

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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First pairing of collages & sculpture by New York Abstract Expressionist artist Esteban Vicente

Concrete Improvisations: Collages and Sculpture by Esteban Vicente
on view at NYU's Grey Art Gallery from January 11 to March 26, 2011

New York City (October 12, 2010)—The lyrical collages and polychrome sculptures by noted Abstract Expressionist painter Esteban Vicente are paired for the first time in a major American museum exhibition, opening January 11, 2011, at New York University's Grey Art Gallery.

Concrete Improvisations: Collages and Sculpture by Esteban Vicente reexamines the career of this “artist’s artist” on the tenth anniversary of his death in 2001. *Concrete Improvisations* features some 60 works on paper and 20 small-scale sculptures drawn from public and private collections in Spain and the United States. Following its debut in New York, the exhibition will travel to the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, and will conclude its tour at the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente in Segovia, Spain.

Esteban Vicente was an integral member—and the only Spanish-born painter—of the first generation of New York Abstract Expressionist artists. His dedication to collage, as well as his considered, deliberate approach to the medium, set him apart from most of his New York School colleagues. Indeed, Vicente’s collages comprised half of the artist’s yearly output of finished works. As Lynn Gumpert, director of the Grey Art Gallery and co-curator of the exhibition, notes, “Vicente began making collages, which he thought of as



Orange, Red, Black, 1962. Colored paper on paper, mounted on cardboard, 19 7/8 x 25 7/8 in. Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, Segovia

‘concrete improvisations,’ in 1949 and continued to do so throughout his long career until his death over five decades later. This medium offered him an alternative, but no less important, means for the experimentation with color, texture, and form that is at the core of his paintings.”

Vicente also produced small sculptures, which he called “toys” or *divertimientos*, that were cobbled together from left-over bits of wood and detritus scattered about his studio. Not intended for public display, these sculptures are the products of thoughtful, yet lighthearted, improvisations. They exude a sense of immediacy and whimsy, attesting to the artist’s ability to translate the formal achievements developed in his paintings and collages into three dimensions. “Vicente’s *divertimientos* range from non-representational explorations of color, texture, plane, and volume to cleverly-concocted figures with clear allusions to human forms and animals. Their intentional lack of finish and improvisatory nature bring to mind similar projects by artists like Alexander Calder and Joaquín Torres-García,” observes Edward J. Sullivan, co-curator of the exhibition and the Helen Gould Sheppard Professor of the History of Art at NYU.

Organized by the Grey Art Gallery, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, and the State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad, SEACEX, *Concrete Improvisations* is accompanied by a fully-illustrated, bilingual catalogue. “It is fitting that this exhibition is the result of an international collaboration since Esteban Vicente was extremely open-minded and drew inspiration from both his Spanish heritage and his American colleagues,” notes Gumpert.

Born in Turégano, Spain, in 1903, Vicente arrived in New York in 1936 and by 1950 was an active participant in the Downtown art scene. He rented a studio at 88 East Tenth Street (sharing a floor, for a time, with Willem de Kooning), became a voting member of The Club, and participated in Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg’s landmark exhibition *Talent 1950* at the Samuel Kootz Gallery. A year later, he helped to organize the historic *9th Street* show, and several of his paintings appeared in Thomas B. Hess’s foundational text on the New York School, *Abstract Painting: Background and American Phase*. As his paintings began to garner critical and public attention, Vicente also embarked on what would become a long and successful teaching career. He accepted short- and long-term appointments at universities and art schools throughout the United States, including the University of California, Berkeley; Black Mountain College; Yale University; Princeton University; New York University; and the New York Studio School, among other institutions. Described by his former students as generous and flexible in his thinking, Vicente approached pedagogy as an open dialogue benefiting both instructor and

pupil. “Teaching was an integral component of Vicente’s creative process,” observes Professor Sullivan, “and the continued contact with young talent clearly nurtured his imagination and aesthetic.”

Vicente produced his earliest collages during his residency in 1949 at the University of California, Berkeley. Initially, he employed cut-out strips of newspaper advertisements, thus building upon a modernist tradition that begins with the Cubist collages of Georges Braque, Juan Gris, and Pablo Picasso, and extends through Dada and Surrealism. Unlike many of his predecessors, though, Vicente soon turned away from using found material in his collages. He typically composed his works by tearing or cutting up hand-painted fine-art paper and arranging the pieces on paper or cardboard supports. The resulting combinations offer rich interplays of texture and color as the materials merge visually and, at times, become virtually indistinguishable from one another. “Creating, combining, and constructing his collages, Vicente found a freedom to fashion a reality completely separate from mimesis,” notes Ana Martínez de Aguilar, director of the Museo Esteban Vicente and the third member of the curatorial team.

Not unsurprisingly, many of Vicente’s early collages convey the hallmarks of Abstract Expressionist painting. The busy dispersal of lines and paper strips that make up numerous collages from the early 1950s, for example, recall the spontaneously painted compositions of some of his contemporaries, such as Jackson Pollock and de Kooning. Beginning in the mid-1950s, Vicente began to compose collages from flat, rectangular shapes that emphatically affirm the works’ two-dimensionality—an effect Greenberg praised as the crowning achievement of modernist collage and abstract painting. At the same time, Vicente’s blocks of color create an illusion of depth with lighter tones appearing to project and darker shades to recede. His works thus offer compelling complements to Hans Hofmann’s paintings and well-known “push-pull” color theory.

In later collages, Vicente drew inspiration from the natural beauty of his surroundings. The olive and brown hues in *The Garden*, 1965, allude to the years he spent in Bridgehampton, Long Island, where he purchased a farmhouse in 1964. Similarly, other collages in that decade feature brilliant colors and evocative shapes recalling the distinctive flora and topography of Hawaii, where he spent a one-year residency at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. Taken as a whole, Vicente’s collages reveal both his interactions with hotly contested artistic innovations developed in New York’s vibrant, mid-twentieth century art world, and the artist’s deep, personal reflections on the nature of abstraction.

Vicente's initial forays into painting and, later, collage, were preceded by his years studying sculpture at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in Madrid. Tempted by the possibilities of color, Vicente soon changed his focus to painting, but he nevertheless returned to three dimensions, on a small scale, in the 1960s. Made between 1968 and the late 1990s, Vicente's *divertimientos*—often no more than twelve inches tall—are, for the most part, colorful, three-dimensional collages in wood. As Elizabeth Frank, a writer and friend of the artist, has noted, Vicente devoted substantial studio time to the fabrication of these “toys,” which offered him a “hands-on” engagement with color and surface. Although several of his sculptures were first exhibited publically in 1995, *Concrete Improvisations* is the first museum show to pair these playful experiments with the artist's collages.

The accompanying exhibition catalogue, *Concrete Improvisations: Collages and Sculpture, Esteban Vicente*, reassesses Vicente's career, analyzes his contribution to the medium of collage, and sheds new light on his intimate sculptures. An essay by Daniel Haxall, an art historian at Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, situates Vicente's collages in the discourse of the European and American avant-gardes and in the critical debates surrounding early New York Abstract Expressionism. In another essay, Edward J. Sullivan traces Vicente's rarely discussed career as a teacher, investigating the artist's methods and surveying the wide variety of institutions in which he taught. The volume also includes selections from interviews conducted by Sullivan with Vicente's friends and colleagues Irving Sandler and Elizabeth Frank, as well as with several of his best-known students: Chuck Close, Dorothea Rockburne, and Susan Crile.

The Parrish Art Museum in Southampton, New York, will present an exhibition of paintings and works on paper by Vicente and his contemporaries from February 6 through April 10, 2011. Also on view at the Grey Art Gallery, from January 11 to March 26, and from April 12 to July 9, 2011, is *Art/Memory/Place: Commemorating the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, an exhibition tracing 100 years of the fire's memorializations.

Sponsorship:

Concrete Improvisations: Collages and Sculpture by Esteban Vicente has been organized by the Grey Art Gallery, New York University; the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente, Segovia; and the State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad, SEACEX. It is made possible in part by the generous support of The Harriet and Esteban Vicente Foundation. Additional support for the presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is provided by the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust.

About the Grey Art Gallery:

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine-arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environment.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information:

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Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/greyart>

Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm

OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm

Saturday: 11 am–5 pm

Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge