Representing Struggle: Raquel Forner’s Social and Political Engagement in the 1930s and 1940s

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Representing Struggle:
Raquel Forner’s Social and Political Engagement in the 1930s and 1940s

by

Diana Flatto

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Art History, Hunter College The City University of New York

2018

Thesis Sponsor:

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Introduction: Raquel Forner (1902-1988)

In the December 7, 1945 issue of the Buenos Aires-based women’s magazine *Vosotras*, Mary Perla introduced Raquel Forner’s work to a broad audience of female readers. Issued shortly after the Allies’ victory ending World War II, the article, titled “Raquel Forner ha pintado el dolor maternal” (Raquel Forner Has Painted Maternal Pain), focused on Forner’s response to the war in the series *El drama* (1939-46). Perla lamented the deep and ongoing struggle women faced, even in peacetime, as a result of the war’s violence.\(^1\) The spread includes a photograph of Forner dominating over the illustration of her work, highlighting the personal angle Perla took in interpreting Forner’s paintings (Figure 1). This thesis repositions Forner as a painter who used realisms to further political, social, and religious concepts. She developed a mode of representation that allows for many interpretations of her work outside of Perla’s emotional, feminized reading.

In her work, Forner retained her commitment to Argentina, Spain, and France, all important locations to her biography. Forner received a degree in drawing from the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in 1922. There she trained closely under Emilio Centurión, who worked in an impressionistic realist style, depicting conservative subjects such as landscapes, figural studies, and still lifes.\(^2\) While working with him, Forner began painting figures with heavily impastoed brushstrokes, breaking formal convention and making a socially progressive statement by choosing middle-class individuals as her subjects. After graduating in

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\(^1\) Mary Perla, “Raquel Forner ha pintado el dolor maternal” in *Vosotras* (Buenos Aires: December 7, 1945).

1922, she began exhibiting in Buenos Aires, including the XIV Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1924, where she was awarded third prize for her work *Mis Vecinos*. In 1928, she had solo exhibitions at the Galería Müller and the Facultad de Humanidades, both in Buenos Aires.³ Forner’s only involvement with the slightly earlier generation of avant-gardists in Buenos Aires (including Jorge Luis Borges and Xul Solar) was in 1925.⁴ The magazine *Martín Fierro* published an article in support of Forner’s untitled 1925 painting, depicting a confidently posed woman in a white dress, which according to the magazine was rejected from the *Salón Nacional* for being “aggressive and iconoclastic,” especially offending the judges as it came from a woman (Figure 2).⁵

Following her initial success in Buenos Aires, Forner traveled to Paris in 1929 where she became enmeshed in the collection of Argentinian expats that became known as *El Grupo de París* (The Paris Group) including Antonio Berni, Horacio Butler, and the man who later became her husband, the sculptor Alfredo Bigatti.⁶ She studied in the French capital with Andre Lhote and Othon Friesz, working in avant-garde styles like cubism and fauvism.⁷

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After returning to Argentina in 1931, Forner immediately became involved in modernist circles in Buenos Aires. She co-founded “Cursos Libres de Artes Plasticos” (Free Courses of Plastic Arts) with Bigatti, Alfredo Guttero, and Pedro Dominguez Neira in 1932, making progressive, modernist education available in Buenos Aires. Forner’s commitment to modernist ideas extended to the design of her own home, which she and Bigatti commissioned the architect Alejo Martínez to build in 1936 (the same year of their marriage). The house was constructed to follow concepts espoused by Le Corbusier (Figure 3).  

By 1936 Forner began experimenting with representation in her work. For example, with her 1934 painting Composición (Composition) Forner experimented with perspective and subject, depicting a woman mirrored in statue form, at a jaunty angle and with heavy brushstrokes (Figure 4). This study begins after this point, when news of the Spanish Civil War began to reach Argentina and Forner painted the series España (1936-39). Forner’s family had come from Spain, and she had many living relatives who were still living there at this time. She had visited them at the formative age of twelve, in 1915, and often referred to her connection to Spain both in interviews and through her work.  

Forner began the series España in 1936, at which time she received news that among the casualties on both the Republican and Nationalist sides of the conflict were members of her family and friends. She reported that the violence overseas changed her perception of her art and the world around her. Beginning with España, 


10 Email from Sergio Dominguez Neira, the artist’s nephew and President of the Fundación Forner-Bigatti, Buenos Aires, February 21, 2018.

Forner became more politically and socially engaged through her painting. As the Spanish Civil War came to a close and World War II began, Forner turned her attention to the rapidly-spreading atrocities of the global conflict, affirming her commitment to pacifism that was established with España. The series El drama (1939-47) expressed the urgency of Forner’s response to war’s violence.

The work that illustrated Perla’s article in Vosotras, Forner’s painting El Manto Rojo (The Red Cloak), 1941, provides an entry point for understanding the artist’s stylistic and thematic characteristics (Figure 5). In this painting, Forner depicted a woman huddled dejectedly under a red shroud, walking forward, away from a group of women and a hangman in the distance. The woman’s form overflows from her classical garb, drawing attention to her maternal shape. The scene at once lacks temporal signifiers, like contemporary clothing, and points to specific events of World War II through symbols like the hangman. In her 1945 analysis Perla presented El Manto Rojo as a study of maternal pain, though Forner did much more than express raw female suffering with this work, given its references to the war. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, Forner painted women like the one in El Manto Rojo as conduits for complex political, social, and religious criticism. From the earliest moments of her career Forner’s style and choice to portray women broke with traditional modes of representation, even before she traveled to study in Europe.

Forner’s career continued through the end of her life in 1988. From the 1950s on, she broadened her subject from the world to the universe, and her paintings became stylized and colorful, moving away from the heightened realism of the España and El Drama series. Continuing in her practice of following world events, as the Cold War contributed to the space race, Forner responded to space travel in her abstracted figural compositions.
Forner was a prominent artist in such circles as *El Grupo del París* and she remains a central figure in Argentina’s modernist art history. However, there is a dearth of recent scholarship on her work. In the period addressed in this thesis, Forner was often received positively by the local press. Coverage between 1936 and 1948 includes articles by Julio Rinaldini in *El Mundo*, Jorge Romero Brest in *La Vanguardia*, Oscar Haedo in *Mundo Uruguayo*, Mary Perla in *Vosotras* (as discussed above), and Ernesto Castany in *Clarín*. These contemporary reviews and interviews often focused on Forner’s engagement with female victims of the Spanish Civil War and World War II, or discussed her work as emotional representations. Castany, for example, wrote: “From those of yesterday’s war in Spain to the present day, back to another war, Raquel Forner has been reflecting the whole, ardent range of her anguish in her canvases.” Though Forner’s paintings are indeed expressly emotional, to classify them as such flattens their complexities. Forner did much more than provide a platform for pain, as the following analysis illustrates.

The majority of more recent writing about Forner’s work, from the last few decades, covers her entire oeuvre generally, and curiously it does not delve into any one period. Guillermo Whitelow’s 1980 tome on Forner is the most in-depth study of her work. Whitelow easily divided the work created over her long and illustrious career into distinct periods, often in line with Forner’s series. Whitelow’s book, published while Forner was still living, offers an

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13 Translated from the Spanish in Ernesto Castany, “El Sentido de Humano de Raquel Forner” in *Clarín*, “De aquel ayer de la guerra de España hasta los días actuales posteriores a otra guerra, Raquel Forner ha ido reflejando en sus telas toda la gama ardiente de su angustia.”
idealized examination of her major paintings, focusing heavily on poetic quotes from the artist and biographical context. His research provides a wealth of information about Forner’s career, but lacks the thorough analysis necessary for a critical understanding of her works.

Raquel Forner: Presagios e invenciones de la modernidad, a 2013 exhibition curated by Diana B. Wechsler at El Museo de la Universidad de Tres de Febrero, similarly took on Forner’s entire career. At the time of this writing the catalogue is still forthcoming, but the promotional text states that the exhibition looks to the “aspects of contemporaneity” in Forner’s work. Her career is addressed with the overarching theme of “prefiguring” contemporary experience, finding constants from the war period to her later works. As Wechsler notes, Forner engaged with current events incisively in her work.15 Rather than take on Forner’s entire career as Whitelow and Wechsler did, this thesis frames Forner’s wartime paintings. By investigating Forner’s iconographies I demonstrate that the works from España and El drama confront their own times more than they look to the future.

Beyond these monographic projects, Forner’s work has been contextualized within the art movements in Buenos Aires such as Maria Elena Babino’s research on El Grupo de París.16 Babino writes about Forner’s work up to the early 1930s and demonstrates stylistic commonalities between this work and that of Forner’s peers. Following the Spanish Civil War, Forner began to depart from her Grupo de París peers, as she moved away from the classicized realism evinced in Composición to the expressionist, layered realism in El Monto Rojo. Her work

14 Guillermo Whitelow, Raquel Forner.
16 Maria Elena Babino, El Grupo de París (Buenos Aires: Museo de Artes Plásticas Eduardo Sívori, 2014) and El Grupo de París (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de Recoleta, 2010).
from the late 1930s and 1940s is often viewed as surrealist. For example, surveys on Latin American art, like Jaqueline Barnitz’s *Twentieth-century Art of Latin America*, group Forner with painters like Frida Kahlo. Pairing Forner with her surrealist contemporaries fails to acknowledge the complicated relationship she had with realist and abstract avant-gardes in Buenos Aires. Comparing Forner’s work to that of artists like Kahlo, however, sheds light on her distinct form of realism. Rafael Squirru once stated that, “despite the exoticism... in no moment does it occur to us to place Raquel in surrealism.” In this study, I dissect the “exoticism” Squirru saw in Forner’s work, parsing out her specific references and visual languages that contributed to the unfamiliar atmosphere of her work.

Through a close examination of Forner’s paintings from the 1930s and 1940s, the following discussion brings out the ways in which Forner’s engagement with current events manifests in her realist style and iconography. New detailed iconographical studies of the works bring out overarching themes and meanings in Forner’s work from this period. Each chapter focuses on a thematic area of her work over these years: the female figure and representation, religious iconography, and wartime. I contextualize Forner’s paintings through the political and cultural developments in Argentina and Europe with which she engaged. Many of Forner’s paintings are addressed in multiple chapters. Examining her works through different lenses, each a facet of her brand of realism, brings to light the complexity of her references.

The female figure features prominently in Forner’s paintings from the late 1930s and 1940s. Chapter One examines Forner’s approach to form over this period, illuminating how she responded to and developed the language of realism. Forner’s work has been classified as

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surrealist, but her paintings demonstrate how she utilized the female form to move beyond surrealism; particularly her modern realist style emerges when paired with work by her surrealist contemporaries. Women in Forner’s paintings are key to her visual language, used as an active mechanism for political and social commentary as their bodies take on symbolic, political meaning.

Within the understanding of female form as a strategy in Forner’s work, religious iconographies emerge as a political language. Chapter Two explores the relationship of Catholicism and politics in Forner’s paintings. Her commitment to female form is evident in her depiction of biblical figures, like Mary, as well as through her manipulation of traditional scenes, for example portraying Christ as a woman. Given its deep history in Argentina, Catholicism was intertwined with the social and political spheres. Through her engagement with religious subjects, Forner participated in feminist and pacifist movements in the 1930s and 1940s.

The final chapter examines the topic of Forner’s most pressing pictorial activism, that of war. Beginning during the Spanish Civil War and continuing through World War II, Forner used painting to expound on the ramifications of war, not only its appalling violence but also the surrounding policies, particularly on culture. Forner continued to formulate visual languages with which she confronted her times, supporting pacifist and anti-fascist movements and participating in artists movements like the 1945 Salón Independiente (Independent Salon).19

The three themes, the female form, religion, and war, place Forner’s production as distinct from twentieth century avant-gardes because of her complex mode of realism. Forner’s paintings used this realist formal language to respond to aesthetic, political, and social circumstances. The works discussed, many of which are examined through more than one lens,

emerge as deeply embedded in the issues of their time. Forner was able to engage with the existence of domestic and international issues, going beyond a superficial empathetic engagement, through her detailed realist visual language.
Chapter One

Women of the World: Forner’s Use of the Female Form

Raquel Forner used the female figure as a platform to develop her politics surrounding the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and art history. Beginning in the late 1920s, her work intersected with art historical dialogues around realisms, surrealisms, and abstraction. Forner deliberately engaged with each of these styles, but with each painting she molded these vocabularies to convey messages specific to her political and historical contexts. Her canvases ranged in content and style, but consistently referred to the female form, which she used to advance strategies of modernist representation in Argentina. The central position of women in Forner’s oeuvre attests to the importance of realism for the artist. Forner’s portrayals of women in the 1930s and 1940s gave contemporary significance to her work.

Central to Forner’s paintings are narratives that tie each work to the historical moment of its conception, whether related to the Spanish Civil War, World War II, Argentinian political developments, or the artist’s biography. In the period from the 1930s-1940s Forner depicted the female form in her paintings as flesh, sculpture, stone, and trees. Women in Forner’s work act as conduit for the expression of her attitudes toward war and political events. Art historians often write that women artists’ depictions of the female form can be read as a subversion or reclaiming of the male gaze, a term coined by Laura Mulvey in 1973 to describe the position of power in viewing female subjects. While Forner did operate outside of the male gaze, portraying form from a female perspective, she moved beyond such paradigms to relate to historical events,

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particularly through her 1939 painting *La Victoria* (The Victory). Gender and politics were intertwined for Forner, as will be expanded on below.

Forner’s relationship with realism may be tracked in her work through her consistent depiction of female figures. Though Forner was educated in Paris and participated in European modernist trends, her work demonstrates a nuanced dialogue with prevailing twentieth century art movements. Forner participated in international aesthetic advances to create an individual, proprietary style that related to the countries to which she had a personal connection: Argentina, Spain, and France. Beginning with the 1934 canvas *Composición* (Composition) and continuing through one of her most abstracted paintings, *Los Vigias* (The Lookouts) from 1946, the following analysis examines Forner’s association with the specific movements of realism, surrealism, and abstraction, as well as her relationships with modernist artists both in Europe and in Argentina.

**Early Style**

In Forner’s early paintings, the female figure became the subject for her stylistic experimentation. As a participant in Argentina’s *El Grupo de París*, Forner spent 1929-30 in France and absorbed modern currents including variations on realism, abstraction, and surrealism. Her work from the early 1930s was stylistically in line with that of her contemporaries, including an early-career Antonio Berni, Horacio Butler, and her husband, the sculptor Alfredo Bigatti. These artists were informed by Cubism and by Cézanne’s early contributions to modernism, depicting form through broad facets of color and thick impasto.21

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The works from this early period of Forner’s oeuvre are marked by solid figures and vivid colors, as evidenced in *Composición*, from 1934 (see figure 4). In this work, a vibrant female figure embraces in one arm a statue that mirrors her formally; she firmly grasps an orange fish in her other hand. The angled bodies suggest dynamism, perhaps even dancing or running. The buoyant tone of *Composición* is common in Forner’s early work, setting this period apart from her paintings in the late 1930s and 1940s. The angled composition suggests that Forner utilized modernist strategies of spatial manipulation, while the uncanny pairing of woman and sculpture may suggest an affinity to surrealists, who depicted mannequins and sculpture in their work. The whimsical subject, a woman with a fish and a sculpture of herself, is clearly not a scene from reality and recalls the subconscious imagery favored by surrealists, though Forner’s images lack the hyperrealism of painters like René Magritte or Salvador Dalí. Her women are solid and healthy, rendered in cheerful hues. The subject of *Composición* was uncomplicated by current events and used mainly to experiment with representation. At this point, Argentina was prosperous, though entering a series of military governments and coups which ultimately led to Juan Perón’s 1946 election. The Spanish Civil War had not yet begun and the events leading to World War II had not yet shattered the interwar tension. The impending political strife abroad provided a major catalyst for the shift in Forner’s style in the late 1930s.

*Mujeres del Mundo* (Women of the World), 1938 marked Forner’s turn to meaningful monumental compositions, in which she imbued female form with weightier symbolic meaning (Figure 6). The early figural style seen in *Composición* remains evident in *Mujeres del Mundo*,

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with classicized modeling of human form. She depicted multiple figures in varied degrees of scale and layered references, as she explained:

The composition is not complicated. The central figure is America, inclined to the earth with a sheaf of wheat. America is at peace, but the clamor of the world comes to her. Behind her is China (to the left, with the Semitic face covered with the forearm) and Spain (to the right) in an attitude full of anguish. And to the sides of the painting I have placed two figures of suffering: a mother who appears to cradle her dead son (barely insinuated by a vague form) and a wife who, after having lost her husband, takes the sickle so that she doesn’t lose the rhythm of the work. As the background, below the terror of planes which move away, having completed their mission of death, is a panorama of a bombed village.23

With this work Forner expanded her vocabularies beyond the immediately legible, despite her description of the composition as “simple.” She continued to devote herself to the female form, visualizing women as bearers of the world’s trauma. Forner depicted the central figure of America in full color with tan skin, while using greyscale for those representing Spain and China (though giving them distinct ethnic characteristics), calling to mind the sculptural woman in Composición. The women representing the wife and the mother are more fully realized than those representing foreign countries, emphasizing the universality of tragedy despite the focus on specific areas of the globe. All of the figures are sheathed in a halo of light, underscoring their symbolic stature and further removing the allegory from reality. Mujeres del Mundo also represents an early instance of Forner’s use of abrupt differences in scale to include context.

23 Translated from the original Spanish as published in Guillermo Whitelow. Raquel Forner. Buenos Aires: Ediciones de Arte Gaglianone, 1980: “La composición no es complicada. La figura central es América, inclinada a la tierra con un haz de espigas. América está en paz, pero a ella llega el clamor del mundo. Detrás de ella están China (a la izquierda, con la cara semita tapada por el antebrazo) y España (a la derecha) en plena actitud de angustia. Y a los costados del cuadro he colocado dos figuras del padecimiento: una madre que aún parece acunar a su hijo muerto (apenas insinuado por una forma vaga) y una esposa que, después de haber perdido a su compañero, toma la hoz para no perder el ritmo del trabajo. Como fondo, bajo el terror de los aviones que se alejan, cumplida su misión de muerte, un panorama de aldea bombardeada.”
details surrounding the central figures. The bombed village and mourning figures in the background, albeit scattered and minute, most closely represent actual events in the composition. They fill the negative space between the symbolic figures with reminders of the atrocities that had prompted Forner to create this piece. Forner was responding to news of the Spanish Civil War, and the international spread of violence through other nations’ involvement in the conflict. The horror Forner meant to convey is magnified by her distortion of space and form.

Forner’s women of Composición and Mujeres del Mundo recall Pablo Picasso’s classicized forms. Following World War I, Picasso and other avant-garde figures painted heavy figures far more naturalistically than the preceding cubist works, turning to the ancient Greeks in both style and subject with paintings like Three Women at the Spring, 1921 (Figure 7).24 These developments interrupt the linear, Hegelian idea of modernist progress by returning to naturalism. Forner’s paintings from the mid-1930s fit in this narrative. Like Picasso, she depicted classical women as a reaction to the upheaval of war with Mujeres del Mundo. Forner, though, integrated wartime imagery into her composition. Picasso stepped away from the realities of World War I with works like Three Women at the Spring, while Forner chose instead to depict the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War. Such differences are contradicted when considering Picasso’s contemporaneous work, like Guernica, but formally his classical paintings are more relevant to Forner’s style of realism.

Forner’s focus on women as subjects did not aim for aesthetic pleasure, as many female forms in art have, but for political messaging. The composition is an honest representation of the world Forner saw, rife with destruction, meant to elicit sympathy for its victims. Forner depicted

each figure with dignity despite the horrors surrounding them. Her description of the work is matter of fact, since it related directly to the news she read from Spain. Around this time, women’s groups in Argentina became increasingly interested in foreign affairs. Just two years before Forner painted Mujeres del Mundo, the writer and activist Victoria Ocampo wrote, “The fortunes of women in China or Germany, in Russia or the United States, in short, any corner of the world, [are] a matter of utmost seriousness for us because we feel the repercussions.”

With Mujeres del Mundo, Forner made a visual statement similar to Ocampo’s textual one. Both leave no question that the symbol of a nation’s suffering during wartime should be female. Forner’s tool to comprehend and paint unfathomable news was the female form, a familiar subject that would represent the spectrum of emotion and ruin of war.

Surrealist Connections

Forner’s canvases from the late 1930s illustrate her increasing deployment of surrealist strategies as a visual tool while subverting the male, European surrealists’ objectifying perspectives on their female subjects. Surrealism has been criticized in recent decades for its misogynistic leanings. For example, Mary Ann Caws has written of the violence in the surrealist depiction of female form. Briony Fer describes the dehumanization of women in their surrealist depiction as mannequins or simulacra. Giorgio de Chirico depicts women as mannequin figures.

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in *Two Sisters* (1915) (Figure 8). In the mysterious scene, de Chirico depicted the female form body as mechanical beings devoid of flesh, and by extension feeling. In a departure from these European surrealist tendencies, Forner inserted her women into complicated compositions, referencing a broad range of events and cultures. Her depictions borrow strategies from European surrealists that give agency to the female subject rather than suppress it. In her 1939 oil on canvas *La Victoria* (The Victory), Forner presented a broken, sculptural female body on a pedestal, like an offering (Figure 9). Surrounding the form are small-scale images of suffering or violence. The ground and the sky are both tinged with scarlet, a nod to the bloody scenes depicted. *La Victoria* seems at first an ironic title for a painting showing such suffering; it refers to the end of the Spanish Civil War, which began on July 18, 1936 and ended April 1, 1939, and initiated Francisco Franco’s military dictatorship. With this painting Forner acknowledged the brutal atrocities carried out under both the Republican opposition and Franco’s Nationalists, and hinted that a victory for Franco would not necessarily end suffering for Spaniards.\(^\text{28}\) In the upper right hand corner are two execution scenes; in front of them a less legible scene shows an altercation between two women. Sculpted classically and wearing long, sheathed skirts the figures recall depictions of goddesses. The extreme foreground is bathed in a pool of blood, with a white, sculptural foot holding down an illegible newspaper, the medium through which Forner would have discovered news from Spain. A lifelike hand clasps a bunch of wheat symbolizing San Cayetano, the patron saint of work and sustenance important to Argentine culture that Forner also referenced in *Mujeres del Mundo*.\(^\text{29}\) Additional referents to wartime pain surround the


figure, including female mourners, a solitary bare tree, an empty hut, and a field of cruciform headstones.

Forner created anti-war commentary by depicting female figures that were broken and manipulated as a result of the Spanish Civil War’s violence. To support this commentary, she utilized art historical tropes from surrealists as well as from her own earlier work. Though she did not cite René Magritte as an influence or reference for her paintings, Forner’s La Victoria recalls Magritte’s La Lumière des coincidences (The Light of Coincidence), 1933 (Figure 10). Magritte’s painting underscores the surrealist methodology of depicting representation itself, questioning the mode of painting and acknowledging the medium as a form of simulacrum.30 His depiction of an anonymous female sculpture, however, also demonstrates the problematic pattern of misogyny in his work. Briony Fer criticizes the practice of invoking the female figure as simulacra for the real, cropping it or using mannequins (or in this case, sculpture) as a stand in for an actual model.31 Forner’s work suggests a consciousness of these issues. La Victoria depicts a classical nude marble, similar to that in Magritte’s La Lumiere des coincidences, with notable differences. While Magritte truncated his sculpture at the neck, Forner gave hers a face, eliminating anonymity and also imparting a consciousness of female emotion in the viewer. Magritte depicted the figure as fully nude, whereas Forner draped her figure with fabric, suggesting modesty or shame, but also the possibility of agency. While Magritte’s figures are naked by the male artists’ choice, Forner’s are imbued with individual purpose. Further, Forner’s figure bleeds while Magritte’s is assumed to be a devoid of consciousness or feeling. Forner also included disembodied hands grasping the form, suggesting an attack on or possession of the

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31 Briony Fer, Realism, Rationalism and Surrealism: Art between the Wars, 191.
female body. By invoking the possibility of sentience in the sculptural figure, Forner overturned the surrealist tradition of removing female form from individualization. Forner’s figures were not representations of specific women, symbolizing victims of the wars in Europe. The choices that set her work apart from Magritte’s underline the sympathy and kinship she felt for each individual who suffered at the hands of conflict, while understanding the broader symbolism of her figures. She left the identity of the woman in La Victoria in this vague and symbolic space, but the figure bears a resemblance to the artist herself.

La Victoria also reveals Forner’s interest in directly appropriating images from the European canon in order to indicate her disturbance at the ongoing universality of war. Vignettes surrounding the central figure quote various art historical touchstones. On the upper right, Forner sketched a copy of Francisco Goya’s The Third of May 1808, 1814, in which Spanish revolutionaries were executed by a group of French soldiers under Napoleon (Figure 11). It is likely that she chose such a reference for its relevance to Spain as well as to the general theme of senseless violence under the guise of war. The detail also points to Manet’s homage to Goya, the Execution of Emperor Maximilian I series of 1867-69, which shows the death of the French emperor of the Second Mexican Empire by a firing squad (Figure 12). The scene is repeated twice in La Victoria, with a silhouette shadowing the first depiction toward the horizon, suggesting an awareness of repetition of such imagery throughout art history. While this detail of imagery does not reference a specific contemporary moment, the mention of these European canvases inserts Forner into a long tradition of political painting.

The inclusion of the execution scene further complicates Forner’s use of the female figure. By making references to the violence that was taking place in Europe, Forner pointed to the strength of her figures. Though the sculptural form of La Victoria is broken and bleeding, she
has survived among the chaos of war. Forner made a feminist statement by placing her women within violent and hectic environments, pointing to the impact of war on women and to their capabilities to provide support in trying circumstances.

Forner engaged in certain strategies, like the collapse of time, that also connected her to modernist developments. In her book *Realism*, Linda Nochlin discusses the differences between Manet and Goya’s execution scenes through their depiction of a temporal fragment. Nochlin argues that while Manet captures the moment in an empirical rendering of figures and action, Goya portrays the moments before, during, and after the execution in a single, emotional image.\(^\text{32}\) Forner, in turn, collapsed time completely in works like *La Victoria*. The repetition of the execution image skews the perception of time by depicting the same moment twice. The scenes that play out around the periphery of the painting are likely in the past, since the work represents the end of the Spanish Civil War, while the central figure remains in the aftermath of its horrors. In the clouded sky in the background Forner included both the moon and the sun, suggesting either two locations or two times. She also alluded to both Spain and Argentina (Spain via the newspaper, and Argentina via the bundle of wheat), collapsing spatial bounds in one image. In doing so, Forner attested to the violence in Spain transcending geographical and political borders, given the engagement of many outside countries as well as Forner and others in Argentina’s familial connections there.

Forner’s *Autorretrato* (Self-Portrait), 1941, provides a lens into how the artist viewed her role as a female artist during times of international strife (Figure 13). She depicted herself with some restraint compared with her expressive works from this time, while her studio, seen around her, is imbued with historical and geographic references. Forner placed herself in a non-specific

environment with objects receding into their groundless surroundings, a strategy falling in line with some European surrealist painters. The area to the right of the self-portrait connects to Europe. A globe in the foreground contains a newspaper pinned to Spain, which bleeds into the sheet in a nod to Forner’s relatives and others who were slaughtered in the Civil War. In the far background on this side, paratroopers descend into or behind an ocean, another reference to the violence in Europe. Between these references to the war, Forner repeatedly asserted the presence of female figures: a hand holds a wounded or dead bird before mourning women, behind which more women carry a painted version of her 1939 work La Victoria over a body. Just in front of the paratroopers, a repeated image of the artist stands before an illegible canvas.

The large self-portrait figure at center holds paint brushes in her left hand which rests on the table in front of her, with her right hand raised almost over her heart. Her right hand’s positioning, pointing to the events in Spain to her left, and her face’s stoicism, underscore the importance of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath to her production of art in the late 1930s and early 1940s. By depicting herself twice, in her studio reflecting on Spain’s tragedies as well as working on a canvas, Forner again eschewed temporal constraints. She focused in particular on the women of Spain through the vignettes included on the right side of the canvas, clearly identifying with these women.

In Autorretrato Forner used figures and maps to explain her connection to the war in Spain. The left side of the composition, in turn, is dominated by a map of Argentina, Forner’s home country where she was living at the time the work was painted. On the top left, a monochrome silhouette reproduces a photograph of Forner and her husband, the sculptor Alfred Bigatti, hovering over Buenos Aires on the map. Affixed to the lower part of the map, a bundle of wheat tied with a blue ribbon references Argentinian prosperity and well-being. The wall the
map is affixed to is in ruins, its holes making visible the references of destruction in Spain behind it. The spatial flattening in this work, which binds together Spain and Argentina, repeats the methods Forner used in \textit{La Victoria}, asserting the modernity of her compositional construction. The result is a glimpse at the mindset behind her artistic output, as well as the tension between Forner’s born nationality and her roots in Spain, where her relatives were suffering and dying on both sides of the war and during the beginning of Francisco Franco’s dictatorship.

\textit{Forner and Kahlo}

Forner’s unique treatment of the female form is emphasized by comparing her work with that of female contemporaries such as Frida Kahlo. Kahlo and Forner (both women working in Latin America, though they should not be constricted by these classifications) portrayed women’s bodies in their work in different ways and engaged surrealist ideas, which traveled across the Atlantic in both directions. Forner, who did not actively participate in surrealist exhibitions or publications, presented an alternative narrative to that of Frida Kahlo, whose name has become synonymous with Mexican surrealism. Forner’s paintings bear a superficial similarity to Kahlo’s, and thus incorrectly further the understanding of her work as surrealist. \textit{Autorretrato}, in particular, echoes Kahlo’s 1932 \textit{Self-Portrait on the Border Line Between Mexico and the United States} in its approach to dual geographies (Figure 14). Kahlo employed types to represent a traditional Mexico and an industrialized United States, with the artist’s likeness acting as both a connecting and dividing device. Forner’s composition is similar, in that her identity is split between nations, with the artist’s likeness in the center. It is unclear whether Forner would have had access to images of Kahlo’s work in the late 1930s and 1940s, but the
parallels speak to the importance of surrealist strategies for Latin American women. Both artists utilize European compositional strategies that were originated by mainly male surrealist painters. Alice Gambrell has compellingly discussed the concept of female surrealists as outsiders to the central circle of men in France led by André Breton. She describes Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington, another female surrealist painter in Mexico, as contradictory figures who neither reclaimed the dominating methods nor were complicit in creating art that upheld them. Latin American women were othered and fetishized through European surrealists’ emphasis on the feminine and primitive, but artists like Kahlo and Carrington participated in the system nonetheless. Despite these relationships, it is worth noting that neither Kahlo nor Forner self-identified as surrealist painters. Each of these women simultaneously participated in and rebelled against the patriarchal structures imposed by surrealism. Forner was caught in this relationship, addressing art history directly through her figures while conforming to an extent to traditional depictions of the female nude. Paintings like La Victoria are exemplary of this dynamic, the sculptural figure corresponding to European surrealist strategies but performing beyond surrealist discourse to comment on the Spanish Civil War.

Disrupted Forms

Though Forner’s earlier images, like La Victoria, present a fragmented view of the female form, later works like Ícaro (Icarus), 1944 include a figure being consumed or lost to materials like earth and stone, suggesting once again a possible affinity with surrealist practices (Figure 15). René Char wrote of surrealist compositions, “the painter has slain his model.” In

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plasticizing the body, the painter commits a violent act against the sitter, mainly for male enjoyment. Many surrealist images are aggressively violent and demeaning to women in their distortion of the figure. Mary Ann Caws takes Man Ray’s *Erotique-voilée* (Erotic-veiled), a nude image of the artist Méret Oppenheim posed behind the wheel of a printing press, her arm lined in grease, as a model for the complex relationship between male surrealists and their female subjects (Figure 16). The artist cropped the photo in a way that may suggest violence, creating disjunction through the body and aligning the female form with a mechanical object. Forner’s paintings hinder the female form in a different way, allowing the viewer to empathize with the subject, as the artist would have been a woman herself.

For example, *Ícaro* belongs to a series of works in the 1940s that subject the female form to different and more sympathetic distortions than those of Man Ray’s photos. In this work, Forner referenced the Greek myth in which the titular figure is destroyed by hubris. Forner inserted a feminine figure into the myth, central and grand in scale, to witness Icarus’s fall to the sea. Branches frame her face, which appears to be bifurcated and hollow, with no rear skull or hair, and portions of missing skin. Forner cropped the body to the neck, leaving only the woman’s visage present. Though cropping the female body relates to surrealist traditions, Forner’s omission of the torso may be read as a subversion of surrealist tactics. Male surrealist artists, including Magritte as evidenced in *La Lumiere des coincidence*, cropped female form to leave only the torso with women’s most sexualized body parts. While male painters removed identifying features above the neck to create an anonymous and fetishized form, Forner did the opposite by painting only the head, humanizing her subject rather than suppressing her.


In works like *Ícaro*, Forner used strategies such as the distortion of scale, one of her core commonalities with surrealism, to elevate her female figure. In this work, as well as in *La Victoria* and *Autorretrato*, Forner depicted a central, oversized female figure with surrounding narratives or vignettes. In the case of *Ícaro*, the title implies that the background figures are the most important. Forner inverted typical methods of representation in which larger figures carry the most importance in terms of meaning. The witness, rather than the event itself, is the focal point of this work. Forner referenced World War II in *Ícaro* through the paratrooper in the sky, which represented Icarus in this instance, but was also a recurring symbol of war throughout Forner’s paintings from the 1940s (including *Autorretrato*, discussed above). The dismembered woman Forner painted is witness to *Ícaro*’s fall and the events of World War II. She is trapped, bodiless, and unable to take action against or participate in the war. By depicting the woman’s face in a hyper-realistic style, despite the fantastical setting and narrative, Forner created empathy for her viewer. The figure is a stand in for any woman in her position, witnessing yet unable to change the events of war, but the detail and scale Forner used to depict her accentuates the reality of women who were impacted by World War II. Despite cropping and immobilizing her, Forner enlarged the scale to elevate the woman as an important figure during wartime, validating her pain as an important consequence of war.

In the 1947 painting *El manto de piedra* (The Stone Robe), Forner similarly created sociopolitical commentary through a female body consumed and fragmented by natural forces (Figure 17). The woman here is central to the narrative, however, rather than bearing witness to it. In a barren shoreline landscape, the lone figure (save for a detail figure with raised arms in the

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36 Pieter Bruegel’s *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*, circa 1555, in the collection of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, similarly depicts the Icarus tale as a minute detail within a larger composition. Forner, however, would not likely have been familiar with this work.
lower background) is being swallowed by a silhouette of earth or stone. The stone curves around the figure’s body like a cancer, enveloping her curves and rooting her to the ground. A preliminary sketch for the composition shows the stone even more clearly as a second figure (Figure 18). The assailant looms over the woman like a man, with a hand reaching over the woman’s genitals. In both the study and the realized painting, these women are rooted to the ground by the organic material. Like the female figure in Man Ray’s Erotique-voilée that Caws discussed, Forner’s women are physically impeded by structure in her work.³⁷ Forner deeply obscured and even violated the figures she paints through the inclusion of rock formations. There is, however, a sense of empathy for the woman as is present in works like Ícaro. In the sketch, the subject appears to be frightened, while in the completed painting she has a more resigned look.

In 1947, Forner was less focused on Europe since World War II had ended and instead shifted her attention back to Buenos Aires, commenting on women’s roles in Argentina. Women’s rights groups had spent the past decades in a futile fight for the right to vote, and finally under Juan Perón’s administration saw the passage of women’s suffrage on September 23, 1947.³⁸ Though the feminist struggle had reached the goal of suffrage, many women resisted the Peronist appropriation of their decades of work, complicating the milestone.³⁹ In the oil version of El manto de piedra, Forner created ambiguity as to whether the subject is being consumed by the rock or is emerging from it. Keeping the complexities of feminist social change in mind, the

³⁷ Ibid.


³⁹ Gregory Hammond, The Women’s Suffrage Movement and Feminism in Argentina from Roca to Perón, 142-148.
work can be read as the shedding of a skin of cocoon, supporting women’s slowly advancing roles in a modernizing Argentina, while struggling against looming patriarchal structures.

**Figurative Abstraction**

Forner remained committed to portraying the female form as groups of her contemporaries embraced abstraction. In 1940’s Buenos Aires, abstraction was being propagated by artists such as Raúl Lozza.\(^{40}\) The publication of the first and only issue of *Revista Arturo* in 1944 established the Argentine branch of concrete abstraction. The periodical’s cosmopolitan positioning of what became the Madí movement allowed each artist’s work to extend beyond his or her national or political context.\(^{41}\) By maintaining her realist style, Forner retained the specificity that allowed her to comment on both international and local political situations. Her continuation of realism also further aligned her with artists like Antonio Berni, who had also been part of *El Grupo de París* in the early 1930s. Despite her strong association with figurative painting, Forner’s work at this time was nonetheless informed by the growing abstract art movement.

In *Los Vigías* (The Watchers) from 1946, Forner married the female form and abstraction through local references (Figure 19). The trees depicted here, possibly a reference to the Nahuel Huapi forests in southern Argentina where Forner had traveled, are posed as women with flowing hair and arms raised to the sky, one even holding a child up.\(^{42}\) Forner and Bigatti kept


indigenous artifacts from across the Americas (some even labeled Eskimo art) (Figure 20) and stones from Miramar and Patagonia (Figure 21) in their shared studio on Plaza Dorrego in San Telmo. Forner engaged with the stones both by painting the objects themselves (though this practice is not dated) and by incorporating their porous form in work such as *El Manto de Piedra*, in which the texture of the stone matches that of the rocks she collected from Patagonia. In *Los Vigías*, she physically connected her female forms to their homeland. Referencing an Argentine forest emphasizes the importance of women in a society in which men are those who fight wars and women are relegated to the domestic sphere. By physically rooting her figures to the land and titling the work *The Watchers*, Forner repeated the message from *Ícaro*. To bear witness yet to be immobile and limited by tree roots, the female loses agency. Though works like *Los Vigías* depart stylistically from Forner’s more naturalistic works, their particularity is in keeping with the tenets of realism.

*Argentinian Realisms*

Through her repeated portrayal of female figures, Forner played an important role in the development of realisms in Argentina. Andrea Giunta writes of Forner’s prominence in the Buenos Aires art circuit in the 1930s and 1940s, prior to postwar shifts, reflecting on her position as an established figure by the 1960s. Giunta places Forner’s work in dialogue with that of other artists who interrogated the body through their paintings with varying degrees of realism to abstraction.43 For example, artists like Berni, Juan Batlle Planas, and Juan del Prete, were

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contemporaries of Forner’s whose contrasting strategies underscore her unique approach to representation.

In the 1930s and 1940s, when Forner painted the works discussed above, Berni produced work in a version of social realism. Berni’s *Manifestación*, from 1934, is painted in the same realist style he had worked in since his time with El Grupo de París and continued working in through the 1940s (Figure 22). The figures are depicted hyper-realistically, and each one is stylized with exaggerated characteristics. Berni’s subject matter is explicitly sociopolitical—these demonstrators hold a sign saying “pan y trabajo,” (bread and work)—giving a platform to struggling social classes. Though they both painted figural and political works, Forner’s paintings from this time are more abstracted and expressionistic than Berni’s and include fantastical or surrealist elements while Berni’s do not. Forner painted *Los Vigías* when her attention was shifting from postwar Europe back to Argentina. Berni’s subject matter leaned politically toward social issues of labor and poverty, while Forner’s were more concerned with international events and social issues of women’s rights.

While scholars have retrospectively imposed the surrealist label on Forner’s work, there was in actuality a separate surrealist movement thriving in Buenos Aires in the 1930s and 1940s that she did not participate in. Artists including Berni and writers like Ernesto B. Rodriguez began the *Orión* group with a 1939 exhibition and publication that espoused surrealist ideas. Forner, though aware of the movement, remained independent from the *Orión* group. Battle Planas, like Forner, has been associated with surrealism, though he played a much more conscious role in the local movement. He contributed to the advent of automatism, and supported

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the surrealist periodical *Cero* in the 1960s, though he died prior to its realization.\footnote{Dawn Ades, “Surrealism in Latin America” in *A Companion to Dada and Surrealism*, ed. by David Hopkins (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016) 190-192.} Many of Batlle Planas’s paintings were created through automatic methods, drawing from the subconscious as Europeans like André Masson and Jean Arp had. His work *Personajes automáticos* (Automatic Characters), from 1943, exemplifies Batlle Planas’s style of modeling figures through geometric patterns and automatized shapes (Figure 23).\footnote{Guillermo Whitelow, *Obras de Batlle Planas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones R. Benzacar, 1981).} *Cero* involved many figures in Buenos Aires who either counted themselves as surrealists or had an interest in surrealist thought, publishing numerous poems and reviews of visual art.\footnote{*Cero*, Buenos Aires, Nos. 1-8, 1964-67.} Despite moving in similar cultural circles, Forner did not contribute to the periodical, indicating her conscious separation from the surrealist movement. Though contemporary scholars like Aldo Pellegrini discussed the variation in styles and methods within surrealism,\footnote{Aldo Pellegrini, *Nuevas Tendencias de la Pintura*” (Buenos Aires: Muchnik, 1966).} Forner’s lack of engagement with theories of the subconscious or methods of automatism set her apart from figures like Batlle Planas, who practiced automatism.

In a starker contrast to Forner, del Prete, fused geometric abstraction and figuration in his work. Among these artists, he is the one who most departed from realism. In his paintings, such as *Abstracción*, from 1932, del Prete used geometrized shapes of flat color to construct human-like forms (Figure 24). Like Forner, he traveled to France in the 1930s, but he studied with Jean Arp and others.\footnote{Adriana Lauria and Enrique Llambias, *Una Mirada al Arte Argentino del Siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Museo de Arte Latinamericana de Buenos Aires, 2003).} In this work, del Prete combined shapes to create a stylized couple. He has
been included in conversations which pair him with Forner for their common ability to meld realism and abstraction as the Buenos Aires scene tended toward the latter.\(^{51}\) Both artists selected mechanisms of modernism and made them function for their individual purposes. Forner, to create emotionally moving figural scenes, and del Prete to explore the bounds of figuration and abstraction.

Forner was a rare painter focusing on female subjectivity among her peers in the Buenos Aires art scene through the 1940s. It does not do her work justice, however, to fixate on this one aspect of her production. Stylistically, the representational strategies in her work bridge those of others, as naturalistic as Berni at this time with those as abstract as del Prete. While each of these artists depicted the female form in their work, Forner uniquely used the body as a realist tool. Her figures not only were media for experimenting with representation and abstraction but also were politically and socially relevant.

**Conclusion**

Why, then, did Forner repeatedly depict female figures? How did she manipulate their representation, and to what ends? In the interwar period, as Devin Fore has written, artists returned to figural representation after the increased mechanization of art under modernism, which had removed the artist’s hand.\(^{52}\) Forner’s style supports Fore’s ideas of humanization in realism; her thick brushstrokes and naturalistic subjects allow for an understanding of her work as compassionate. Theodor Adorno famously wrote “there can be no poetry after Auschwitz.”

\(^{51}\) Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, didactic text for *La paradoja en el centro* (Buenos Aires, January 2, 2017).

which has been understood that following the atrocities of World War II, art for art’s sake could not be enjoyed.\textsuperscript{53} Forner adhered to this perspective by engaging with the very atrocities which, according to Adorno, had the potential to tear art down. Unlike many other surrealists whose work dissociated from reality, as evidenced by de Chirico and Magritte, Forner incorporated the same pictorial strategies to confront it head on. Her work from the late 1930’s and 1940’s engaged with its specific moment; she worked with developing modernist strategies to comment on the events of her time. Female form gave Forner a language to employ in both specific and broad terms, speaking to the current war but also to histories, as with her references to Goya and Manet. Forner’s realist specificity succeeded in propelling her work into the political conversation.

Chapter Two

Icons: Religion and Gender in Forner’s Paintings

Raquel Forner engaged with tradition by interrogating religious and gender norms. The iconography present in Forner’s oeuvre, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, demonstrates a strong affinity to Catholicism. Female figures feature prominently in Forner’s paintings that relate to Catholicism in three ways: as biblical figures, as stand ins for the canonical male Christ figure, and even as architectural forms like the Tower of Babel. A selection of paintings from this period and a study of their art historical and cultural references, provide a basis to analyze her Christian references in a feminist context. Feminist and political movements in Argentina in the early twentieth century are irrevocably rooted in Catholic conventions, thus Forner’s interventions in traditional iconographies indicate her awareness of their political meaning.

Forner’s choices of religious subject matter also inform the understanding of her practice as an artist with connections to both Argentina and Europe. The relationship between religion and national or political identity furthers the understanding of Forner’s role in dialogues of representation both in South America and abroad. The biblical iconography she included in her work relates to local as well as international contemporaries, ranging from Norah Borges and Antonio Berni to Frida Kahlo, providing insight into their interconnected artistic thought. Forner inserted her female figures into the feminist dialogue in Argentina in the 1930s and 1940s, when women’s rights groups faced complex setbacks in the midst of progress.\(^{54}\) Her use of Catholic imagery was also a strategy to universalize her commentary, since the religion was (and is) so central to Argentinian culture, yet European in origin. This strategy was only possible due to

Forner’s commitment to realist strategies, without which her distinct iconographies would have been lost.

**Women and Christian Iconography**

Christianity maintains a tradition of female pain, particularly through *pietà* images, which underscore the trauma of motherhood. Forner projected her thoughts regarding the effect of war on women onto Mary, the mother of Christ, who witnessed the ostracization and crucifixion of her son in biblical narratives. Mother-child relationships exist throughout Forner’s work from the late 1930s and 1940s. Forner also incorporated other women from biblical narratives into her work, expanding beyond maternal themes. She deliberately selected women over men, perhaps suggesting a relationship between the artist’s female identity and the figures she painted.

Forner repeatedly used women as symbols to portray her attitudes toward war and social issues in the late 1930s and 1940s. With ¿*Para qué?* (For What?), from 1938, Forner depicted a monumental woman seated with arms raised in strife (Figure 25). Her pose is that of a *pietà*, a swath of fabric lying across her lap in place of a deceased child. In addition to the compositional reference to Mary, the figure’s womb is enlarged to suggest motherhood. The absence of a figure for the woman to mourn over avoids the direct correlation to Christian iconography, but draws attention to the loss, relating to those whose sons are lost to war, whose bodies were not always recovered. The title emphasizes the senselessness of violence during the height of the Spanish Civil War. Since the figure appears to be pregnant, the title also questions the child’s purpose or the fact that she mourns the child’s bleak future. The iconography of ¿*Para qué?* evokes the connection between religious imagery and contemporary maternity which continued through a number of Forner’s successive paintings.
For example, the 1939 painting *Ofrenda* (Offering), imparts the continued intensity of Forner’s interest in female pain (Figure 26). This work depicts a sculpture of an anonymous woman, possibly another reference to Mary because of the mantle over her head, as an offering on an altar. Blood seeps from the mouth as if she is human, a theme repeated from *La Victoria* (see figure 9). Here the head and hand are truncated, and the body is absent. These elements lay on a pedestal of rubble, ensnared in fisherman’s netting. The woman holds a handful of peonies, lending ambiguity to the scene as to whether she or the flowers are the nominal offering. The title suggests a religious sacrifice, implying that the suffering depicted would lead to a better future or salvation. *Ofrenda* belongs to Forner’s *España* series of six works painted in 1938 and 1939 that contended with the events of the Spanish Civil War. The conflict ended the year *Ofrenda* was painted and is addressed in the other works similarly through coded references. The idea of a female offering subverts the typical wartime paradigm of men fighting and dying for progress. Instead, Forner’s depiction brings to light the sacrifice of women.

The 1940 painting *Éxodo* (Exodus), created in response to the Nazi invasion of Paris, is one of Forner’s more explicit religious references, titled after the second book of the Bible (Figure 27). The kneeling central figure depicted is a subtle pietà, with only a hand bearing the stigmata coming out of the ground representing Christ. The surrounding vignettes both repeat the pietà motif and relate more directly to the Exodus narrative. The scene to the left includes a mother holding the body of a child, as in a traditional pietà. The background includes several groups of itinerants, some of whom are wailing with their arms extended toward the sky, who are a clear representation of the Exodus story. In the Biblical tale, groups who had escaped slavery in Egypt wandered in the desert for forty years. Forner used this narrative to parallel displaced

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people due to war in Europe. Additional details to the right show reclining couples in either sleep or death, possibly depicting women with their husbands lost to war.

In one corner paratroopers descend from the sky, the only contemporary reference that connects the painting to present day tragedies. World War II saw an increase in paratrooper use, particularly on the German side, and Forner repeated this symbol in her works to reference violence in Europe. Forner conceived Éxodo as a result of the fall of Paris to the Nazis. Because Forner had spent some of her formative years training in Paris, she mourned the news of the invasion. Guillermo Whitlow writes that Forner included her family in this work, likely represented by the wandering group to the left.\(^{56}\) Incorporating these figures further suggests a connection between religious iconography and women’s familial roles, as will be elaborated on below. By connecting the events in Europe to one of the Bible’s greatest catastrophes, Forner rendered a strong indictment of modern culture.

Forner engaged with issues of gender as they became more pressing in the 1930s and 1940s. Feminism in Argentina had been growing since the turn of the century, when Elvira Rawson de Dellepiane spearheaded liberal campaigns for women’s legal, economic, and political rights. Feminist discourses were often at odds with prevailing gender norms, including ideals of womanhood and motherhood that were propagated by Catholicism. The Virgin Mary was long upheld as a constricting moral standard for women. By the 1930s, feminist groups began using motherhood as a tenet of female empowerment. As mothers, women were qualified to campaign for state protections and they used the socially-acceptable status as parents as a strategy.\(^{57}\) By co-


opting images of Mary and inserting them into her monumental paintings, Forner participated in this discourse, affirming mothers’ influence, not only as moral pillars but as powerful agents for social change.

While Forner skirted overt engagement with feminist or social justice discourses in favor of symbolic Marian imagery, artists like Lino Enea Spilimbergo painted in a social realist style to address underrepresented communities in Argentina. His 1936 painting La planchadora (The Ironer), representing a woman at work in the home, though apparently lost in thought, illustrates an interest in women’s domestic roles (Figure 28). Rather than conform to realist subject matter by painting typical scenes of women in mundane tasks such as this, Forner used her platform as an artist to expand and elevate femininity to a range of private and public roles, using biblical imagery to portray women outside of domestic bounds. Though she did not explicitly participate in feminist discourses, Forner’s paintings fit into the narrative which feminist figures like Alicia Moreau had been championing for decades - that women deserve equal rights to labor and politics outside the domestic sphere. By simply making paintings in which women existed outside the home (even women with strong ties to motherhood) and stood as universal symbols of suffering, Forner participated in Moreau’s movement.

Forner’s turn to historical, biblical iconography supported her politics and also placed her in a lineage of realist representation. The above works each depict female biblical figures, their stories as a tool with which Forner confronted contemporary politics. ¿Para qué?, Ofrenda, and Exodo each include women from the Bible as independent agents. Though each work may be responding to male actions, the compositions are relatively absent of men (save for symbolic

\[^{58}\text{Ibid. 270-71.}\]
references like paratroopers’ silhouettes and the hand of Christ), a common characteristic of Forner’s work from this period.

*The Female Christ Figure*

One of the iconographies Forner used to question gender was the depiction of traditional Christian scenes with women in the place of Christ and other male prophets. Though the subject matter is traditional, this cunning subversion sets Forner apart from her contemporaries like Berni and Spilimbergo, who used similar iconography but did not make such extreme changes. By painting Jesus as a woman, Forner disrupted gendered hierarchies and gave women the prominence withheld by society. The pictorial move also criticized the existing canon of representation, bordering on sacrilege. The radical portrayal of traditional subjects thus questioned the prevailing societal and representational norms in the 1940s in Argentina.

In *Presagio* (Omen), 1931, Forner presented a group of women as prophets, creating a precursor to her female Christ figures (Figure 29). Forner modified her subjects’ gender in this instance, substituting women for men. While there are several female prophets and saints in Catholicism, Forner’s depiction of anonymous group of women suggests her rejection of the theme of male omnipotence that runs through this religion. The inclusion of a serpent is a nod to the biblical temptation of Eve, in which woman is blamed for the fall of man. Given the interwar context in which *Presagio* was painted, with this work Forner commented on the irony that it was man who had facilitated destruction, and that woman had foreseen it. The women’s vision in Forner’s painting, depicted above their heads, is that of three horses cantering toward a scene of classical ruins, with an erupting volcano in the background. To the left, a school of fish

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59 In addition to Mary, the Bible considered Moses’ sister Deborah as a prophet, and there are a number of women designated as saints in Catholicism
swims away from the scene, underscoring the threat of destruction. The ominous scene is an interpretation of the Apocalypse. With these references and that to the fall of man, Forner drew from both early and late books from the Bible to depict her version of a godly vision, using existing narratives to express the urgency of current social and political issues.

Forner continued to present strong, central female figures, as in *Amanecer* (Dawn), of 1944 (Figure 30). The composition includes a figural prophet, just one year before the end of World War II. The female figure presents a hopeful scene in the cloak she raises above her head, with peaceful parents and children as well as a prosperous agricultural scene. Despite the surrounding death and violence, represented by skeletal figures on the left and prisoners of war on the right, a new set of figures emerges from the ground beneath the woman’s feet. The central woman is a beacon for rebirth after the war’s struggle, a distinctly female symbol. Her presence provides hope in despair, alluding to the peacefulness religion would have held for many Argentinians. The scene recalls the 1931 painting *Presagio*, though with a more optimistic spin. The female figure, while not a specific reference to Jesus, is depicted as an icon to lead into the future. Within the context of Forner’s other paintings from the 1940s, the woman of *Amanecer* is a clear messianic, savior figure, while also wholly female.

In *Retablo del dolor* (Altarpiece of Pain), 1942, Forner created a female Christ figure by depicting a shroud showing a female form (Figure 31). The image is a reference to the story of Veronica’s veil. In the biblical narrative, Saint Veronica offered Christ her veil; after she wiped the blood and sweat from his face he left his likeness on the cloth. The fabric is said to have retained Christ’s godly healing abilities. The story is portrayed in the Stations of the Cross, signifying its importance to Catholic tradition, and the veil itself was depicted repeatedly by Renaissance-era artists. Forner’s title aligns this religious iconography with a universal, and
therefore, contemporary strife. The woman illustrated on the cloth is gaunt, with symbols of Jesus including the stigmata on the hands and the crown of thorns, each indicating extreme suffering and persecution. The figures in the lower portion of the work are in mourning, including a miniature pietà with a woman standing over a covered corpse. Nude figures to the right of the fabric are in various limp poses implying martyrdom. Forner included anthropomorphic tree branches which hold up the cloth, connecting religious iconography to nature. In the story, the woman’s role is that of a messenger, providing her veil and transporting it. Forner’s interpretation inserted women into the role of martyr, representing Christ prior to the crucifixion.

Forner’s 1946 work El Juicio (The Trial/The Judgement) is one of her most overt examples of feminizing Jesus (Figure 32). In this work the central figure is a female Christ, with the crown of thorns as an identifier. Forner likely chose this scene to convey the suffering that came from war. Over the central woman’s shoulders, looming figures represent hunger and death, as tree branches puncture her body in a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice. To the right is a structure representing the Tower of Babel, a motif to which Forner devoted a whole painting that same year, which is suffused with demon figures clothed in contemporary military boots and pants. The title makes reference to the aftermath of World War II and the resulting Nuremberg trials for war criminals. Forner created this Last Judgement scene to confront the post-war prevalence of war criminals, particularly in Argentina, which had become a refuge for a number of Nazi fugitives in the late 1940s. The demon criminal figures in El Juicio stand in line to be judged by the central Christ-woman, while above the cliffs the innocent await salvation.

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Feminizing Christ in this image suggests that women, not men, should have the power to punish or save in a world enmeshed in conflict.

With *La Victoria*, 1939 (see figure 9), Forner feminized Christ to underscore female suffering. As discussed in Chapter One, in this work Forner depicted a woman being sacrificed on a backed pedestal. Though the torso is cut off at the arms and legs, the scene implies a crucifixion, which is confirmed by the graveyard of cruciform headstones in the background. The execution scenes in the background also reinforce the crucifixion narrative, each conveying a sense of martyrdom. Like *Retablo de dolor*, this work takes an image from the Stations of the Cross as its subject. In his 1980 monograph on Forner, Guillermo Whitelow wrote that in this work she indeed replaced Jesus with a woman, though he does not read into the meaning of this action.\(^{61}\) In addition to the shift in gender, Forner took several steps to remove the image from its biblical context. Her mediations, including the surrounding details and the crucified figure’s sculptural form, bring the biblical reference into the twentieth century. She depicted her female Christ as a victim of the Spanish Civil War to underscore the conflict’s disastrous effects.

While the shift from male to female drastically alters traditional Bible scenes in itself, Forner pushed further by depicting her women in the nude. In *Amanecer, El Juicio*, and *La Victoria*, each female Christ figure is at the most only partially covered. Traditionally, the female nude in art has been sexualized. In Christianity, the female form is linked to Eve’s original sin and is presented as inherently dangerous.\(^{62}\) Forner’s women, rather than titillate the male viewer, exist as platonic, strong leaders. The female body is not sexualized in Forner’s work; instead the nude is presented as the natural form for her women, thus negating their potential as a sinful


body. The figures are uninhibited by their nudity, which does not hinder their actions. Their nakedness provides another connection to Catholic iconography, which depicts Jesus humbly dressed in spare cloth or nude, without shame. Forner’s women are thus consistent with these representations but are contrary to traditional female biblical figures, like Mary, who are generally depicted clothed and modest. Rather than relating to traditional female nudes, like a Venus, or contemporary female nudes like Emilio Centurión’s painting *La Venus criolla*, Forner’s women relate purposefully to images of Christ (Figure 33).

Forner first studied under Centurión, though her symbolically weighted depiction of women contrasts with his grittier realism. With *La Venus criolla*, Centurión depicted a standing nude with one arm modestly across her chest, suggesting the viewer’s intrusive gaze and the woman’s resulting modesty. By placing female nudes in biblical settings, Forner avoided the voyeuristic perspective that is seen in more traditional nudes like *La Venus criolla*. Her figures are confident and natural in their nude states, defying the conventional representation of women. In keeping with realist tradition, Forner did not paint idealized depictions of women, but lifelike, imperfect figures.

José Emilio Borucúa and Laura Malosetti Costa have written of the difficulty in separating Forner from the label of “female artist,” and also of the importance of iconography in understanding her relationship with womanhood. They write particularly of *Retablo del dolor*, citing the wound on the figure’s torso as an encapsulation of both Jesus’s suffering and women’s “capacity to generate life.” They equate motherhood with the potential to match the stature of Christ.63 This reading marries Forner’s female Christ figures to the figure of Mary. Maternity is privileged in Christianity; the narrative of the Virgin giving birth to Christ obviates the need for a

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63 José Emilio Borucúa and Laura Malosetti Costa, “Iconografía de la mujer y lo femenino en la obra de Raquel Forner” 55.
man, and Mary takes on the central nurturing role in Jesus’s life, from his birth through her mourning the crucifixion. In the Bible, the role of women is more often supporting than central. Forner elevated the woman’s role by portraying a female Christ, creating a feminized hero who is not in need of outside assistance (or a man) for support. She also removes men from power by upturning models of femininity and masculinity in her figures.

Forner’s depiction of female Christ figures related to the work of feminist activists in Argentina at the time. In the late 1930s and 1940s, feminist groups pushed for gender equality in political and labor spheres. Both conservative and progressive feminist groups faced obstacles in the 1930s, including a push by President Agustín Pedro Justo in 1935 to overturn the Civil Code reform of 1926, which had expanded women’s equal rights to employment, property, and custody of children out of wedlock. In 1938, the year before Forner painted *La Victoria*, the Eighth International American Conference passed a resolution for “equal political treatment” of women and men. Argentina abstained from the resolution, contributing to efforts of feminist leaders like Victoria Ocampo and Alicia Moreau to petition female engagement both in the home and the workplace. Forner indirectly responded to these setbacks in her paintings, where she placed women in prominent roles, including in place of Christ.

While Forner depicted female Christ figures, her contemporaries, including Norah Borges, also depicted religious subjects relating to gender. Borges, the most prominent female artist in Argentina preceding Forner, repeatedly engaged in religious themes in her work in the earlier twentieth century. She generally depicted extremely different subject matter than Forner, focusing on domestic scenes. Borges’s painting *Annunciation*, circa 1920, illuminates the importance of Catholicism across avant-garde circles (Figure 34). Borges painted this work

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64 Gregory Hammond, *The Women’s Suffrage Movement and Feminism in Argentina from Roca to Perón*, 133-136.
while living in Spain and working with the Ultraísta group, shortly before returning to Buenos Aires. In *Annunciation*, Borges depicted Mary with a feminized angel Gabriel. Though angels are often depicted as androgynous figures, signifiers like the halo and wings are absent in Borges’s *Annunciation*, aligning Gabriel closely with Mary. Borges also connected the scene to Argentina, as Forner connected her compositions to events in Europe. The balustrades are a reference to common Buenos Aires architecture which is present through Borges’s work, rooting the biblical narrative in a local context.65 Both Forner and Borges utilized religious themes in their work, but Borges focused on Mary, depicting optimistic scenes like the Annunciation, while Forner chose to depict female Christ figures and scenes from the Stations of the Cross that represent sacrifice and pain. Images of a suffering Jesus supported Forner’s 1943 description of her figures, “they carry the weight of universal tragedy on their unguarded backs.”66

Like Forner and Borges, Frida Kahlo developed a practice of experimentation with religious roles in the 1930s. *My Birth*, 1932, is an imagined scene depicting the artist emerging from the womb (Figure 35). Her mother’s torso and face are shrouded in fabric, leaving a framed image of the virgin on the wall to stand in as a mother figure. Alluding to Christ’s birth via the decorative icon, Kahlo illustrates a mythologized scene with a blunt realism by including birthing fluids staining the white sheets. María A. Castro-Sethness writes of the influence of *retablos* on Kahlo’s work, citing the *Mater Dolorosa* hanging above the bed in *My Birth*.67 This

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reference is part of Kahlo’s practice of connecting her work to Mexicanness, but brings to mind mourning alongside birth. Though its presence suggests Kahlo being born as a baby Jesus, her inclusion of a specifically Mexican *Mater Dolorosa* distances her work from European canons of Catholicism. Kahlo’s *My Nurse and I*, from 1937 is more consistent with Forner’s strategies of transforming Catholic imagery (Figure 36). The composition relates to many Medieval and Renaissance paintings, including El Greco’s *The Holy Family*, circa 1585 (Figure 37). In *My Nurse and I*, Kahlo not only replaces Mary with Mexican indigenous imagery, but inserts a self-portrait in place of Jesus.

Despite their different practices, the consistency of Catholic subjects in these artists’ works speaks to the widespread experimentation with religious imagery at the time. Forner likely did not see these Kahlo images, which were created contemporaneously with her own Christ figure experimentations. Despite different contexts, artists like Forner, Borges, and Kahlo manipulated the art historical canon and Catholic tradition, spurred on by new modes of representation on both sides of the Atlantic. While Kahlo appropriated Catholic imagery to create a Mexicanized visual language, however, Forner remained connected to European imagery through her subversion of conventions. Though she participated in artistic circles in Buenos Aires, much of the Catholic imagery relates more strongly to European Renaissance holdings of Buenos Aires museums, including paintings by El Greco, or works she would have seen during her studies in Paris in 1929-31.
Expanded Religious Iconographies

Forner repeatedly employed religious iconographies to relate to then-current events. She drew from wide references including the Bible, repeatedly reading Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia*. Iconologia, first published in 1593, outlined the meanings of imagery from ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sources and was utilized by European Renaissance artists to develop symbols for abstract concepts. With these sources as a basis, Forner developed vocabularies to portray figures from World War II. Many of her paintings are interpretations of known narratives that expand to imagined environments with invented figures in order to convey a political message. Though these images were far from naturalistic, Forner used them as realist symbols for the phenomena occurring in Europe.

The demons in the monumental *El Juicio*, as touched on above, represented reprehensible war criminals following World War II. Forner conducted many studies for the canvas, including sketches of the demon creatures that suggest she invented her own versions of monsters from hell. One of the studies for *El Juicio* from 1946 shows her preoccupation with the matter (Figure 38). The figures on the right are regaled in military medals and in the upper center a gas mask grows branches and vines, taking on life of its own. The detail with which Forner created these beasts illustrates the horror she felt toward the events of the war, including the use of chemical warfare, which is represented through the inclusion of a gas mask. Forner implicated the accused as literal demons, including such details as bestial heads, snakes emerging from bodies, and multiple heads to one body. Forner drew these fantastical representations partially from *Iconologia*, which includes a woman with an animal’s legs to illustrate hypocrisy, a snake emerging from a man’s torso to illustrate sin, and a three-headed dog to accompany the phenomena.

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68 Ibid. 58.
illustration of persuasion (Figure 39). By connecting the Nuremberg Trials referenced in *El juicio* to religious narratives of heaven, hell, and sin, Forner underscored the enormous moral burden that the trials carried at the time.

In the work *La Torre de Babel* (The Tower of Babel), Forner used the biblical narrative to produce a scathing rebuke of mankind following the Second World War (Figure 40). In the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, the people of the world had been united and endeavored to build a tower to reach heaven but were struck down in their attempt and punished with divisive languages to staunch their future progress. In a postwar period, Forner related the conflict caused by varying languages to the recent international conflict based on nationalism and racial divisions. Forner repeated the militarized demon figures in this work, showing them as constructors of the tower in the process of confining the larger-scale female faces of varying colors. With this work, Forner continued her anti-war stance by depicting the propagators of war as inhibitors of an idealistic future.

The iconography of the Tower of Babel, present in both *El Juicio* and *El Torre de Babel*, references the global strife of the 1930s and 1940s as well as the patriarchal constructs of society. *El Torre de Babel* most explicitly shows male demonic figures literally confining female forms within an architectural structure. Forner’s females, though depicted only with faces, are large scale and appear resigned though stoic as the rodent-like male forms do their work. Following the example of Forner’s earlier paintings like *Mujeres del Mundo*, each woman represents one of the countries that have been ravaged by war, pointing to the universality of such violence. Though the symbolism of gender in these works may be more directly related to the international politics of World War II than to Argentinian gender issues, Forner deliberately
cast the victims as female and the perpetrators of violence as male. Forner depicted men at war as the evilest opponents to her feminized Christ figures, which represent the ultimate good.

*Complexities of Catholicism in Argentina & Latin America*

By depicting biblical scenes in her work, Forner participated in a legacy of Catholicism that is a direct result of Argentina’s complicated history with Europe. Because the majority of Argentina’s indigenous population was decimated through colonization, the lineage of Catholicism and related iconographies had an immediacy for figures like Forner, whose family traced directly back to Spain. By using the vocabulary of the Church in her work, Forner asserted her place in the European canon, in which Christian themes date back to medieval commissions, while staying rooted in the strong tradition of Catholic belief in Argentina.

The link between the Catholic Church and the governing of Argentina dates back to colonization by Spain. At the time of Argentina’s independence, numerous priests aligned themselves with revolutionary efforts to maintain their prominence in social and political structures. When colonists became an independent government, Catholicism maintained a central place in ruling structures and culture. By the early twentieth century, the Church was receiving funding from the conservative government in exchange for support against rising progressive and socialist movements. Catholicism in Argentina developed an especially complex political position in the 1930s. Religious values were upheld by conservative nationalists, who were implicated in Fascist ideologies, as a moral pillar. Catholicism became closely aligned with authoritarian principles and political machines. Though Forner’s embrace of New Testament

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narratives may suggest an endorsement of such movements, she distanced herself through various mediations. By incorporating the Virgin and Christ figures into her work, Forner co-opted the languages of social conservatives with whom she disagreed. Her manipulation of these figures addressed the religious, nationalist segment of the population, but may be taken as aggressive toward the conservative party or even blasphemous toward the Church. By underscoring the feminine in her work, Forner decried the patriarchal basis of the right-leaning trends.

When Juan Perón came to power in 1946, he was poised to impose a religious dictatorship with Catholicism as an official religion. Though his populist politics were framed as an alternative to conservatism, religion became unified with governmental control under Perón. These close ties waned as his tenure wore on and Catholicism was eclipsed by the cult of the leader. Significantly though, at the time Forner was working on *El Juicio* and *El Torre de Babel* the Church flourished as a governmental agent.\(^71\) Though Forner focused her paintings from this time on European events, she also acknowledged these governmental shifts in Argentina. Combining the two locations through religious references commented on the relationship between political movements in Argentina and Europe.

Forner had centuries of Catholic representation to reference in her work. *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, from 1600-1607, for example, attributed to El Greco by the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, was acquired for the collection in 1936 and would have been accessible to Forner (Figure 41). Forner continuously invoked El Greco as a reference, from a


quote in a 1945 article to a 1978 interview with Raul Vera Ocampo in *La Opinion Cultural*. She stated, “El Greco focused painting in a totally distinct way. It is curious how the important events that occurred in the world first influenced the subject of my painting. And not only the subject, but also the aesthetic of my painting.” Forner connected the expressionistic quality of El Greco’s work as complementary to the wars in Europe. Stylistic consistency with El Greco is evident in her painting from the 1930s and 1940s through her use of color and modeling of form with thick brushstrokes. Due to her reiterated connection to El Greco, Forner would have been interested in the strongly Christian subjects of his paintings. *Jesus on the Mount of Olives*, for one, includes a Christ figure in a similar pose to that in Forner’s *El Juicio*. The biblical scene referenced by El Greco includes the question of temptation, with Christ postulating to the disciples, which was relevant to Forner’s moral interrogation of war and postwar paradigms.

*Contemporary Pietà Imagery*

Forner revisited the *pietà* in several works from the 1930s and 1940s, bringing attention to female suffering. Her consistent portrayal of tragedy supports the realist reading of her work. She was quoted in 1945, in the women’s magazine *Vosotras*, “I am a woman, I feel for women, for mothers.” Forner expressed her empathy for mothers of fallen soldiers through Christian *pietà* imagery. Her 1939 work *Destinos*, for example, is a pared down *pietà*, with a single central


73 Translated from the Spanish quoted in Vera Ocampo, “Raquel Forner” in *La Opinion Cultural*: “El Greco enfocó la pintura de una manera totalmente distinta. Es curioso cómo los hechos importantes que ocurrieron en el mundo influyeron primero en la temática de mi pintura. Y no solamente la temática pero también la estética de mi pintura.”

74 Translated from the Spanish in Mary Perla, “Raquel Forner Pintado el Dolor Maternal” in *Vosotras* (Buenos Aires: December 7, 1945): “Soy mujer; siento con las mujeres, con madres.”
figure and one distant mourner, which fit in a pattern of artists’ representations on this theme (Figure 42). In place of the dying Jesus is a female sculpture, illustrating Forner’s consistent manipulation of gendered iconography. The newspaper in front of Mary reads “Guerra,” explicitly referencing the Spanish Civil War. Forner depicted Mary as a voluptuous figure, emphasizing her maternal qualities. Her breasts are nearly completely exposed, highlighting her vulnerability as well as her femininity. As she did in ¿Para que? and Éxodo (see figures 25 and 27), Forner used the pietà to comment on casualties from the Spanish Civil War and World War II. By connecting with religious tradition, Forner pushed the maternal aspect of these works beyond each specific conflict.

Forner was not alone in her dialogue with Christian traditions; her contemporaries applied similar strategies in their own work. Antonio Berni, for example, mirrored Destinos in his 1937 work Medianoche en el mundo (Figure 43). Adriana Lauria connects these artists’ reflection on art historical compositions, such as the pietà, to the Nueva Realismo (New Realism) movement, which reinvigorated traditional methods of representation for social causes.\(^7^5\) Medianoche en el mundo presents a pietà scene complete with surrounding mourners in classical robes and head shrouds. The Christ figure is male but appears to be modernized, with no beard, pants instead of robes, and young, suggesting ties to contemporary violence similar to those in Forner’s work. Additional bodies receding into the background further reference the Spanish Civil War, illustrating an epidemic of lives cut short as a result of violence on both sides. Compared with Berni’s Medianoche en el mundo, Destinos illustrates the nuances in Forner’s stylistic departure from her contemporaries. Both artists implement light and darkness to convey good and evil, which return as a biblical tension. Berni’s example includes a modern

\(^7^5\)Adriana Lauria, “Correlates Between Berni and his Contemporaries. Argentine Dialogues” in Berni y sus contemporáneos (Buenos Aires: MALBA, 2005) 166.
street lamp illuminating each mourning scene within the darkness of night. Forner’s Destinos, like most of her paintings from this time, includes both a darker side and a lighter side, implying either sunrise or sunset, and a shift between good and evil. Both artists incorporate Catholic iconography through the pietà, responding to contemporary tragedies.

The ubiquity of the pietà theme among modern artists speaks to the common experiences over geographies in the early twentieth century. The basest level of human suffering suggests threads of universality. While Forner and Berni worked from Argentina, artists in Europe like Käthe Kollwitz decades before had also depicted pietà scenes to shed light on the tragedies of war. The 1903 etching Frau mit totem Kind (Woman with Dead Child) shows a mother bent over her child’s corpse in agony (Figure 44). Kollwitz’s figures are stripped to their bare bodies and are not easily placed in time - unlike Berni’s figures who are clothed in contemporary garb or Forner’s who are dressed like classical figures. Writers on Kollwitz have described her manipulation of Christian imagery to relate to more modern themes; she removed the elegance found in Renaissance examples to convey the blunt pain a mother feels for her fallen child.76 Forner’s images are similarly realist; they favor deep emotional pain over aesthetic grace. Unlike Kollwitz, though, Forner’s images are rife with additional references and symbols to specify the locations and conflicts she engaged with, while Kollwitz’s images focus distinctly on the figures’ mourning.

Use of female Christian figures in Argentine painting continued through the twentieth century, including the late Antonio Berni painting, Magdalena from 1980 (Figure 45). In this work, Berni depicted a Mary Magdalene figure standing in mourning before the cross and revisited her as a modern sex worker. Playing on denigration of Mary Magdalene for her

76 Elizabeth Prelinger and Alessandra Comini, Käthe Kollwitz (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1994) 40-46.
promiscuity, Berni depicts a scantily-clad, thin woman through a voyeuristic lens, depicted alone in a domestic environment. She contrasts with Forner’s women, like the figure in ¿Para qué?, who are sculptural and solid pillars despite being placed in varying degrees of difficult circumstances. In Forner’s paintings, women have maternal agency and are not objects for a male audience, as Berni’s Magdalena appears to be, despite its religious model.

Conclusion

Religious iconography illuminated ideas of gender, maternity, and feminism in Forner’s work. Pervasive religious tendencies translated to a conservative social sphere, which Forner addressed through her works rather than social activism. She worked in the space between art as activism and art for art’s sake, neither overtly protesting nor ignoring issues of feminism. Her work reflected and critiqued the human experience as it related to war and loss, without explicitly taking part in anti-war or anti-fascist efforts. Religious themes enabled Forner to connect with her audience on a deep, near universal level (as Catholicism had been ubiquitous in Buenos Aires). Recognizable scenes including the Stations of the Cross and the pietà facilitated a conversation about the contemporary role of women. Despite being reviewed at the time as mere manifestations of maternal pain, these paintings question the standards of motherhood and homemaking for women. By depicting a pietà without a son, as in ¿Para qué?, and by embedding women into the male Stations of the Cross as in El Juicio and La Victoria, Forner asserted that female identity is multifaceted, beyond traditional maternal and domestic roles. Women in paintings like Destinos and Exodo represent the suffering of war, while in El Juicio a woman is the final judge of war criminals and in Amanecer a woman is the harbinger of a

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77 Mary Perla, “Raquel Forner Pintado el Dolor Maternal” in Vosotras.
peaceful future. Rather than be confined to the home, women in Forner’s paintings could act as prophets and dynamic leaders. They were worldly, aware of and participating in international events and politics at a time when such activities became increasingly vital. Forner’s contribution to religious and feminist dialogues is consistent with those of historical realist painters, who used their images to illuminate social issues for underserved populations.
Chapter Three

Blood in Flowers: Forner’s Response to the Complexities of War

I really began to paint when war broke out in Spain. The physical and spiritual tragedy that started in Spain and later spread through the world, threatening humanity with the shadow of totalitarianism, made an intense impression on me. Because I love Spain and I am a woman I could not return to painting a still life… I see agony in the twisted branches of the trees. I see blood in each delicate flower, because I remember the same flowers of Europe.

- Raquel Forner

Forner’s paintings from the late 1930s and 1940s, as discussed in the preceding chapters, focus substantially on subjects of war and violence. Her work confronted both the Spanish Civil War and World War II head on, though she mediated her subject matter through allegory. Mary Perla’s 1946 *Vosotras* piece on Forner highlighted maternal pain as a central facet of war, dwelling on female distress over transnational political implications. “The woman as a figure of pain, the woman-life, we could say, is in all of our painter’s canvases,” Perla wrote, generalizing Forner’s oeuvre. Despite this emphasis, the political engagement in Forner’s work superseded her female identity and sympathies. Forner took on the gargantuan task of understanding humanity’s darkest moments, creating nuanced views of the world in her monumental works.

78 Translated from the Spanish quoted in Ernesto Castany, “El Sentido Humano de Raquel Forner” in *Clarin* (Buenos Aires: June 1948): “Yo comencé a pintar realmente cuando estalló la guerra en España. La tragedia material y espiritual que empezó en España para despararramarse luego por el mundo, amenazando de toda la humanidad con la sombra del totalitarismo me impresionó intensamente. Porque amo a España y soy una mujer no pude volver a pintar una naturaleza muerta… Veo agonía en las retorcidas ramas de los árboles. Veo sangre en cada flor delicada porque recuerdo las flores semejantes de Europa.”

A close examination of Forner’s paintings from her war series, *España* (Spain) (1938-39) and *El Drama* (The Drama) (1940-46), reveals the complex strategies of representation she employed to reflect her times. The subject matter and visual devices Forner implemented in these paintings address the political and cultural atmosphere of the 1930s and 1940s. Her paintings evoke cultural subjects, from visual art and architecture to theatricality, each a component of the realism Forner developed during this period. Through these mechanisms, Forner’s works comment on the Spanish Civil War and World War II’s influences on the production of art. The period surrounding the Second World War has been recently revisited by historians, who have focused on the political implications on artmaking in Europe. The effects of cultural policies were felt as far as Forner’s city of Buenos Aires where, as will be elaborated on below, political appointees like Oscar Ivanissevich spoke out against modernism.

### España and Collective Culture

Forner’s series *España*, six paintings from 1938-39, challenges the atrocities of the Spanish Civil War and cautions against future abuses of fascism. In this series Forner repeatedly depicted the war’s destruction through symbolic sculptural imagery. Forner had visited Spain with her family as a child to connect with relatives and later credited the experience with her initial interest in creating art. This landmark trip, coupled with her Spanish descent, added a

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personal dimension to her interest in the conflict, which echoed a broader societal interest. Beginning in 1936, Argentina’s government and citizens became invested in the activities in Spain. As the government maintained an official policy of neutrality, in-depth coverage of the conflict by newspapers became exceedingly popular in Buenos Aires. Among the general population, socialists sided with the Republicans, while conservatives sided with the Nationalists. Argentina also took part in various mediations between the Spanish Republicans and Nationalists, participating in discussions of intervention at Pan-American conferences. Despite their physical distance from the conflict, artists like Forner absorbed the atmosphere of wartime into their works. Forner, particularly, was shaken by news of casualties among her family in Spain and developed a pacifist political stance that was reflected in her work. Her family and friends in Spain participated and were slain on both sides of the conflict, so Forner’s attitudes were not sympathetic to one side or another; rather she comprehensively opposed war in general. This pacifist conscientiousness manifested itself in Forner’s progressively dark subject matter after 1936.

Forner’s España paintings delve into topics of culture, heritage, and destruction. Through their symbolism, including sculptures and classical cultural references, the series as a whole commented on both Spanish and Argentinian politics. The six paintings in the series, Mujeres del Mundo, 1938 (Women of the World), Sin título, 1938 (Untitled), Ofrenda, 1938 (Offering), La Victoria, 1939 (The Victory), Claro de Luna, 1939 (Moonlight), and ¿Para qué?, 1939 (For

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84 Email from Sergio Domínguez Neira, the artist’s nephew and President of the Fundación Forner-Bigatti, Buenos Aires, February 21, 2018.
What?) include representations of women and female sculptural figures. By incorporating imagery of classical sculpture, Forner commented on Iberian and Greco-Roman cultural legacies. Her use of sculptural imagery preceded España, as in works like Composición, 1934 (see figure 4). The España paintings are the first, however, in which Forner used sculpture to depict wartime destruction. The works allude to violence as well as to its effect on innocent Spaniards, illustrating the devastation of towns alongside mourning and damaged figures.

The España paintings and other works from this period focused on specific conflicts, but their subject matter extended to the ramifications each war had on the cultural landscape. Forner developed vocabularies to address different facets of culture in Europe (visual, written, and performative). For example, she consistently depicted toppled sculptures as symbols for war’s ravages in Spain, in works including Sin título, Claro de Luna, Ofrenda, and La Victoria, all belonging to the España series. Each sculpture depicts a wounded or toppled woman, and all are white and classicized, referencing antiquity. Forner considered the sculptures a stand in for Spain as it was being torn apart by the civil war. The classical sculptures reference the longstanding Spanish identity that was destroyed by the divisive conflict. Forner’s focus on statues also underscores the importance of art and culture, which was threatened by the indiscriminate violence of the Spanish Civil War and by the possibility of a fascist, authoritarian government under Franco.

For example, Claro de Luna, 1939 (Moonlight) shows a toppled statue of a woman who is beheaded, stabbed through the chest, and clasping the sculptural head of a boy (Figure 46). Additional wounds, including an iron gate piercing the female figure’s hand, reveal that the statue is hollow, though it also bleeds. More sculptural appendages dress a tree in the background, and the dark figure of a hangman at right impedes the moonlight on the horizon.
The title ironically references the filtered light behind the eerie image. The central sculpture, attacked by other sculptural limbs, suggests a Spain that had been destroyed from the inside, the war’s fighters killing their fellow countrymen. The use of classically-styled sculpture and the toppled ionic column in *Claro del Luna* emphasize Forner’s concern for the continuity of culture in a Spain threatened by fascism.

By repeating imagery of slain sculptures throughout the *España* paintings, Forner responded to the unrelenting destruction of the Spanish Civil War. *Sin título*, 1938, is similar in composition to *Claro de Luna* (Figure 47). It also includes a hollow sculpture, alluding to the hollowness of the conflict in Spain or in the news coverage of its disasters. The fallen statue appears to represent a young woman or a child, with a human figure flailing in the background to emphasize the intensity of her death. *Ofrenda* (Offering), 1938, similarly incorporates the female sculptural form (see figure 26). In this work, the figure is represented by head only. The violence of the figure’s death is portrayed through red blood that drips from her mouth. In *Ofrenda* Forner did not show the offending figures, but the netting that surrounds the figure’s neck alludes to the complicated nature of the war. The web of rope also acts as Spain’s permeated border, as Italy, Germany, and other nations had intervened in Spain’s conflict.

When the *España* paintings were first exhibited at Galería Müller in Buenos Aires, they were received well as allegorical works. Jorge Romero Brest reviewed the series in *La Vanguardia*, contending that Forner’s subject matter was not the women of Spain, but a broader suffering that was relatable in Argentina, or anywhere there is grief and conflict. He described her works as surrealist, however, approaching her allegories with less nuance than they are due. The surrealist reading removed *España* from its context and limited the further understanding of

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Forner’s works as political, pacifist statements. Since *La Vanguardia* was the official publication of the socialist party, its positive reception aligned Forner with the party’s Marxist ideals. The review portrayed her series as anti-Franco and anti-Nationalist, since the socialists sided with the Republicans, rather than anti-war. While Forner likely did sympathize with such socialist causes, her work opposed the actions and implications of war itself more so than either side’s political ideologies. *España*, as a series, was not partisan but pacifist. Forner engaged with imagery in her published work, however, that aligned her with political causes.

One of Forner’s most overtly politicized explorations of war motifs was in an illustration published in the Buenos Aires magazine *Conducta* in 1937 (Figure 48). To accompany a poem by Cordova Iturburu, a politically active communist writer, Forner depicted the figure of death standing over a mother and child. In the background tanks and fighter jets contextualize the scene as one of modern warfare. The fighter jets are reminiscent of fascist propaganda, as is the angular style of the buildings, departing from Forner’s typical, classicized approach. The airplane formation was a motif used in Italian Fascist propaganda which associated war with modernization and progress. Forner subverted this symbolism, however, and appropriated these strategies for her own political goals. By pairing the cubist-futurist military subjects with the realist-expressionist depiction of suffering, Forner refuted the fascist representational style as well as the associated propaganda. In the lower portion of the drawing, which related most closely to Forner’s paintings, she succeeded in portraying the realities of war which propaganda avoided.

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By coupling images of military might (typically used to impress and illustrate modernity) with images of war’s victims, Forner indicted rather than aggrandized military power. Iturburu, the author of the poem Forner illustrated, was an active member of the communist party in Buenos Aires, suggesting Forner’s image was critical of fascist governments of Europe. Completed at the height of the Spanish Civil War, the references to Italian propaganda indicate an awareness and critique of Mussolini and Hitler’s military involvement in the conflict. Though she had family on both sides of the Spanish Civil War, Forner’s pacifist stance became aligned with various progressive fronts in the 1930s and 1940s, including this anti-fascist illustration.

It is nearly impossible to speak of art and the Spanish Civil War without mentioning Picasso’s Guernica, 1937, a painting that has become firmly entwined with the conflict (Figure 49). The infamous bombing of the Basque town in 1937 both represented the height of Franco’s barbarism and reflected his alignment with Hitler’s Nazi regime and Mussolini’s Fascism, as their bombers actually carried out the attack. Forner did not specifically reference the incident or Picasso’s response to it in her work, but her methods reflect Picasso’s strategies in confronting the war. Andrea Giunta speaks of Guernica as “an image generated at a very precise historical moment, one which aimed to provide answers to a set of latent imperatives regarding the forms in which modern art could indeed provide answers in the face of historical imperatives.”

Modernism offered a solution to the question of representing previously unfathomable crimes against humanity, its distortions representing ideas outside of a naturalistic reality. For her part, Forner conceived of the otherworldly landscapes and anthropomorphized sculptures in España to cope with her unique historical moment, formulating visual languages that she needed in order to

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process the attacks on her family and culture in Spain. The repeated allegorical depiction of destruction was not only a critical, pacifist mechanism for Forner, but also a tool to comprehend the conflict. Forner’s paintings, however remained committed to a realist depiction of violence more stylistically aligned with Picasso’s peaceful, classicized works, like *Three Women at the Spring* (see figure 7) than with *Guernica*.

Like Picasso did with *Guernica*, Forner developed imagery that referenced the terrors of the Spanish Civil War. With *Mujeres del Mundo* (see figure 6), one of Forner’s first paintings engaging in the conflict in Spain from 1938, Forner universalized the conflict through its title, despite its local subject matter.\(^{89}\) As discussed in Chapter One, the women in this work represent the widespread consequences of the tragedies in Spain. Beyond the larger figures representing far-flung nations are the detailed horrors of war, including mourning mothers and the remnants of bombed buildings, Forner’s stylized, symbolic interpretation of the Spanish Civil War directed her commentary to a global scale.

In a move toward theatricality, Forner began to question reality through her symbolism. While she painted based on then-current events, her iconography shifted to suggest fiction by nodding to theater or other forms of narrative culture. Forner classicized the women in her realist style as well as their draped dresses, referring to Greek and Roman tragic theater. This reference is buttressed by the inclusion of sculptural forms in the other *España* paintings. Forner continued her references to theater in her next war series, *El drama*, in which she confronted the atrocities of World War II.

El Drama: *World War II and Farce*

With the series *El Drama* (1939-47), Forner responded to World War II, incorporating themes of suffering and violence with the theatricality that she began working with in *España*. As World War II ravaged Europe, the series *El Drama* was a confrontation of the farcical posturing of governments in wartime; the title is an acknowledgement of the theater of war where destruction took place, but also a nod to the superficiality of human conflict. Forner painted stages on which the war and its consequences played out. Her paintings, rife with symbolism already, became sweeping realist allegories for the fragile human condition at wartime.

*El Drama*, 1944 (The Drama) is one of Forner’s most monumental and darkest oil paintings (Figure 50). In this work, painted in the midst of the Second World War, Forner presented icons of war as a theatrical scene, with rows of players facing the viewer like an audience, flanked by the monumental women found throughout Forner’s oeuvre. The focal point, an anatomical skeleton diagram, alludes grimly to the Holocaust’s Nazi medical experiments. Though the chart is damaged, the form extends beyond its edges and suggests that the skeleton has life. In the periphery of the composition the motifs recall previous paintings by Forner: paratroopers and ghastly soldier figures to suggest war, torn canvases and sculptural fragments in a nod to the destruction of culture, a history book and globe to allude to the roots and ramifications of conflict, and familiar history scenes like the execution from Goya’s *Third of May*, in the upper left corner (Figure 51). Forner’s inclusion of such an array of symbols acknowledge the vastness of war’s consequences. The reference to Goya also recalls the same detail in *La Victoria*, from 5 years earlier, which responded to the Spanish Civil War (Figure 52).

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90 Josef Mengele, who orchestrated these crimes, ultimately landed in Argentina in 1949.
Forner’s repetition demonstrated how the wars were connected; their destruction felt deeply and pervasively, on many levels and over time.

Forner depicted the imagery of a stage of destruction in Desolación (Desolation) from 1942 (Figure 53). In a stark, ravaged landscape, the tattered red fabric entwined in a tree presents the only sign that human life had existed there. As typical of Forner’s work through the 1940s, the bare tree limbs take on anthropomorphic qualities; hands emerge from the ground and the central tree grasps the red fabric in its wooden fingers. The red fabric contrasts with the gloomy, blue landscape as a harsh reminder of the continuing violence abroad. In keeping with the theater references present through the series El Drama, the red fabric acts as a stage curtain that can no longer sustain its fictions. With this work, Forner commented that the proponents of war themselves would suffer from the pervasive ramifications of their actions.

In La Lucha (The Fight), 1945, Forner repeated the imagery of a stage. In this work she rendered war’s devastating effects as uncontrollable as unbridled nature (Figure 54). Forner depicted a hand rooted to the ground at the wrist, with several wounds and a plant emerging from one of them. Tree branches are gnarled around the appendage, with anthropomorphized trees looming over cliffs in the distance. Forner depicted the hand crippled by destruction, unable to function. Forner’s highly symbolic representation of the effects of war acknowledged that the conflict became beyond control, particularly from Forner’s distant, civilian standpoint. In the background two trees support a scrim, a backdrop for two visages, one female with a likeness to the artist, and one male. The cloth appears as a theater curtain, the cliff as a stage, illustrating the fragility of the war’s drama. The stage in this work, placed in the background, underscores Forner’s physical remove from the war, as she painted this series in Buenos Aires.
Forner repeated a classical Greek chorus throughout her work in another nod to theatricality. *Tirieblas* (Darkness), 1943 shows a procession of women mourning or wailing at the sky (Figure 55). This image appears repeatedly in Forner’s work (most closely in *Éxodo*, and also in *Retablo del dolor and La Conferencia*) but has been interpreted in a way that emphasizes emotion and overshadows the broader subject matter of her oeuvre. Like in *Mujeres del Mundo*, each female figure is dressed in a long, draped gown in a classicized manner. The group of women may be read as a Greek chorus, collectively voicing each other’s pain. The ruin behind the figures acts as a stage backdrop, its color red echoing the curtains present in *El Drama* and *Desolación*.

In the context of a theater, the stage motif places the viewer in the audience, implicating her as a silent spectator of the war’s horrors. In each of the works discussed above, Forner condemned political powers, as well as the general public, in Argentina for their superficial support of the Allied forces during World War II. Her criticism of Argentina’s politics extended to culture as support of fascist policies emerged, including attempted control of cultural production.

**European and Argentinian Politics and Cultural Policies**

Forner’s focus on visual and other forms of culture in *España* and *El Drama* confront the Spanish and Nazi assault on culture during the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s rule and World War II, which permeated Argentina through the rise of nationalist thinkers. The wounded sculptures of *España* allude to the victimization of artists during authoritarian regimes, while the theatricality of *El Drama* nods to the potential for art to be a form of resistance.

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From the Spanish Civil War through Francisco Franco’s authoritarian rule, opponents to the nationalist regime were ruthlessly attacked for their dissent. The government privileged nationalism and Catholicism in all spheres of life and attempted to control cultural production. While fascist ideals were taught in schools and imposed on cultural institutions, efforts to control and censor artists failed and there was no clear official aesthetic. Because Forner’s initial interest in art was tied to her 1915 familial visit to Spain, an assault on the free production of art there would have been particularly alarming to her, though it had not been successful.

Hitler’s National Socialist Party in Germany imposed a comprehensive cultural program through which the government controlled the production, public holdings and exhibition, and private collection of works of art. The widely publicized Kunstaustellung Entartete Kunst, or Degenerate Art Exhibition, held in 1937 condemned avant-garde work (including expressionism, cubism, and all forms of abstraction) in a dialectic with National Socialist Realism. The preferred Nazi style was a classicized body that reflected nationalist values and ethnically-charged ideals of beauty. While Forner was far from the racial persecution of the regime, had she been working in Europe at the time, her progressive figural style would have been condemned in Germany. News of the exhibition and surrounding persecution of artists scandalized cultural centers throughout the world as freedom of expression became synonymous with democracy.

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94 See the Free German League of Culture in England.
In Éxodo, 1940 (Exodus) (see figure 27), Forner responded directly to the Nazi invasion of Paris. While her work from this era widely commented on the pervasive effects of global conflict, Éxodo was a nostalgic reflection on the artist’s connection to the French capital where she had studied in 1929-31. In addition to her biographical connection to the city, the Nazi occupation of France had important implications for modern art and artists, which contributed to Forner’s response to the event. Under the Nazis and the Vichy government, artists in France faced restrictions on materials and production; Hitler sent Arno Breker as a cultural ambassador to advance his national socialist aesthetic. News of the Nazi assault on culture was prevalent, and likely contributed to responses like Forner’s. Éxodo alludes to layers of suffering seen in the paratroopers and bodies in the background. The central female victim, personifying France, reaches for help from a corpse’s hand from the ground, underlining the hopelessness of the moment. A series of groups of women, or Greek choruses, in the background allude to the importance of culture, as well as to the droves of artists who left Paris in response to the Nazi invasion.

Argentinian institutions, themselves experiencing a rise of nationalist sentiment, fell into oppressive patterns that mirrored Spain’s and Germany’s (though to a lesser degree). For example, as a consequence for aligning himself with Jews, Jorge Luis Borges was passed over for the National Literary Prize in 1942. In 1945, artists protested the government-corrupted Salón Nacional (National Salon) by organizing the Salón Independiente (Independent Salon),

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95 Guillermo Whitelow, Raquel Forner, 160.


where artists would be free to express dissenting political opinions.\textsuperscript{98} Abstract art was lampooned in *El Arte Morboso* (Morbid Art), a repeatedly presented and published speech from 1949 by Minister of Education Professor Oscar Ivanissevich. Ivanissevich was known to be a Nazi sympathizer, however, and despite his views such avant-garde styles continued.\textsuperscript{99}

While Forner’s paintings focused on the violence in Spain and Europe, Argentina was simultaneously suffering through an era of political tumult. The period including the 1930s through 1943, initiated by José Félix Uriburu’s coup that overthrew President Hipólito Yrigoyen, was known as *La Década Infame* (The Infamous Decade). A poor economic climate and political corruption continued under presidents Agustín Pedro Justo, Roberto María Ortiz, and Ramón Castillo. The latter was overthrown in 1943 by the nationalist *Grupo de Oficiales Unidos* (United Officer’s Group, or GOU), which included the future president Juan Domingo Perón, beginning a series of short-term military dictatorships. Each administration was encumbered with structural corruption and instability.

Forner’s emphasis on the theatricality of the global conflict in the series *El drama* also took a jab at the hypocrisy she saw running through Argentina in the 1940s. The Argentine government continuously invoked a policy of neutrality in the face of the global conflict, over the course of several administrations. Despite the outward impartiality, Argentina’s exports particularly supported British war efforts while a segment of the population’s nationalists sympathized with Germany.\textsuperscript{100} The country remained neutral, even under continued pressure


from the United States to align with the Allies, ultimately declaring war on the Axis Powers only months before their surrender, on March 27, 1945. The continued posturing of the government, resulting in their delayed official response to World War II, resulted in the rise of populism and contributed to the cynical spirit of Forner’s paintings in the *El drama* series. In *El drama*, for example, painted before Argentina officially entered the war, Forner pessimistically placed a skeleton at center stage.

In 1945, as Europe was reckoning with the war through conferences and divisions, Argentina was entering the time of Peronism.\textsuperscript{101} Perón held positions including Minister of Labor and Vice President under the various military governments of the mid-1940s, but by 1945 his workers’ rights platform was at odds with the conservative military government. After his speech on September 18, 1945 in support of social reforms he was arrested, prompting the infamous demonstration on October 17, 1945 to demand his release. The massive demonstrations were captured in photographs and became a spectacle of political support, ultimately becoming a propagandistic symbol for Perón.\textsuperscript{102} Though Forner and most modern Argentinian artists did not engage directly with this imagery, its ubiquity in Buenos Aires promoted politically active visual responses. Forner’s engagement with World War II corresponds to this uptick in political imagery. For example, in 1946 and 1947 Forner created work in response to post-war trials and conferences, which will be elaborated on below.


Forner was not alone in her attention to the events in Europe and their implications for Argentina, though her strategies were unique. In 1945, a large group of artists participated in the *Salón Independiente* in Buenos Aires. The exhibition provided an alternative to the government-affiliated *Salón Nacional* and brought artists with diverse aesthetic interests together through their shared pursuit of democracy. Forner participated with the painting *Liberación* (Liberation), 1944, which she had withdrawn from the *Salón Nacional* (Figure 56). The painting centers on a monumental female figure emerging from a canyon. Surrounding the figure and in the red fabric draped over her side, small suffering victims of war fall by the wayside. Though Forner depicted the promise of liberation, she also showed that individuals who had already felt the war’s pain would not necessarily benefit from peace. Antonio Berni referenced this work in particular in an article he wrote about the exhibition, “If Raquel Forner, let’s say, had been present at the *Salón Nacional* with her magnificent canvas ‘Liberación,’ it is without a doubt that Daneri would not have been able to compete artistically for the Gran Premio.”103 Berni wrote of Forner as a symbol of the *Salón Independiente* and as a foil to the more traditional painter who had participated in the protested *Salón Nacional* and won its top prize. In her analysis of the *Salón Independiente*’s political importance, Andrea Giunta includes *Liberación*, alongside *Objetivo estratégico*, 1945 (Strategic Objective) by Emilio Centurión (Figure 57) and *1945* by Enrique Policastro (Figure 58), as works which most directly critiqued World War II, calling them “reports from the front.” Giunta elaborates on *Liberación* as a culmination of Forner’s wartime paintings.104

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103 Translated from the Spanish published in Antonio Berni, “El Salon Independiente” in ...*anti*nazi, September 27, 1945: “Si Raquel Forner, pongamos por caso, hubiera estado presente en el Salón Nacional con su magnífica tela ‘Liberación,’ es indudable que Daneri no le hubiera podido disputar artísticamente el Gran Premio.”
Unlike Forner, Centurión and Policastro represented a faction of artists who exhibited in the Salón Independiente but whose styles were not political in and of themselves. Centurión was one of Forner’s earliest teachers and mentor at the Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes.\textsuperscript{105} As an established figure, his style was a traditional realism. He favored naturalism over abstraction, often painting still-lifes and portraits. The work \textit{Objetivo estratégico} is a dark portrayal of a woman carrying a child’s emaciated corpse out of a burned-out village. A departure from Centurión’s usual lighter subjects, the work references the miseries of World War II head on by depicting its perils. Though the work is stylistically similar to Forner’s of this time, including \textit{Liberación}, the scene could be painted directly from a newspaper headline, unlike Forner’s symbolic figures. In \textit{Liberación}, for example, Forner depicts a symbolic savior figure to represent the end of the war, without any images of military, and with only detail images to symbolically reference war’s victims.

Policastro engaged with the war in works like \textit{1945}, but embraced realist and impressionist styles, after choosing landscape as his central subject.\textsuperscript{106} In select works from the 1940s and 1950s, however, Policastro focused on the figure as a tool for social criticism, in the same vein as contemporaries like Berni and Lino Enea Spilimbergo. \textit{1945} depicts an emaciated figure with a shaved head sitting in front of a distorted landscape. Similar to Forner’s \textit{El drama} paintings, the figure in \textit{1945} symbolizes the victims of war in the wake of peace. The date in Policastro’s title demonstrates a keen awareness of the year’s significance as the end of the war,

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\textsuperscript{105} Guillermo Whitelow, \textit{Raquel Forner}, 150.
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utilizing a harsh style that set this work apart from his overall, more impressionist oeuvre. Because it is an anomaly in Policastro’s other work, it is safe to assume 1945 was produced specifically for the political Salon in which it was exhibited, ideological imperatives superseding aesthetic motives. His composition showed the result of fascism in Europe to protest the emergence of fascism in Argentina. Forner, meanwhile, maintained a consistent style throughout the 1940s. The Salon did not necessitate adaptation from Forner since her work fit quite naturally with the anti-fascist agenda of the Salon.

Social and political fervor animated modern art throughout South America in the mid-1940s. Candido Portinari, the Brazilian painter, depicted a defeated family in Os Retirantes, 1944 (Retirantes was a term given to the impoverished inhabitants of Brazil’s favelas) (Figure 59). Portinari’s work reflected his social consciousness and communist leanings, presenting underrepresented classes to shed light on the harsh realities of their daily lives. Like Forner had in her war paintings, Portinari depicted the intimacy of families to illustrate the strife caused by socio-economic issues. Portinari’s stylistic strategies were far from Forner’s brand of realism, however. Portinari expressed the anguish of his subjects through thickly muddled, dark, and expressionistic forms drawn from local images, while Forner used a heightened naturalistic style to depict allegorical scenes relating to the war in a general sense. Portinari utilized similar strategies to Forner’s, applying modernist style to social realism in order to draw attention to political issues. Both evoke deep suffering and mourning which came with the war’s aftermath, placing Forner in as international movement of painters who used their stature as respected artists as a sociopolitical platform.

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Forner continued to reflect on the war through works including the monumental canvas *El Juicio*, 1946 (The Trial) (see figure 32). By this time the Nuremberg Trials were well underway, exposing additional details of Nazi war criminals’ actions. As discussed in Chapter Two, in *El Juicio* a female savior figure stands ahead of the ravages of war, including hunger, death, and an army of inhuman figures. Forner’s composition expresses her doubts regarding the efficacy of justice following the war. While guilty individuals may be convicted, the innocent remain slain or damaged, and the end of one conflict does not preclude future trauma. The Tower of Babel structure which supports the lineup of war criminals may, in the context of theater, represent a stage. In this light, Forner presented those being judged as performers, their testimonies as untrustworthy monologues. Pressing further, those war criminals who had escaped to South America would continue acting, performing ordinary lives daily and denying their pasts.

Forner’s response to World War II continued in its aftermath through her series *Las rocas* (The Rocks), four paintings from 1947-49. *La conferencia* (The Conference), from 1947, makes a nod to postwar bureaucracies including both the Nuremberg Trials and the 1947 Paris Peace Conference (Figure 60). Forner carries over the Greek chorus motif from the series *El drama*, here with a group of women in the distance who are the only naturalistic human representation in the painting. In the foreground, the titular conference is portrayed through a group of porous geological forms. One figure sits, throne-like, holding a tablet in an authoritative stance, and another stands tall with a staff, while the remaining figures splay on the earth reaching for help. A world map in the foreground is punctured with anthropomorphized branches, poking through Europe and Buenos Aires’s places on the map and bleeding into the ground. *La conferencia* repeats the sentiments of *El juicio*, suggesting that the global situation has not improved despite
peace talks and trials. The map explicitly brings Argentina into the conversation, proving Forner perceived the war and its aftermath on a transatlantic scale and alluding to the local political situation.

Forner also references the Argentinian situation through her use of rocks to portray human form. She had traveled to the south of Argentina in 1942 and continued to bring forms from the region’s topography into her work.\textsuperscript{108} The series *Las rocas* serves, then, as a proclamation of Argentinian relevance. While Forner’s work is most explicitly about the war and its aftermath in Europe, paintings like *La conferencia* implicate Forner’s home front. By 1947, Perón was two years in power. The public majority supported his platform of populism and labor reform following years of industrialization and urban migration. In particular, labor unions were concerned that their success was tied to Perón’s political longevity.\textsuperscript{109} Forner related the precarious situation in Europe with Argentinian politics through the inclusion of indigenous rock forms to reference Argentina.

\textit{Pictorial Strategies to Confront the Conflict}

Throughout Forner’s war paintings are specific repeated iconographical elements that point to the widely-felt violence of war. She drew each reference from actual events, underscoring her engagement with realist pictorial strategies, depicting lived situations through her perspective rather than inventing realities in a surrealist strategy. In addition to the subjects that commented on culture, including sculptural forms and staged motifs, Forner both created and appropriated vocabularies that shed light on her perception of war. Indeed, in *España* and *El


\textsuperscript{109} Daniel James, “Perón and the People,” 10-12.
drama, repeated imagery contributes to the sense that Forner created her own version of reality through her paintings. The vocabulary she developed through these series also sets her apart from the contemporaries, like those discussed above, who approached war through more concrete references.

One of the most widespread motifs, paratroopers, are present in Éxodo (1940) (see figure 27), Autorretrato (1941) (see figure 12), Tinieblas (1943) (see figure 55), Ícaro (1944) (see figure 16), and Amanecer (1944) (see figure 30). Forner had any number of options of symbols of destruction to draw from the war, but she quickly abandoned the more obvious fighter jets and tanks that she had included in her 1937 Conducta illustration (see figure 48). By selecting paratroopers, she emphasized how violence traveled in the modern era. Paratroopers can appear with little notice, inciting destruction on unsuspecting towns. Their sinister depiction in Forner’s skies shows the looming specter of war in the early 1940s. These images also relate to the widespread impact of war. As discussed above, Forner was concerned with the global ramifications of each conflict. Rather than depict specific instances of violence (as Picasso had with Guernica), Forner portrayed anonymous agents of destruction, which may apply at any location, as ever-present threats.

Complementing the paratrooper’s silhouettes throughout both war series is the repetition of darkness. The paintings from España, including Sin título (1938), Ofrenda (1938), Mujeres del Mundo (1938), ¿Para qué? (1939) and Claro de Luna (1939), and the paintings from El drama, including Éxodo (1940), Amanecer (1944), Ícaro (1944), El drama (1944), La Lucha (1945), and Los Vigías (1946), each include dark landscapes with cloudy skies of deep blues, violets, and grays. These environments suggest a dreamlike consciousness, which falls most in line with surrealism than other patterns in Forner’s work. Because Forner painted events which
she did not witness - she was not in Europe during either the Spanish Civil War or World War II – her war paintings take place within scenes of her mind’s eye. The dark landscapes are not those of subconscious invention, however, as a surrealist reading would imply. They depict scenes which the painter has based on news reports and familial exchanges, rooted more in reality than in fiction. Further, as applies to the paratroopers, the nondescript, dark landscapes lend themselves to anonymity. The ravaged land is read as easily as Argentina as it is Spain, France, or Germany.

Coastal landscape contributes to the dark but innocuous backdrops of many of Forner's paintings, particularly from the series *El Drama*. The reference to the sea relates to Forner's transatlantic history, and also to the pervasiveness of the war’s influence. The globe in *El Drama* (see figure 50) is turned to the Atlantic Ocean, showing both South America and Europe; Europe and Argentina are both featured on the map in *La Conferencia*. All point to Forner’s acute awareness of Argentina and Europe’s interconnected cultural and political paradigms. Rather than act as a geographical divider, the ocean in Forner’s paintings connects the disparate continents.

Newspapers and other texts are also present throughout Forner’s war paintings. Like paratroopers and the ocean, the presence of newspapers points to the dissemination of violence and propaganda over great distances. The repeated emphasis on text also broadens Forner’s approach to culture by encompassing the written word in addition to visual and performative art. In *Destinos*, 1939 (see figure 42), a newspaper lies beneath a fallen statue figure. The word “GUERRA” (War) in all capital letters is the only legible text, highlighting that Forner relied on newspapers for information. *La Victoria*, 1939 (see figure 9), includes a newspaper that has been stomped on and can no longer be read. In *Autorretrato*, 1941, a bloody newspaper she pinned to
Spain on a globe identifies Forner with the conflict. Just barely visible on the paper is an illustration including a figure, possibly a pieta scene, relating to World War II. *El Drama*, 1944, depicts a sculptural dismembered hand laid on an open book, again without any legible text. In *El Juicio*, as mentioned above, the hand that emerges from the ground holds a crumpled newspaper. The paper in *El Juicio* also includes no legible text; as the conflicts wore on they became more difficult to convey and as a result Forner included less legibility. Text was no longer necessary as the atrocities of war became increasingly apparent and ubiquitous.

This vivid vocabulary of Forner’s fueled her political commentary. By cloaking her message in idiosyncratic imagery, she successfully commented on a range of political and cultural topics as related to both Europe and Argentina. Forner navigated the political and cultural events of the 1930s and 1940s by developing particular visual vocabularies. She created allegories that confronted the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the Argentinian government’s evolution. Forner exposed injustices and social-cultural issues by depicting their ramifications and effects on victims. Though she conveyed and critiqued these realities through symbolic gestures and forms, in many cases bordering on the fantastical, her works embody a modern realist ideology.
Conclusion

The complexities of Raquel Forner’s work become clear through the three lenses of the female form, religion, and war. Recalling Mary Perla’s 1945 article, “Raquel Forner ha pintado el dolor maternal,” Forner’s works were received in their time as emotional rebukes of the war’s impact on women.\textsuperscript{110} Despite this view, and Forner’s later affirmation that her identity as a woman was central to her work, the above analysis of her paintings from the 1930s and 1940s releases her from such constrictions.\textsuperscript{111} More than personal emotional reactions, Forner’s paintings were pointed, critical responses to her time that remain potent through the universality of their references.

Forner’s central female figures were conduits for critique as well as expression. She deployed them to respond to developments in art history, like surrealism, and also to the politics and wars of her time. Her visual language did not relate to a particular movement, instead served as a modern realism that she used to portray and comment on the condition of the world. Her figures became symbols that, along with the details that adorned the margins of her paintings, allow for the interpretation of her works as engagements with the ongoing development of cultural movements.

With religious iconography, Forner furthered her social critique. Catholic references connected with the people of Argentina as well as referred to her ancestral country of Spain. Due to Catholicism’s complex relationship with politics and history, the transformations Forner made

\textsuperscript{110} Mary Perla, “Raquel Forner ha pintado el dolor maternal” in \textit{Vosotras} (Buenos Aires: December 7, 1945).

to biblical iconography supported her social and political commentary. She pushed her rhetoric even further by portraying Christ as a woman, participating in the feminist conversation in Buenos Aires as women’s suffrage and labor issues became central to social reform efforts.\textsuperscript{112}

The world’s atrocities during the Spanish Civil War and World War II necessitated the new visual vocabularies that Forner developed over the course of the 1930s and 1940s. She used idiosyncratic symbols in her work for a subtle, but purposeful, political critique. Beginning with the female sculptures of the \textit{España} series and moving on to theatricality in \textit{El Drama}, Forner made allusions to both local and foreign policy. With Forner’s honest depiction of war, as she saw it, she painted in a modern version of realism.

Investigating Forner’s work through each of the above themes—the female figure, religion, and war—demonstrates that the scope of her paintings from the 1930s and 1940s went well beyond the personal. Though she depicted a wealth of specific references to pin her work to particular issues of her times, the breadth in each painting allows diverse themes to arise in single works. A number of Forner’s paintings are revisited in each chapter, as they are relevant in multiple contexts. Each canvas is open to several points of entry due to Forner’s extensive and layered use of iconographical references.

In her 1973 article “The Realist Criminal and the Abstract Law,” Linda Nochlin set up the abstract/realist dichotomy through the questions, “Is the universal more valuable than the particular? Is the permanent better than the transient? Is the generalized superior to the detailed?”\textsuperscript{113} Forner evaded even these classifications. She used particularities to convey

\textsuperscript{112} Gregory Hammond, \textit{The Women’s Suffrage Movement and Feminism in Argentina from Roca to Perón} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2011) 133-136.

universality, painted transient events to comment on permanent conditions of humanity, and incorporated details into otherwise general scenes. In keeping with realist strategies, Forner depicted an unidealized world via these contradictory tactics.

This thesis therefore expands the classification of Forner’s work. As previously outlined, art historians nearly always group her work with the surrealists. Forner’s works, in actuality, are only superficially surrealist. Formal aspects of her work relate to surrealist counterparts both in Europe and in Latin America. For example, her manipulation of scale and perspective and her fantastical landscapes are consistent with recognizably surrealist imagery. Forner’s methodology, however, departs from important surrealist theories including privileging the subconscious and automatism. Forner’s references, from Catholic pietàs to World War II’s paratroopers, were predominantly external rather than introspective. She used existing, invented, and manipulated iconography to depict and indict human condition in times of strife. Though Forner used symbol and allegory to reference war and politics, her practice of representing her times was more consistent with those of realist painters. She painted in a hyper-naturalistic style that portrayed events and pushed social and political agendas.

Following the war came the rise of the art critic Clement Greenberg, who championed pure abstraction as a means to transcend the political in art. It may be due to the widespread influence of his ideas that figurative work like Forner’s did not take hold in international art

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115 David Batchelor, “‘This liberty and this order’: Art in France after the First World War” in *Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism: Art Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press in Association with the Open University, 1993) 48-51.

circles during the 1940s, and why it has continued to be misclassified years later.\textsuperscript{117} In her native Buenos Aires, Forner continued painting and evolving her figurative style after the 1940s, becoming a fixture in the art establishment by the 1950s and 1960s.\textsuperscript{118} She incorporated ideas of abstraction into her paintings, such as \textit{Los Vigías} (see figure 19), while retaining her commitment to representing form.

Forner’s style changed in the years following the 1940s, but the themes explored in this thesis remained central to her practice. For instance, in 1965 she painted the nine-canvas work \textit{El viaje sin retorno} (A Journey of No Return) in response to her husband Alfredo Bigatti’s death (Figure 61). Throughout the canvases, Forner’s stylized figures stand in for her mourning and reflection on her husband’s life. The work resembles an altarpiece, referring to traditional forms of biblical representation, as in her earlier \textit{pietàs} and Stations of the Cross. While there was no war for Forner to comment on, she continued to use painting to respond to events, in this case the death of her husband.

With these strategies, Forner maintained her practice as a modern realist, and woman painter for the totality of her career. Forner’s visual vocabularies contributed to a sense of another reality, suggesting surrealist tendencies, but in actuality her symbols were manifestations of the actual world, reflecting on the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and social movements. Though marrying politics and art may have been frowned upon by critics like Greenberg, it was

\textsuperscript{117} While the Museum of Modern Art had collected Forner’s work prior to 1943, their curatorial strategy shifted to focus on abstraction around this time. See Lincoln Kirstein, \textit{The Latin-American Collection of the Museum of Modern Art}, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943) 22.

through this marriage that Forner created paintings that were relevant both during her trying times and today.
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