

**Alistair Crawford**  
*Barcelona Tango 1993-1995*

For many years a great deal of my work has been concerned with the 'spirit of place'. Ever since my first visit to Italy in 1970, I became aware of the importance, psychological importance, of place as a source of subject matter. While I continue to make pictures of Wales, where I live, and of my native Scotland (never England where I lived for 4 years) it was Italy and the Mediterranean that became my spiritual home. Italy alternated with Greece, and while trips to France and Jersey, for example, did result in pictures and exhibitions, (unlike Switzerland and Germany) there was no ache to return. I thought that next I should cross the Libyan Sea from Crete and wander in North Africa, travel the Greek and Roman roads, visit Turkey.

In July 1993 I had the occasion to be invited to give a lecture on a 19th Century Scottish photographer, who worked in Italy, to a conference in Spain, in Vilanova i la Geltrú, near Barcelona. This was my first visit to Spain (why had I never gone before?). After the conference I stayed on for two weeks and I ended up in Sitges, a small seaside resort next to Vilanova on the Costa Daurada. On my first visit to Sitges, I walked past the door of the Hotel Romantic and, looking through the doorway, saw the inner garden bathed in brilliant green foliage and deep blue ceramic tiles. Perhaps it was at that moment that I realised I had fallen in love with Spain. The results of my two week love affair (I ended up staying at the Hotel Romantic) are embodied in these works on paper. Sitges, in an entirely different way and for different reasons, had become as important to me as that first visit to Italy when I stayed at the Convento di San Agostino in San Gimignano.

These pictures have turned out to be a diary of my trip. They include my reunion with the work of Antonio Tàpies (b 1923) who had been an important influence when I was a student at the Glasgow School of Art in the 1960s. I left the Fundació Tàpies in Barcelona that day with the resolve to rediscover another influence from my youth, Antonio Clavé (b 1913) which I succeeded in doing in a bookshop. I was now beginning to understand better the work of Picasso and Miro. I realised that I also knew more about Spain than I thought. Wandering the towns of the Costa Daurada, at times I thought I was in Italy, at times in Greece. If I could smell the Romans, I could now also sense a new and wondrously exotic passion - embodied in these

brilliant coloured ceramics attached to the walls of houses. I was having my first encounter with the Moor.

In addition to the brilliant and dramatic colour combinations, the black and red, there is also, throughout, a delicacy of pinks, of pink and aquamarine. Combinations I had not used before and all peppered with a staccato rhythm; the piling up of bits on top of bits on top of bits. The rhythm is echoed in the guitar music, in the Flamenco; in the clicking of heels. I now understood, for the first time, Gaudi. Not so much Art Nouveau (what a daft notion) but definitely and essentially Catalunyan.

Some of these pictures took me quite by surprise (I have very little control over what they want to be). The problem for all artists is being able to lose control, to let go of what one knows, in order that we may discover something new about ourselves. (Picasso of course, knew better than anyone how to do this). And so, contrary to my expectations, the fire works of Vilanova that refused to let you sleep, the great fish on his way to the Festival of the Sea made their appearance, as did meeting a boy on a train that looked like Picasso. All the while I worked I also listened to Spanish guitar music, to Tarrega, Albéniz, Mudarra; to Flamenco; to Montoya, Ricardo. I thought of Spain and her history and these journeys sailed me across to America, to Cuba, to the tango, from Barcelona to Havana and back.

Least that is where I thought I had been but, of course, no matter how far one travels, the journey is actually inside yourself and when the works began to appear side by side, I also realised that I had just made a retrospective exhibition of my life. I had re-enacted my many interests, from the time I was at Art School (from the time I first responded to Tàpies and Clavé) to now, my 49th year.

In the process I hope that I did manage to catch in these pictures a brief glimpse of the spirit of Catalunya. It was maybe presumptuous of me to think I could from a two week visit, but I never set out to make any pictures of Spain. Indeed such was its power that, on a recent visit to Italy, I found myself still drawing Spain. I know I will return soon, to find again those charming, friendly, generous and spirited people. No doubt I will still be asking the same questions. Where

is the source, what is the cause, of your haunting, beautiful melancholy? What is it that you have lost? Why do you keep tapping the floor?

©Alistair Crawford