

## Speaking in (multiple) tongues

I.

*Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not be looking for it, and intellectualism (rationalism) fails to see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or equally again we should not be searching.* – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Psychology of Perception

An important ‘through line’ connects all the meandering roads that thread their way through Irene Pijoan’s oeuvre, even as it brings together the disparate materials and approaches she used: something I have come to think of as a unique kind of multilingualism. I use this term not only in its conventional sense-- fluency in three or more languages-- but in a more inclusive way, describing an ability to communicate ideas through multiple media (sometimes simultaneously); through mind and body, heuristic thought and intuition, and, additionally, through the meta-language of musical form: counterpoint, harmony and tempo. Pijoan’s deftness with many tongues enabled her creative restlessness. Eventually, it resulted in a language of its own.

This unique tongue speaks throughout her work, propelled by a combination of forces: curiosity, passion, self-criticism/abnegation. In retrospect, Pijoan’s career can be seen as a quest for a particular kind of knowledge that, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, cannot be acquired through rationalism or empiricism alone. In her paintings, sculpture and drawings, we are always aware of a constant search for a more complete kind of *knowing*, centered in physical and emotional experience, and a way to express it. But something else was in play as well. Pijoan had an intense ambition for success in art world terms: specifically, for her work to be seen in gallery and museum shows, and for it to receive the recognition represented by reviews and sales.

Predictably, these two forces did not always work in tandem. When Pijoan's encaustic reliefs gained critical notice in the early 80s, for example, she decided to stop making them. She was aware of the foolhardiness, in career terms, of leaving behind a body of work at the very moment it could have propelled her to greater recognition. But she did it anyway. She didn't want to be pigeonholed, and there was more to be learned by doing something else.

Seen in light of this ongoing tug-of-war, is useful to think of Pijoan's gift for multi-lingualism as a kind of *non*-melting pot for the artist's conflicts-- between Old World and New; spiritual ambition and the forces of the market; mother and father, art and life. Like the silvery flakes in a snow-globe, constantly shifting but never melting, these forces and ideas exist side by side: observed and represented as part of the constant flow of thought *through* the body, framed by a kind of willed suspension of beliefs.

In the summer months leading up to Pijoan's death, I interviewed her on two separate occasions about her life and work. She was reflective, but not resigned. She talked about how her best work lay ahead, never to be realized, and that her husband and daughter would have to live out their lives without her. But her immanent death gave her the ability to frame the progression that her ideas and passions had followed in a way that was as lucid and objective as it was tender and, at times, even funny.

Pijoan professed to speaking only French as a child, but admitted to hearing many other languages around her (as most Europeans do, as a matter of proximity). Her father, a prominent art historian, was of Catalonian descent, so she remembered him speaking both Catalan and Spanish to her mother and to friends. German, Pijoan admitted grudgingly, was "rammed down [her] throat" at school. Both of her parents were also fluent in English, having lived in English-speaking countries for protracted periods of time, so when Pijoan picked it up in her late teens, she spoke it correctly, idiomatically-- and even with different accents. Laughing, she talked about this aspect of herself:

There's a part of my personality that's mimetic, and if I'm in a country or place that has different ways, I sort of adopt these ways intuitively. And I'll pick up the accent. If I go to New York, I'll start trying to speak with a New York accent. Of course, it probably sounds ridiculous to New Yorkers. But if I really lived there for about two years, I probably would get a New York accent, you know. And if I go to England, it's the same thing. I try speaking with a British accent. It just comes to me.<sup>1</sup>

Pijoan's father was 74 when she was born. Until she was six, she and her parents lived in a small house on her maternal uncle's estate. Because of her father's failing health, the family spent his final years in a tiny village in the mountains. When Pijoan was eleven, he died, and she and her mother Geneviève moved to an apartment in Lausanne.

As Pijoan came into adolescence, the two were perpetually at odds. She remembers her mother, in despair about the situation, enticing her into the car somehow and driving off—to Venice, as it happened. It was the middle of winter, and Pijoan, fifteen at the time, recalled the astonishing, dream-like vision she had of the city as she rode a vaporetto down the Grand Canal,

being obstructed by fog and fumaroles and mist, I think, from the water...then on the way back, we stopped in Padua and we went to the Scrovegni Chapel. I walked in and all of it was painted and decorated, every part of it, from floor to ceiling. And the atmosphere was one of magic. And it was that first revelation about painting-- it just lit up a light bulb in my head. And that really was a turning point.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Irene Pijoan in recorded and transcribed but unpublished interviews with the author, August 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

At sixteen, she left home, living more or less on the street and in bars for three years. To survive, she sometimes made things to sell-- dyeing silk for clothes, crafting leather purses. Unfortunately, she spent so much time on these pieces that the enterprise wasn't very profitable. At 19, she reconciled with her mother and decided to return to school. But once a student has dropped out of the Swiss system, there is no going back. Pijoan traveled to the United States to attend college near Sacramento in California. (During her homeless years, she had met a woman from that city who had urged Pijoan to follow this path to gain an education-- making this choice less surprising than it would at first seem to be.) In the beginning, Pijoan studied psychology, but soon discovered that she felt both comfortable and alive in the school's sculpture building. Most often described as a painter, Pijoan began her career as a maker of things, a direction that went on to shape her approach to everything that followed. She described her earliest pieces as very much "from the gut" and as heavily influenced by the work of Eva Hesse.

Despite the fact that Pijoan had just begun to develop as an artist, she was accepted into the very well-known and highly competitive graduate program at the University of California in Davis. Pijoan remembers being terrified "that [she] was going to be ejected from the school, wasn't going to cut the mustard."<sup>3</sup> Soon after classes began, a beloved aunt with whom Pijoan had been very close passed away unexpectedly. This loss led to a complete change in the young artist's work. She jettisoned the Minimalist forms and materials she had been using, since there no longer seemed to be "an appropriate way to account for the experience with that language." She began drawing images that implied narrative without telling a story: two concentric "circus" rings within which figures were carefully placed, though not for any reason she could clearly articulate, seen here in *Circus Drawing 1* (1978) and *Circus Drawing 2* (1979). After the school year ended in the spring, she attended Skowhegan, a program in Maine that brings some of the brightest and best young artists together for six weeks each summer. She changed her work yet again, now making tiny self-portraits. She worked hard and played hard, no longer fearing that she would be tossed out as an imposter. She was on her way.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

## II.

*In a sense, you don't 'start out'. There are points when you alter your course, but most of what one learns, if that's the word, occurs gradually... What made 'going to be an artist' into 'being an artist', was, in part, a spiritual change.--Jasper Johns, interviewed in The Guardian, 7/26/04*

As her second year of graduate school began, Pijoan began experimenting with encaustic. Although this medium was then in use in contemporary art (by Jasper Johns, for example), no one around her knew how to mix or apply it. In the school's library, she found a 17<sup>th</sup> century recipe in French. She melted wax and added pigment to create works that featured figures in relief set against a painted landscape.

Part of her inspiration came from an ancient Fayum portrait that she had seen every day in her parent's house throughout her childhood. Despite the fact that it dated from the first century AD, she knew that it was an accurate representation from first-hand experience.

I had an indelible memory of seeing a man in the street one time when I was about five years old, coming back home from kindergarten. I saw him stepping out of a bakery, and as he looked behind him, I saw his eyes. He was just like one of those portraits. It was unforgettable. <sup>4</sup>

The exacting process required by her new medium taught her something new: patience. The hours required to form and paint these pieces brought a meditative experience to her art practice that would later take root in her life in a more formalized way.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

After she completed her master's degree, Pijoan continued on to two artist's residencies-- one at the University of Georgia, supported by a Ford Foundation Grant, and the other in Roswell, New Mexico. She began painting, mostly with oils, on curved surfaces carved out of Styrofoam or on shaped plaster. She wanted these forms to suggest spaces seldom thought about-- the back of a knee, or the inside a car bumper.

One quiet night in Roswell, she received a call from Sam Tchakalian, a member of the faculty at the San Francisco Art Institute, asking her if she would like to teach a couple of classes there in the upcoming fall semester. Pijoan said yes. Both of her parents, after all, had taught: her mother, the subjects of music and movement; her father, art history.

I already knew that I had a teacher in me...I had inherited (unfortunately, probably) from my mother a vastly didactic mind that was always observing and analyzing what was happening to me. I felt like I had learned things I was ready to impart.<sup>5</sup>

When she began her career as a professor in 1983, Pijoan was 29—the age of many of her students—and as tough and judgmental with them as she was with herself. Some thrived on the challenge; others “collapsed.” Over time, her teaching style mellowed, in part because something important and theretofore unknown came into her life. That first year in San Francisco, Pijoan met and fell in love with another painter, Craig Nagasawa, who would become her partner for the rest of her life.

And that happiness was very ordinary happiness. It wasn't great fireworks and it wasn't big drama. But it came from someplace very deep within him that he was able to offer me. It took me a while to understand that such a place even existed. And that changed my work.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

### III.

*Because I am half Spanish and half Swiss-- half this incredible fire that my father was about and half this Calvinistic Protestantism that is all about hiding your beauty and not ever getting in the light --I was always very, very conflicted about success.—Irene Pijoan*

In San Francisco, Pijoan began experimenting with an Arcadian-inflected figurative imagery executed in soft Mediterranean hues. She worked on plaster that had been spread over wire mesh and mounted on pieces of wood. She didn't hang these pieces, but instead leaned them against the wall.

I was thinking of paintings that are taken out on processions during certain feast days in Catholic countries... That idea of walking this thing that a painting is -- an illusion -- around in space is just such an absurd gesture, and such a magical one.<sup>7</sup>

The panels became quite large—up to eight feet by six feet—and she continued trying different materials, creating the images in plaster relief, sometimes in encaustic relief, and sometimes just drawing and painting on a flat surface. By having these different languages to work with, she found that she had a vehicle for describing different levels of experience: the multiple voices of the self. Several of these paintings were included in 'New Horizons in American Art,' a then-biennial exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York—works like *Church and State* (1985), with its brooding, neo-Expressionist rendering of figures in conflict in a twilight world. It was a heady moment for Pijoan. She believed that this show would lead to further success and a wider audience for her work in the form of gallery representation in New York and beyond. When this didn't take place—something that she later admitted she was as complicit in as anyone else—she experienced a crushing depression. She reflected on this painful period:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

One of the most difficult aspects of making art for me is the conflict between the marketplace and the studio process. It has to do with money, but it doesn't even have to do with money... I always used to think someone works to achieve success and then continues going up. But in fact, I see more and more that it's comparatively up and down and up and down. Even in really big careers.<sup>8</sup>

Pijoan's paintings contracted, both in terms of physical size and content. Among other things, she began making small landscapes depicting scenes in and around the town of Rodeo. She and Nagasawa had moved to this ex-urban hamlet—a mixture of ranches, industry and tract housing at the far edge of the Bay Area, where cows grazed near oil refineries. She described these works, painted on pieces of concrete debris, as “dumpy and awkward.” She didn't know what she was doing, but she kept on doing it.

One day in the studio—‘just by happenstance,’ as she put it-- there was a piece of sheetrock leaning against the wall,

just raw, covered with this gray, soft kind of paper. And I approached it with charcoal and I drew with my eyes closed. And it just felt so good, like my hand knew what to do and where to go. And I opened my eyes and there was this thing. It was kind of fun to look at. It had lines and big spots. You know, I didn't want to try to get it out into a gallery or something like that, but it gave me the impetus to try to continue this a little bit... At first, I worked with two hands at once. And I remember that I had a very curious and definite sensation in my chest when I was working, as if I was-- in the flow with the work. It was all about surrendering to that flow. And it was not at all about making decisions based on art world concerns.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

With this transition, Pijoan's work began to focus in earnest on the articulation of different levels of thought, emotion and sensation experienced in the body. She began working in enormous pieces of paper, adding gouache, working in layers of marks—net-like skeins, deliberately applied dots, broad colorful forms (sometimes, recognizable as objects). Overlapping scrimms of bars and divided circles in *Calendar* (1990), for instance, suggest the meditative recording of the passage of time, invoked by the painting's title. Later, cutting into the surface of the paper made it possible to, once again, interject actual dimensionality into these pieces.

The palimpsest-like quality created by layers of materials and marks suggests multiple voices, speaking or singing together, or the drift of thought through the mind: a mix of past and present, memory and perception. Pijoan averred that these works came directly out of the deepening of the Buddhist meditation practice she had begun, though they looked nothing like the so-called spiritual art she found in books, functioning, rather, as interrogations of the uncertain terrain between what she called “bogus spirituality” and the real thing.

The next several years were a rich and productive period. She returned to painting in oil, on canvases that were often eight feet tall. Pattern played an increasingly important role. Then, in 1994, she took a sabbatical from teaching and went to New York City for a few months, during which time she became pregnant.

Pijoan, afraid that caring for a child would impact unfavorably on her art practice, had long avoided parenthood. When she finally decided to embark upon it, she found that “it empowered my work, and really made it grow.” The profoundness of this change can be seen in a large triptych of long, cascading paper panels titled *Kick Count Chart* (1995), an extraordinary piece made mostly before her daughter Emiko was born. In the central sheet, Pijoan uses extensive cutting to create elaborate linear images incorporating numbers, while the panels on either side are primarily painted, with gestures and marks both delicate and broad. Other works from this time show the same kind of organic, meandering forms, elaborated with lace-like patterns of cut and painted lines. Words

appear in many, fully incorporated into the web-like whorls that dominate these compositions.

The death of Pijoan's mother a year and a half after Emiko's birth instigated a series of six haunting and elegiacal works. Each incorporates a deathbed dictation of names, dates, and locations—the 'bare bones' version of Geneviève Bugnion's life story. This matter-of-fact sequence of words, its meaning inscrutable to most observers, was the first substantial text that Pijoan had been able to use in her work. Previously, she had experimented with numbers—the Fibonacci series, for instance—and "magic words, like abracadabra... and strange sort of runic signs." " But in these large works based on her mother's life, Pijoan reworked this gnomic text into a variety of configurations, using, for the first time, a computer to alter and distort the overall shape. These extraordinary images have an almost hallucinogenic intensity- an obsessiveness that recalls the inventions of Outsider artists such as Martin Ramirez, or, most aptly, the Swiss mental patient Adolph Wolfli. During her rebellious and alienated youth, Pijoan had practically lived in a bar frequented by hippies, druggies and Leftist intellectuals alike. Among the latter group was Michel Thevoz, the director of Lausanne's Museum of Art Brut from its opening in 1976 until 2001. Thevoz had been instrumental in bringing Jean Dubuffet's collection of outsider art to the city. Pijoan remembered his infectious and knowledgeable fascination with these artists and their work.

We looked at Alloise, and at Wolfli, and at another artist called [Auguste] Forestier who was a sculptor... I looked at these people passionately... I was fascinated by their outsider status. I was very influenced by this work.<sup>10</sup>

IV.

*It is the mission of the twentieth century to elucidate the irrational.*

--Maurice Merleau-Ponty

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

*You can plan events, but if they go according to plan they are not events.*

-- John Berger

In 1999, Pijoan received her first diagnosis of cancer. She chose to have a mastectomy, and the surgery seemed to be completely successful in removing the diseased cells from her body. Following this brush with death, however, Pijoan felt that there was something important that she needed to address through her work.

I wanted to come clean about another aspect of my life that had been just needling me all these years. Which is ambition.<sup>11</sup>

In Wannabe, an installation first presented at the Institute for Contemporary Art in San Jose [catalogue numbers 81-83], passages of paint on the wall linked immense paper cut outs that encircled the room. Each of these individual pieces consisted of a brief text, written by Pijoan, addressing an aspect of her desire for recognition. One, shaped like an upside-down ziggurat, talked about power; another, its form suggesting a giant thumbprint, discussed the importance of individuality and the creative process. A teardrop shape simply said *please, please, please*, over and over, invoking an artist's desperate need for attention.

Around the same time that she was making this work, Pijoan was awarded a series of widely-praised public art commissions-- for hospitals, a library, a park. Using the techniques she had perfected for the shaping of text and drawing through the use of a computer, she translated her ideas into a larger scale and different materials, such as water-cut aluminum.

At the end of 2003, Pijoan's cancer came back, in a form that was inoperable. The following summer, when I visited her studio, there were a number of pieces in various stages of completion. In one, I traced successive layers of squares within squares and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

netlike tracings of white and black that lay over two figures in a landscape. It wasn't done, she assured me.

I wish I didn't have to adhere to this palimpsest kind of format, you know-- that I could come up with an image that had a clear beginning and end and...a general dynamic that was very purposeful. But when I've tried to do things like that, most of the time, I end up feeling like I'm lying or that I'm not getting at the real bottom of my experience.<sup>12</sup>

At the end of our conversation, Pijoan stopped for a moment to think about the words *creativity* and *invention*.

I always thought that they were very wonderful words. They glow with a kind of magic. They have a kind of pearlescent feeling about them, a luminous quality. But invention only actually comes from perceived experience. So really, it's about perception. It's just about paying attention to what goes on within, and just listening to what the natural language is that posits itself as the appropriate one for that experience.

You're not inventing out of thin air. There's no such thing. You just pay attention to experience and you're a savant, you obey. But in order to do that, you have to have the courage to place yourself in that current of experience without trying to defend an identity or expectations of what will happen. That, you know, is the trick.<sup>13</sup>

It is, of course, impossible to experience Pijoan's work as she did: to understand all the nuances of her unique *natural language*. But the effort to do so provides both pleasure and, perhaps, a deepened knowledge of our own interior landscape: how to get there, what the points of interest are, and--most importantly--how to allow things to take place there, without a plan. In these uncertain times, this skill may prove invaluable.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Maria Porges