 204). In his epic 1962 monograph, Dupin remarks on the artist's 'profound naïveté of the heart' (Dupin 1962:10), while Richardson describes the Miró that he met for a 1960 interview as 'a very small, very courteous, very reticent man with just a touch of the troglodyte' (Richardson 2002:183), and goes on to describes how Picasso tended to view Miró as 'a little boy ... riding a scooter (*trottinette*),' and would thus cry, "'*Toujours la trottinette, toujours la trottinette*" [always the scooter]' whenever Miró's name was mentioned (Richardson 2002:183).

8 Miró received early formal training in art at the School of Fine Arts at La Lonja, which, according to Dupin, was

'concerned with turning out well-trained practitioners of the applied arts … rather than "artists"' (Dupin 1962:44). He subsequently trained at Francisco Galí's Escola d'Art, a more progressively-minded institution, or, as Dupin puts it, 'an anti-academic academy' (Dupin 1962:49).

9 Despite such protestations, Miró had a very direct association with the Surrealists throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and, as shown on this exhibition, frequently contributed illustrations for their poetry (see endnote 4 above).

10 It has been suggested (by, *inter alia*, Penrose, Dupin, Crump) that Miró's idiosyncratic vocabulary of signs may have derived partly from his training in Galí's technique of 'drawing from touch' (*i.e.* blindfolded).

11 *The interpretation of dreams* was first published in 1900, followed by *The psychopathology of everyday life* in 1901. Although he made his first international presentation of his theories at Clark University in Massachusetts in 1909, Freud's work was not published in French until the 1920s (*The psychopathology of everyday life* in 1922 and *The interpretation of dreams* in 1925). Fer (1993:182) argues that this first hand access to Freud's texts lent them certain vividness in contemporary France, and hence to the Surrealists in particular.

12 Freud distanced himself from the Surrealists on the grounds that the unconscious was essentially un-representable (Fer *et al* 1993:176).

13 The Rorschach Ink Blot Test, designed by the Swiss psychoanalyst Hermann Rorschach in 1921, is perhaps the best known of the psychoanalytic projective techniques. The underlying premise of such techniques is that individuals will respond to given stimuli (*e.g.* Rorschach's ten inkblots) in a manner consistent with their own unique patterns of conscious and unconscious needs, fears, desires, impulses, conflicts, and ways of perceiving and responding. The analyst in turn generates hypotheses regarding the individual's state of mind, mental health and/or personality based on patterns of response, recurrent themes and interrelationships among scoring categories. Word association tests, based on similar assumptions about the workings of the unconscious mind, were a common feature of early psychoanalysis, for example Galton's word association test, which consisted of the presentation of a series of words to which the subject was prompted to respond with the first word that came to mind (1879); Jung's similar test consisting of the identification of key words representing possible areas of conflict (1910); the Kent-Rosanoff Free Association Test, which was an attempt to standardise responses to specific words (1910).

14 Clement Greenberg, the arch-apologist of formalism in the post-Second World War period identified this notion of self-criticality as fundamental to the definition of 'Modernist Painting'. In a 1961 essay of the same name he argued that, 'the essence of Modernism lies … in the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence' (Hopkins 2000:29). Although Miró was never directly associated with Greenberg, I would argue that there are many aspects to his work that fit comfortably into this definition of Modernism, not least the warning against 'subversion' which, as Hopkins (2000:29) puts its, excludes 'socially generated anti-art impulses, such as Dada and much of Surrealism'. This is borne out as much by his constant insistence on the formal aspects of the discipline above poetic or literary effects, as by his reluctance to associate himself unequivocally with the Surrealists.

15 Rhodes tells how the early twentieth-century saw women increasingly discovering a voice in society (reflected, for example, in the suffragette movement), and how this resulted in their being increasingly subject to intense scientific scrutiny by their male contemporaries. 'It was usual to conceive of the entire female population in terms of its differences to the male and to address "the women problem" in a language which often echoed that employed when speaking of the savage' (Rhodes 1994:23).

16 While different writers may disagree on points of interpretation regarding Miró's work, they virtually all agree with the notion of its fundamental connection with the landscape, culture and character of Catalonia. The incidences of this interpretation are too numerous to cite here, but see, for example, Dupin (1962), Penrose, Jouffroy, and Weelen.

17 Dupin (1962:10), elaborating on the child-like qualities of both Miró's character and his art, and reinforcing the construct of Miró the naïve (see endnote 7 above) writes that, '[d]aily, Miró patiently recaptures and revives the vision of childhood, in all its limpidity and with all its terrors'. Is one to conclude then that Miró's lifelong project was something of a regression into the idyllic state of childhood, ultimately reaching its apotheosis in the unbounded creativity of his later years?

18 Credit must be given here to Helene Smuts whose educational outreach programme for children, as well as the learners' resource produced for it (see bibliography), went a long way to demystifying the exhibition and encouraging participants literally to 'play' in the imaginative space created by Miró.