

# Tomás Sánchez: On the Razor's Edge

## Susan L. Aberth

At the time of this exhibition the natural world as we know it is teetering on the brink of destruction. Massive forest fires, floods, and increasingly multiplying hurricanes are but a small sampling of what is to come as a result of human-induced climate change. Tomás Sánchez is an artist who has long grappled with ecological issues; covertly in his mesmerizingly beautiful paintings of paradisiacal tropical landscapes, and more overtly in his lesser-known depictions of apocalyptic garbage dumps. Marlborough Gallery is proud to present Tomás Sánchez's first solo exhibition since 2005, showcasing a comprehensive view of the artist's last decade of work.

Audiences are most familiar with Sánchez's meticulously crafted landscapes with their poetically placed meditating figures; however, when these idyllic visions are shown together with his disturbing trashscapes (as the artist always intended), then other political messages become apparent. For example, the ecological cost of rampant consumerism is on full display, alongside more subtle and poignant nods to colonialism's

tragic role in the exploitation and despoilment of previously pristine natural resources.<sup>1</sup> Another important aspect of Sánchez's work is his insistence on technical mastery. So intense is the artist's desire for perfection that his works often take years to finish as they slowly and painstakingly form and percolate to completion.

While unable to travel outside Cuba until the early 1980s, Sánchez familiarized himself, through various publications, with old masters such as Pieter Bruegel, Hieronymus Bosch, and Goya, as well as nineteenth-century artists including Frederic Edwin Church, Albert Bierstadt, and Caspar David Friedrich. Never a copyist, Sánchez's lessons from art history instead led to a sophisticated employment of subtle references and iconographic meanings. That the artist's references were wide-ranging is evidenced by his interest in, for example, the Belgian symbolist Léon Spilliaert, whose expressive monochrome images often depict lonely dreamlike spaces. In *The Gust of Wind* (1904) [Fig. 1], Spilliaert embeds a lone figure into a melancholy landscape using

the simplest of compositional means, and in *Le Canal* (1909) [Fig. 2] one can immediately see a parallel to Sánchez in construction and tone.

Sánchez's growing interest in landscape painting coincided with his concerns for the environment and his burgeoning practice of meditation, both of which provoked the ire of the Cuban government at the time. Considered a retrograde practice, landscape painting was largely disrespected in Cuban artistic circles when Sánchez began to paint. A turning point came for the artist in 1980 when he won the Joan Miró Prize for drawing, an unusual honor for a landscape painter, signaling that it was possible to breathe new and experimental life into this traditional genre of art. Ultimately, nature would become the metaphysical vehicle through which Sánchez expressed both alarm at humankind's tragic penchant for greed and destruction, as well as its ability to experience elevated levels of spiritual awareness.

Another unexpected and intriguing influence on Sánchez was the work of twentieth-century American artist Andrew Wyeth. He became familiar with the artist's work by chance, through an illustrated book he found in Old Havana. Wyeth's emotionally fraught landscapes, masterfully crafted with great attention to detail, often utilizing stark contrasts in light and dark, also reinforced his desire to become a landscape painter. Wyeth's influence is everywhere in Sánchez's work from the 1980s—*Abandono y vuelos* (1981) utilizes a similar upward compositional tilt and weathered wooden structure on the upper horizon as seen in Wyeth's famous *Christina's World* (1948) [Fig. 4] or in the maritime landscape *Teel's Island* (1954). Wyeth used expanses of white (on canvas or paper) to great effect in his paintings and drawings, allowing for an emotional breathing space that admitted a contemplative silence. A comparison between Wyeth's *Farm Pond* (1957) [Fig. 5] and Sánchez's *Isolote solo* (1981) [Fig. 6] is instructive. Wyeth's solitary home embedded within white snow and Sánchez's island set in an expanse of light, water, and sky give off the same melancholy sense of isolation and beauty. Wyeth's continuing presence can be seen throughout Sánchez's career, but especially in his drawings, like *Diagonal de isla, meditador y nube* (2018) [Plate 7].

Sánchez's *Diagonales opuestas en un paisaje interior (Opposing Diagonals in an Interior Landscape)* (2014) [Plate 10], a work which exemplifies the Romantic era influence on the artist, is a sublime statement on impending disaster. In many ways this painting carries as much metaphoric punch as Thomas Cole's 1836 *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow* [Fig 7]. This Hudson River School painter is well known to Sánchez, who has long admired his sweeping panoramas and subtle political content. In *The Oxbow*, Cole uses compositional elements



[1] Leon Spilliaert, *The Gust of Wind*, 1904, Indian ink wash, brush, watercolor, and gouache on paper, 20 x 16 1/8 in., 51 x 41 cm  
Collection of Mu.ZEE, Ostend. Photo by Steven Decroos



[2] Leon Spilliaert, *Le Canal*, 1909, gouache and colored crayon on paper, 27 x 19 in., 68.6 x 48.2 cm  
© Christie's Images / Bridgeman Images



[3] Tomás Sánchez, *Abandono y vuelos*, 1981, casein on paper, 11 1/2 x 18 1/4 in., 29.3 x 46.4 cm



[4] Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*, 1948, tempera on panel, 32 1/4 x 47 3/4 in., 81.9 x 121.3 cm  
© 2021 Andrew Wyeth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: © The Museum of Modern Art / Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY



[5] Andrew Wyeth, *Farm Pond*, 1957, watercolor on paper, 13 1/4 x 21 1/4 in., 33.7 x 54 cm  
© 2021 Andrew Wyeth / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo Courtesy  
of Reynolda House Museum of American Art, Affiliated with Wake Forest University,  
Gift of Barbara B. Millhouse



[6] Sánchez, *Isolte solo*, 1981, casein on paper, 18 7/8 x 14 1/4 in., 48 x 36 cm

as well as weather conditions to promote westward expansion in the United States as a civilizing influence on an unruly and dangerous nature, thereby promoting the ideology of Manifest Destiny. In an oppositional move, and from a non-American perspective, Sánchez uses weather conditions, light, and various compositional elements to hint at social storms to come. A mysterious drama is unfolding in a grand and far-reaching view of a virginal forest interior. A glittering ribbon of water winds its way peacefully down from sunlit rolling hills in the background while a bank of white clouds forms in the background. As twilight gently falls, intimated by subtle streaks of lavender in the sky, trouble is brewing. To the far left, on a vague and watery horizon, a funnel of dark clouds forms, casting ominous shadows across the right half of the canvas. Is it smoke from a fire? Is it a tornado? It doesn't fit the phenomenological category of either and so we are left with a symbolic reading of psychic turmoil amidst this otherwise tranquil scene. His palm trees and vegetation are reminiscent of the rainforests of the Americas and elsewhere that are in grave danger of destruction due to the ever-growing needs of human consumption.

Complex and multi-layered art-historical lineages are found everywhere in Sánchez's works, such as *Inner Lagoon...Thought-Cloud* (2016) [Plate 15]. The scene is divided into three horizontal bands like an abstract Mark Rothko composition. In the lower foreground, soft grasses ripple in the wind, each blade visible with hallucinogenic clarity. Jan and Hubert van Eyck's panel *Adoration of the Lamb* (*Ghent Altarpiece*, 15<sup>th</sup> century) [Fig. 8] or even Albrecht Dürer's *The Large Piece of Turf* (1503) [Fig. 9] come to mind, especially as Sánchez shares with these two a spiritual appreciation of God's creations, albeit from a meditation perspective. A lone path through the grass hints at a recent visitor passing through, either into or out of the forest. An unnatural oval lake in the center of both the forest band and the canvas glimmers like a reflective mirror. In the uppermost area a pale blue sky holds an echoing abstract cloud while its shadow lies below. This seamless combination of the real and the contrived is a signature style of Sánchez, one he deploys to great effect. Upon closer inspection of *Inner Lagoon...Thought-Cloud*, multiple perspectives become apparent, and the work's title reminds us that despite its veneer of hyperrealism, this scene is one of total artifice.

*Entre silencios* (2015) [Plate 9] is a remarkable large-scale painting that presents a long narrow strip of landscape surrounded by a vast expanse of white (Wyeth again). Sánchez is a longtime practitioner of meditation and so the title, in combination with the composition, refers to the exalted state of silence, spreading over the boisterous ocean of the world.



[7] Tomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836, 51 1/2 x 76 in., 130.8 x 193.0 cm  
Collection of Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Mrs. Russell Sage, 1908



[8] Jan van Eyck, *Adoration of the Lamb* (detail), *The Ghent Altarpiece*, 1432, oil on panel  
Scala / Art Resource, NY



[9] Albrecht Dürer, *Large Piece of Turf*, 1503, watercolor, 15 7/8 x 12 1/4 in., 40.3 x 31.1 cm  
© The Albertina Museum, Vienna

Meditation has long been a pervasive theme in Sánchez's paintings with subtle but telling details revealing aspects of his practice. The presence of agitated water in the foreground of certain landscapes, as in *Isla y meditador en diagonal* (2019) [Plate 15] or *Testigo del otro* (2017) [Plate 16] in combination with the seated figures in nature, reference the quieting of the mind during meditation. River landscapes, sans people, can also refer to yoga meditation. In *Como un río al mar* (2017) [Plate 11], *River and Cloud* (2019) [Plate 12] and *El río va* (2020) [Plate 13], calm rivers wind through lush forests towards the sea, serenely reflecting the sky, blues melding together. In an interview Sánchez explains:

*When I enter a state of meditation it's as if I'm in a jungle or a forest; the mind enters into a great exhilarated state, like an exuberant jungle where you can experience fear, desire, anguish—all types of emotions and feelings. When I begin to feel that there's a point of inner consciousness everything goes toward that inner space, that inner river. Everything goes toward that place of quiet, that realm of tranquility within the forest where there is a lake.<sup>2</sup>*

A type of natural architecture is present in a number of Sánchez's paintings, a clear homage to the German Romantic artist Caspar David Friedrich and his works, such as *Abbey in the Oak Wood* (1809-10) [Fig. 10]. *El testigo en la orilla* (2018) [Fig. 11] is particularly evocative of Gothic religious architecture. Dappled light falls across a tranquil woodland scene, which opens up to a gently curving path that upon closer inspection reveals itself to be water. The stream opens up to a clearing whose arching tree limbs form a natural cathedral. The rising sun mimics stained glass, the composition replete with a member of the faithful below, sitting in spiritual reverie amidst God's sacred space. *Inner Walker* (2019) [Plate 18] is more ominous, a dense thicket of woods unrelieved by sky contains an upright man making his way slowly and following a dim streak of light from an unknown source—a perfect symbol for humanity's slow and frightening journey through the dangers of life, not to mention its own psyche, guided by faith and perseverance.

A new work, *Light: Outside, Inside* (2021) [Plate 17] incorporates Sánchez's spiritual ideas and themes into a comprehensive and deeply philosophical statement. The foreground water, bathed in a golden light reflected off the sky, ripples and glitters with vitality. The water darkens and calms as it moves towards the land and penetrates through the thicket of trees on the left. The larger natural archway of trees holds a standing figure contemplating the light of the rising sun as it falls in the clearing. The seated figure within the archway to the right is bathed in a golden aura that appears



[10] Caspar David Friedrich, *Abbey in the Oak Wood*, ca. 1809-10, 43 1/2 x 67 3/8 in.,  
110.4 x 171 cm  
© bpk Bildagentur / Staatliche Museum zu Berlin / Andres Kilger / Art Resource, NY





[11] Tomás Sánchez, *El testigo en la orilla*, 2018, acrylic on canvas, 39 1/2 x 51 1/4 in., 100.3 x 130.2 cm



[12] Georges Seurat, *Approach to the Bridge at Courbevoie*, 1886, conté crayon, 9 5/8 x 12 3/8 in., 24.6 x 31.6 cm  
Collection of The Morgan Library & Museum, Thaw Collection

supernatural. One can make out that the figure is in the cross-legged pose of a meditator, often depicted in the artist's work, and therefore the light emanating from them is spiritual in nature—enlightened, in divine harmony with nature, and contemplating the light within, not without. While painting this work Sánchez recalled his experience of being a child in his grandmother's home and gazing with wonder at a picture on her wall of The Sacred Heart of Jesus (*Sagrado Corazón de Jesús*). Its numinous presence left a deep impression on the young artist-to-be and it is this first encounter with the ineffable spiritual nature of light that he wanted to convey in *Light: Outside, Inside*.<sup>3</sup>

Drawing for Sánchez is as important a practice as painting, and often serves as a preparation for it. In the 1970s, he was a professor of lithography at the Escuela de Arte in Cuba and his engraving background is evident in the fine lines and detail of his drawings. That said, Sánchez's soft and atmospheric use of conté crayon is reminiscent of the drawings of Georges Seurat [Fig. 12] and, like his vision, it lends Sánchez's scenes a mysterious stillness. These small and intimate drawings are stand-alone gems; rare distillations of poetic reverie. One of the remarkable aspects of these drawings is that they can read as night or day, moonlight or sunlight. Other types of reversals occur as well, for example in *La luz* (2018) [Plate 1] a cross-legged figure on a hill gazes upwards and across an ocean of trees as a mysterious light rakes across the foliage...is it the sun or the moon, and does it matter? Likewise in *La nube* (2018) [Plate 5] a white cloud floats along a dark sky, echoing two nearby mountains in form and weight. That same odd cloud hovers above a nearby waterfall in *Diagonales* (2018) [Plate 6] and similar to René Magritte's *Empire of Light* (1953-54) [Fig. 13], it is impossible to discern the time. This is no accident as the two figures hint at the spiritual dimensions of this small but powerful work. One figure sits cross-legged at the base of the pool while another sits at the top. The pool at the base of the waterfall is incongruously calm, a metaphor for the calming and stilling effect of meditation upon life's agitations. Likewise, in *Contemplación* (2018) [Plate 3] two meditating figures face each other across a narrow expanse of calm water, the almost exact mirroring of each side of the landscape—a commentary on the inner confrontation with the self and, simultaneously, the liberating relinquishment of the ego.

Sánchez's trashscapes have a long and interesting pedigree. As a young artist he first encountered streets full of trash in Cuba when, during the periodic disposal of unwanted items (the "Tareco Plan"), he would discover treasures of broken and discarded antiques. More influential for

his art was his experience living in a beach community outside Havana for a number of years and working directly with lifeguards on ecological issues. They would fish out lumps of trash from the ocean thrown out by big state-run companies, photographically record them, and then attempt to tie them to specific corporate offenders. Upon moving to Mexico City in the 1980s, Sánchez was exposed to an enormous apocalyptic dumpsite near where he lived. In *Con la puerta abierta* (2015) [Plate 20] a sky blue shuttered window or door lying in the foreground opens up onto horrific expanse of detritus—specifically a panoramic view. Always interested in film, Sánchez was drawn to Alfred Hitchcock’s 1963 *The Birds*, in which there is a long panoramic shot of a landscape covered with birds; and the haunting sense of wonderment and ominous horror that scene provoked was something he desired to emulate. In *Con la puerta abierta* plastic bags overflowing with trash, tires, cardboard cartons, oil cans, etc. are spread as far as the eye can see and, in an ironic twist, a marble classical bust and what appear to be the backs of stretched canvases (perhaps his own) are strewn about as well. The colorful, borderline cheerful trash clashes against a sky blackened by night, smoke, or God’s wrath. This vista has its own terrible beauty and, when specifically paired with Sánchez’s paradise landscapes, the two form a diptych as stern as any traditional Christian pairing of Heaven and Hell.<sup>4</sup>

*El discurso verde (The Final Speech)* (2021) [Plate 21], a monumental statement incorporating both personal and political histories, is the newest addition to Sánchez’s trash series. The title alludes to recent events occurring in Cuba, notably the avalanche of protests by its citizens against scarcities of food and medical supplies, human rights violations, as well as a host of other urgent problems heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. In this respect, the work is an homage to his beloved teacher Antonia Eiriz who was so influential to his artistic development.<sup>5</sup> Eiriz was declared a dissident by the Cuban government in 1968 following the exhibition of her work *Una tribuna para la paz democrática (A Tribune for Democratic Peace)*, a painting which featured an empty podium with four microphones that some interpreted as a funeral (prophetically according to Sánchez).

In the foreground a white and blue striped box lies next to an empty bottle of rum, whose red Havana Club label is plainly visible. The combined colors throughout the work allude to the flag of Cuba, and embedded within in the detritus are other reminders of the Cuban Revolution. Perched on the horizon, like a tombstone, is the broken podium and other objects associated with Fidel Castro, indicating that his power to intimidate and



[13] René Magritte, *Empire of Light*, 1953-54, oil on canvas, 76 7/8 x 51 5/8 in., 195.4 x 131.2 cm  
The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 1976. © 2021 C. Herscovici, London / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

spew propaganda has run its course. The painting serves as a kind of catharsis, a signaling that certain ways of doing business, both politically and environmentally, are being challenged. The title, *El discurso verde*, is a meaningful play on words. *Verde* in Spanish means green, so some viewers might interpret this as his statement on pressing ecological necessities (and it is). The secondary definition of *verde* means green as in not fully mature, and so the title also refers to underdeveloped nature of the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath. It is a loving but bitter tribute to Eiriz, a follow up to her *Una tribuna para la paz democratica*.

As dire as its message is, Sánchez's awe-inspiring skill as a painter rescues beauty out of ugliness, while honing in on the ecological issues plaguing our natural world. His virtuosity as a painter is a testament to an untapped, idyllic paradise, reminding us of the divine power that nature holds over all humanity. In this sense, Sánchez's oeuvre becomes a vessel for virtue, and so prevents the work from being sanctimonious, superficial and easily dismissed. Instead, we are faced simply with what is.

- 1 For an in-depth discussion on this aspect of the artist's work see Francisco-J. Hernández Adrián, "Tomás Sánchez on Exorbitance: Still Lives of the Tropical Landfill," *The Global South*, Vol. 6, No.1, Special Issue: States of Freedom: Freedom of States (Spring 2012), 15-37.
- 2 Sullivan, Edward J. "Tomás Sánchez: Traversing Multiple Paths." *Tomás Sánchez*, 22. Milan: Skira Editore, 2003.
- 3 Interview with the artist, August 31, 2021.

- 4 Sánchez's dumpsite paintings share some traits with the Argentine artist Antonio Berni's series of trash collages done in the 1970s. These large-scale canvases are covered literal trash and feature scenes from the life of a fictional child, Juanito Laguna, who lives and plays within its confines. In this way Berni commented on the tragic economic consequences of the legacy of colonialism.
- 5 Art historian Edward J. Sullivan has written extensively about Tomás Sánchez's development

as an artist in Cuba at Havana's Escuela de San Alejandro and later at the Escuela Nacional de Arte; including a discussion on the important impact that his professor, the Cuban artist Antonia Eiriz, had on his early work and expressionistic style (Sullivan, 9-10). In the late 1960s she stopped painting for twenty years in response to governmental censorship, and instead dedicated her career to teaching crafts and revitalized Cuban craft traditions. Later, in 1993 when Eiriz was living in

Miami for medical reasons, she began to paint again and had an exhibition that same year. (Sadly the artist passed away before the exhibition opened at the Weiss Sori Gallery in Coral Gables, Florida.) In Sánchez's personal art collection is a work dedicated to him by her, *Paisaje (Obra realizada especialmente para Tomás)* (1993) that he treasures to this day. It is a dark and harrowing vision, worthy of Francisco Goya's *Disasters of War*, of severed heads piled high against a night sky. It ex-

pands the parameters of what is meant by landscape painting, with heads strewn like human garbage across an expanse of land, and one can intuit the psychic impact it had on Sánchez's artistic development. He recalls with great emotion her response to a question asked to her by the press at that time regarding Cuban politics: "I have said everything I needed to say in my paintings, and I said them at the right time" (Interview with the artist, August 31, 2021).