The Collector

Claudio Bravo used Old Master-inspired techniques to create a modern and very personal body of work in which the roles of artist and collector seem to merge.

The wrinkles in a sheet of brightly colored, crumpled paper. The sheen of the lead glaze on a painted Moroccan jar. The individual fibers of a skein of wool yarn before it is transformed into a carpet. A virtuoso at rendering reality in oil paint with exactitude, the Chilean artist Claudio Bravo, who died in 2011, was a painter of rare talent whose use of color, lighting, and textures was in many ways unmatched.

But to dismiss Bravo as an impressive draughtsman is to miss the point completely. Despite whatever eye-fooling effect one takes away, these works are anything but simple, static, dry copies of a perceived reality. Certainly, at first glance a canvas by Bravo strikes one with the attention to minute detail that underlies his technique but, in fact, he sought to communicate something much more meaningful and personal. Indeed, Bravo's oeuvre speaks to the emotional power of color and light, the lens of his own lived experiences, his own informal and largely self-given artistic training, and his role as a collector, both of things and of histories.

By Martina D'Amato

Previous spread, from left: Claudio Bravo, *La memoire du futur*, 2001, oil on canvas 36 x 30 inches; *Cuatro grupos de piedras/Four Stone Groups*, 2001, oil on canvas, 38 x 51 inches. This page, from top: *Cascos/Helmets*, 2009, oil on canvas, 38 x 51 inches; *Papel salmon/Salmon Paper*, 2007, 11 x 14 inches.

An exhibition of selected works that was recently on view at Marlborough Gallery in New York highlighted the simultaneous effect and affect with which Bravo infused his art by means of masterly technical precision but perhaps more importantly through a singular use of color inspired by quotidian life in his adopted home of Tangier, Morocco, and the depiction of the art that he collected and maintained while living there. These paintings, several of which have never before been exhibited or published, cover nearly every phase of the artist's career, with the exception of his portraits—wrapped package paintings, including three massive triptychs; numerous still lifes and *trompe l'oeil* works, like that which depicts faithfully the back of a canvas and its stretcher peeking through; and *plein air* studies of Moroccan towns.

Born in Valparaiso, Chile, in 1936, Claudio Bravo grew up on his family's farm. His father saw his artistic interests as frivolous, but his mother, a painter herself, nurtured his budding talent, and in 1945, while at Jesuit school, Bravo made the acquaintance of the artist Miguel Venegas Cienfuentes, from whom he received his only formal art education, that being to copy, copy, copy. Venegas insisted that Bravo closely examine and replicate art history's masterworks, from those of 15th-century Florence to 17th-century Netherlands, an influence that remained an undercurrent throughout his long career. At just 17, he was offered his first solo exhibition in Santiago, Chile.

Having achieved local success as a portrait painter, Bravo decided

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Clockwise from top left: *Paquete azul y verde/Blue and Green Package*, 1995, oil on canvas, 67 x 47 inches; *Purple and Grey-Blue Package*, 2005, oil on canvas, 51 x 39 inches; *Conversacion en verde/Conversation in Green*, 2010, oil on canvas, 38 x 51 inches.

to leave South America for Europe in the early 1960s. In Madrid, the artist attached himself to the capital's elite social circles and continued to produce portraits, fashioning himself as a sort of mid-century John Singer Sargent. (His apartment eventually became the first home of Marlborough's Madrid outpost.) The Spanish Baroque painters which he encountered at the Prado Museum, particularly Francisco de Zurbarán, left an indelible mark on him. Despite this indebtedness to the Old Masters, it was during this time that Bravo first experimented with the novel modernism that came to define his oeuvre—that is, his wrapped package paintings, which were initially exhibited in 1963 at the Galerìa Fortuny. After moving to New York, Bravo gained fame there in 1970 when these works were shown at the Staempfli Gallery.

By 1972, Bravo left the West for good, moving to Tangier, where he would spend the rest of his life. His adopted home and the new way of life it enabled for him entirely altered the course of his art, and the works in the latest exhibition at Marlborough Gallery, which has represented Bravo and his estate since 1981, span the last 20 years of his career. These paintings reveal a deep affinity with the Mediterranean's distinctive quality of light and color palette, as well as to half a millennium of European art history. Canvases as seemingly varied as his still life *Cascos / Helmets* (2009), the North African landscape seen in *Casbah de Tiout* (2008), and the minutely detailed *Marruecos triptico / Morocco Triptych* (2009) are all imbued with the memories of a lifetime spent across three continents, immersed in diverse cultures, histories, religions, and traditions and finally emphasized through Morocco's vivid hues.

This connection to Tangier

From top: *Clavas Araucamos*, 1997, oil on canvas, 38 x 51 inches; *Iris/Irises*, 1990, oil on canvas, 59 x 79 inches.

was even made the subject of the 2004 exhibition "Claudio Bravo and Morocco" at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. As Edward J. Sullivan wrote in the catalogue for that show, "Bravo has found in Morocco not a distant or 'exotic' visual culture, but rather a confirmation of the enduring visual realities that have permeated the human artistic experience throughout the ages." With this in mind, and given the place of Moroccan landscapes, weavings, and pottery in his work, one might consider Bravo a 21st-century Orientalist, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Bravo consciously eschewed the term and separated himself from the lineage of 19th-century artists in North Africa who, as he saw it, were concerned not with accurately representing the Arab peoples and their culture but rather with exoticist and colonialist storytelling.

Likewise, some critics have also made the mistake of aligning Bravo with the Photorealists and Hyperrealists. In 1970, *New York Times* art critic John Canaday lauded Bravo's "staggering technical exercises," and the following year, Canaday reversed his praise, accusing the artist of cheapness and vulgarity in what he saw as his Hyperrealist and even pseudo-Surrealist subjects. Doug McClemont, director of Marlborough Gallery, says that to include Bravo among the Photorealists is to misrepresent everything the artist believed in. "The Photorealists painted from photographs and Bravo worked with virtuoso skill, from life." "From life" is the operative phrase here, not only in the sense of rendering objects arranged directly in front of one, which was Bravo's daily practice in his Morocco studio, but also because those very objects were the ones he chose to live with. McClemont continues, "The goal was to create a positive aesthetic experience and in his own words 'to capture the rarity in nature.' He felt that art was communication and perfection too cold."

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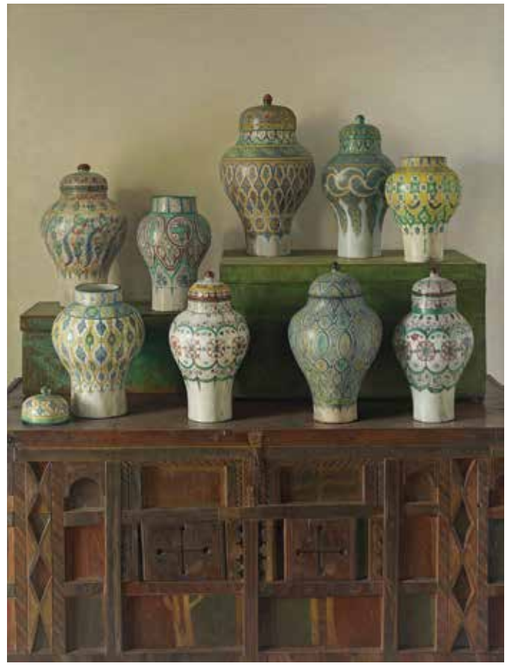
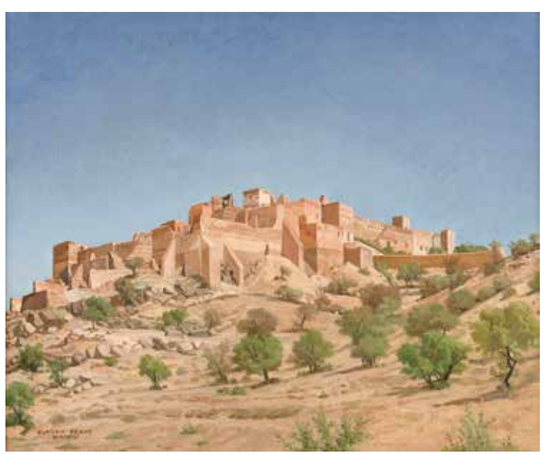


Clockwise from top left: *Khabyas*, 2002, oil on canvas, 79 x 59 inches; *Onions,* 2002, oil on canvas, 45 x 35 inches; *Minerva and Arachne,* 1981, oil on canvas, 65 x 52 inches.

many of which contain objects collected and arranged by the artist, from a fragment of a Roman marble head to a bowl filled with ostrich eggs. Seeing works like *Khabyas* (2002), featuring a collection of covered jars set atop a Hispano-Moorish painted wooden chest, juxtaposed with the Lucio Fontana-esque *Green Paper on Green Background* (2007) draws out such artistic, emotional dialogue while reminding the viewer that everything from the antique earthenware to the detailed rendering of a pierced and crumpled piece of paper was an integral part of Bravo's daily life. These were the things, both tangible and intangible—that is, intangible until brush met canvas—that Bravo effectively collected at his home and studio in Tangier.

Labeling Bravo a Photorealist or an Orientalist would be an error, but he could be considered a collector, both in the traditional sense and more unconventionally in his amassing of an internal assemblage of histories, artistic impressions, and cultural experiences from which he constantly drew and

Clockwise from top left: ***Ave Verum***, 2000, oil on canvas, 79 x 59 inches; ***A White Package***, 2003, pastel on paper, 43 x 29 inches; ***Ait Iaaza***, 2008, oil on canvas, 15 x 18 inches.



which manifested itself in his output during the last decades of his career. It was during the last half of his life Bravo avidly acquired art objects with which to populate his environment and his art. These included African and Asian textiles, Moroccan ceramics, Greek bronzes, and Roman marble sculpture purchased during his time in New York. McClemont notes that these "work[s] from his own collection often found their way into his paintings," as well as his prints and works on paper. In 2000, he donated 20 Classical marbles and bronzes to the Prado Museum, the institution that he spoke of as having "continually nurtured [his] imagination." In an image that successfully combines Bravo's art with his passion for collecting, the cover of the catalogue commemorating the Prado donation even depicted a Greek bronze foot superimposed, and seemingly floating in space, over a detail of a hanging fringed shawl from one of his paintings.

Walter Benjamin wrote that a collection's meaning is lost when the collector is lost. But Bravo's artistic oeuvre makes it clear that the meaning behind a collection, whether it is physical or not, can also shift when the collector is himself a maker. Bravo memorialized his collections of objects and a lifetime of encounters through their incorporation into his own work, which culminated in his move to North Africa. Thus, the art of painting communicates that which might have otherwise been silenced; that is, a lifetime of collecting itself. Even after Bravo's death, up to which

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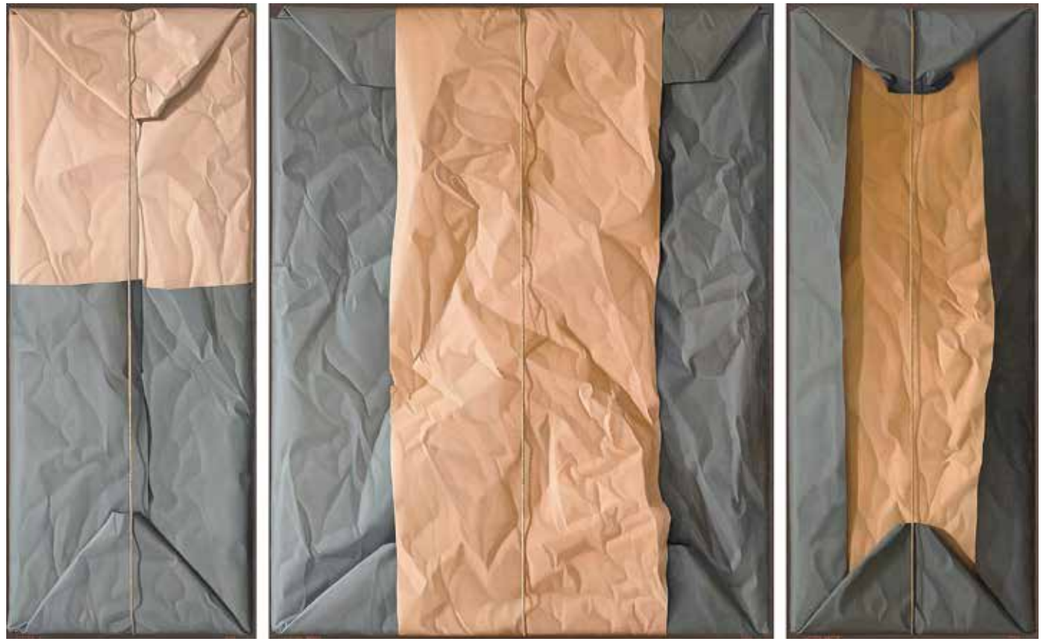

From top: ***Tríptico beige y gris/Beige and Gray Triptych***, 2010, oil on canvas, center panel: 59 x 47 inches, side panels: 59 x 24 inches, overall: 59 x 95 inches; ***Madejas lanas/Wool Skeins***, 2003, oil on canvas, 59 x 79 inches.

point he had continued to paint tirelessly, the significance of his collections and the associations that he felt with each of them remain. In fact, Bravo's masterful two-dimensional works perhaps even strengthens those links. *Irises* (1990) expresses the melding of objects, histories, memories, and Bravo's embrace of Arab culture. Four glass vessels and one wooden bucket, each containing sprays of the purple flower, are set upon a rough-hewn table nonchalantly draped with a woven multicolored textile. A set of shears, along with the remains of cut green stems, have been left on the table. The scene is set against the backdrop of a hanging with motifs inspired by Islamic architecture. The glasses, the flora, the textiles, the wooden surface, and even the shears each have a place in Bravo's arrangement. In this micro-collection, one can unpack a great deal of personal importance.

Bravo is by no means the only artist to have commemorated his collected objects and memories in his artwork. Nevertheless, it feels as though he particularly wished to share some intimate secret with us through the medium of oil paint by offering us a window, both literally and theoretically, into his private world in Morocco and his own collection of things, of lived experiences spread across the globe, and of impressions left from his own exposure to art and nature. Bravo would want us to study the imperfections of the glazed surface of the jar in the corner, to roll the yarn laid out across his table between our fingers, to hear the crinkling of sheets of paper in his studio—all while remembering that this is a painting, *his* painting.