

## ARTFORUM

### Antonio Ballester Moreno

LA CASA ENCENDIDA

January 2012

The question of the relationship between children's art and that of adults has long interested Antonio Ballester Moreno. At a previous exhibition here, titled "No Future," he showed drawings he himself had made as a child. The background to "No School," his most recent show, was a workshop that Ballester Moreno gave, in which participants attempted to do away with learned technique and acquired sophistication in order to make something much simpler, something more akin to the art of children.

"No School" featured the pieces made by participants in the workshop along with a single sculpture. Just as in a show of student art at the end of the school year, the drawings were hung on the walls of two hallways. All are on A2 paper (about sixteen by twenty-three inches), and they cover an array of themes: self-portraits, still lifes, Nativity scenes, landscapes, and trees, as well as purely ornamental motifs. Their individual makers were not identified at the entrance to the exhibition the sculpture was: a life-size bronze titled *Girl*, 2011, which Ballester Moreno made in the spirit of the workshop, though it is obviously much more complex in technique, and neither its spirit nor its appearance suggests a lack of sophistication.

In speaking of his wish to recover the purity of expression and technique that he finds in children's drawings, Ballester Moreno refers to Picasso, who said that when he was young he could draw like Raphael but then spent a lifetime learning to draw like a child. Of course, this approach was the basis of much modern art, not only for Picasso but also for artists such as Dubuffet and Basquiat. And what's true of children's art is also true of works by the mentally ill or from non-Western cultures: It has a kind of purity that many artists hope to recover, or to achieve through a process of unlearning that others might call learning. This impulse goes back to the Pre-Raphaelites or even to the German Nazarenes.

In any case, the works in "No School" are very revealing, mainly because a visitor who is not privy to the premise of the project might think that they were actually made by children (though this is offset by the evident influence of Picasso, Matisse, and Hockney in some of the works). The first phase of the project, then, seems to have been a success: It is in fact possible to create like a child and to be as expressive as children are. And although there were some attractive abstractions, this was particularly true of the self-portraits, which are the most powerful of the works. Some of them, especially those that focus on the subject's eyes, are enormously communicative. This, in turn, leads to another question: Is a work better if its creator is personally involved in its theme? The answer suggested here is yes, since the creators of the largely unconvincing Christmas-themed works seem not to have known how to handle their subject. Another question concerns the affinity between direct expression and technique. As said above, the unknowing viewer might think that the works on paper were made by children. But this is not the case with Ballester Moreno's sculpture—yet he seems to want us to be able to make the backward leap from the highly skilled processes involved in the work's realization to the childlike spirit in which it was conceived.

—Pablo Llorca

ARTFORUM, January 2012