

# ANTONI TÀPIES

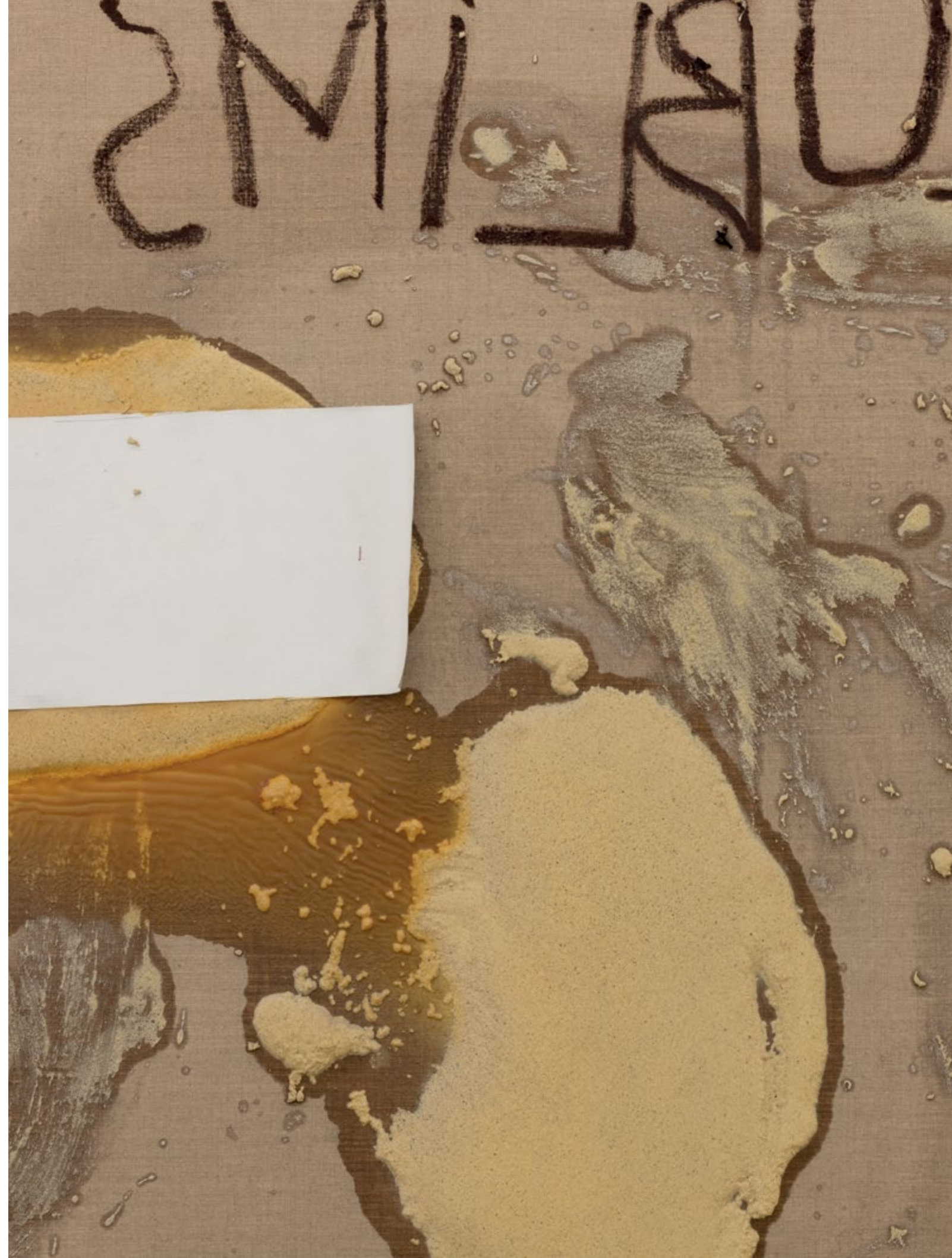
In 1955, Tàpies started working in a 15th Century farmhouse in the Montseny Mountains, 50km north of Barcelona. This building's thick, deteriorating walls likely inspired him to rough up his canvases, treating them more like walls to be graffitied, stained, scarred, nicked, and patched. He presented his first "wall paintings" at the 1956 Biennale di Venezia. From then on, many of his paintings resembled walls. After all, *Tapia* is Spanish for wall. Because of his thick impasto paintings that sometimes feature amorphous blobs, most historians tie his oeuvre to Tachisme, or Art Informel. Others find his linguistic system's inscrutability indicative of surrealist *l'écriture automatique*. Just as Willem de Kooning's "late" paintings from the 1980s shined a light onto his oeuvre, Tàpies' "late" paintings provide new insights, as this exhibition makes patently clear. In contrast to earlier impastoed surfaces that bar access, his "late" paintings exhibit a decidedly lighter touch, indicative of his artistic and spiritual struggle to wriggle free from matter.

Artist and author Sir Roland Penrose concluded that the "ultimate purpose [of Tàpies'] art is transcendental," that is to "shock [the viewer] in order to rescue him from the madness of inauthenticity and to lead him into self-discovery." Although Penrose

never explained his use of "transcendental," Tàpies' late paintings appeal to values espoused by mid-19th Century New England transcendentalists, who advocated personal freedom and the role of subjective intuition to counter objective empiricism and skepticism. Like the earlier transcendentalists, Tàpies studied Eastern religions, was not a dualist, revered nature, and appreciated science. Consider paintings like *Sadharna-Pundarika*, whose title references the most famous *Mahāyāna sūtrā* (Buddhist scriptures relayed by monks) and *Dharmakaya*, which the Dalai Lama defines as the space of emptiness, where matter dissolves.

Although no books by Thoreau or Emerson are listed in Tapies' library catalogue, there are enough parallels to call him a "contemporary transcendentalist," who felt (like them) that much of reality remains hidden, inaccessible to human beings. And what better way to depict transcendence than to display ineffable symbols or to adhere odd objects, thus capturing the mystery of everyday castaways, such as *Collage de la fusta*, *Claus i corda*, *Cistella i 3*, and *Portes cobertes*. French art critic Michel Tapié observed, "[this] practice gives tension to the dialogue, always of the highest quality because of the very acceptance of the secret as a secret, a genera-

Antoni Tàpies, *Colors Sublimis*, 1999 (detail). Mixed media on canvas, 252 x 302 x 8,5 cm - 99 2/2 x 119 x 3 3/5 in







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tor of the most effective structures of desire.”

Tàpies' painting *Esgrafiat* (Catalan for “sgraffito”) suggests that he eventually grew tired of covering everything up, and started revealing and unsealing, rather than merely concealing. In addition to his marking its surface with recurrent symbols like the “T” and black Greek cross, he added three eyes with which to see more clearly and raked the sand to reveal a barely legible peace sign hovering beneath. The profile in *Paisatge i tassa* features what look like eyes or thought bubbles, one of which reflects an

overflowing cup, a sentiment mirrored by the empty tin-can eyes in *Sédas*, which is Catalan for “thirst.” Suddenly, the envelopes in *Díptic dels sobres* [SM1] open up, while one imagines *Matèria ocre amb X* to be an oversized square envelope, sealed by several signatories. Unlike his earlier impastoed surfaces, these paintings typically display what lies beneath, and several even appear lyrical. Even *El Meu índex*, this exhibition's most vividly material painting reveals more than it conceals.

This exceptional exhibition thus offers viewers the opportunity to explore firsthand Tàpies' unconventional use of *sgraffito*, a technique traditionally



Antoni Tàpies, *7315 i terra*, 1992 (detail). Mixed media on wood, 200,5 x 150,5 x 6 cm - 79 x 59 x 2 3/6 in

associated with plaster walls and ceramics, whereby plaster or slip is scratched, leaving tracks of the color of the dried under-layer. Although his approach to *sgraffito* is unusual in an art context, it is familiar to everyday activities such as scribbling on the beach, finger painting, incising soft materials, smearing ink or smudging chalk, letting translucent fluids bleed, puncturing surfaces, or veiling with transparent fabrics. In fact, no fewer than five paintings here exhibit sand/mud scribbles, three are awash in varnish splashes, two feature scratched clay, while *Ou Blanc* hosts a massive plaster egg incised with impenetrable imagery. Every painting exhibits smears, streaks, and/or drips that set its tempo, a pause (much like a film still) in an otherwise ongoing, dynamic process.

Extract from an essay by Sue Spaid, Ph. D., Maransart, Belgium