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Maruja Mallo's Surrealist works get a long-overdue survey



Maruja Mallo's "Arquitectura Humana/El Pescador," from 1937.  
The Estate of Maruja Mallo, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VEGAP, Madrid, via Ortuzar Projects, New York

## Maruja Mallo

Through Dec. 1. Ortuzar Projects, 9 White Street, Manhattan; 212-257-0033; [ortuzarprojects.com](http://ortuzarprojects.com).

Maruja Mallo — whose given name was Ana María Gómez González — was an avant-garde painter living in Madrid in the 1920s and early '30s, before fleeing to Argentina at the start of the Spanish Civil War. (She returned to Spain in 1965.) Mallo pursued Surrealism in the company of Salvador Dalí, the filmmaker Luis Buñuel and the poet Federico García Lorca, but as with many female artists, her contributions are only beginning to be studied.

"Paintings 1926-1952," the current exhibition of Mallo's work at Ortuzar Projects, is her second ever in New York City, after one in 1948. It presents a small selection of paintings made over a 26-year period in which she moved through distinct styles, from varieties of Surrealism to a riff on social realism to portraiture. The result is somewhat hodgepodge, but it's best treated as an introduction.

The standout is "Arquitectura Humana/El Pescador" (Human Architecture/The Fisherman"), a 1937 painting that's dominated by a blocky, androgynous human who wears a net like a nun's habit and holds up a fish. This muted work is mesmerizing and enigmatic: It suggests a muralist paean to working-class life on the sea but lacks the expected energy of celebration. Along with the show's other strong paintings, it demonstrates Mallo's skill at composing scenes that subtly unsettle. She does so to lighter effect in three 1942 examples from her series *Naturalezas Vivas* (Living Nature), all featuring shells, flowers and other natural objects floating atop one another, like miniature, fanciful totem poles. Their rounded forms and pointed protrusions tease out a latent eroticism, while the composite constructions look almost mechanistic. Set against indeterminate backgrounds, they seem to represent the delicate and mysterious balance of the world. *JILLIAN STEINHAUER*