

Studies in Surrealism



Àngel Planells' Art and the Surrealist Canon

Anna Vives

ROUTLEDGE

Àngel Planells' Art and the Surrealist Canon

Having been mistakenly perceived as a follower of Salvador Dalí, Catalan surrealist painter and writer Àngel Planells (1901–1989) has passed through the history of art practically unnoticed. Yet his work suggests an influence on a number of works by Dalí, proving that a fairer way to define their relationship is as an artistic dialogue. His participation in the groundbreaking International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936 is in itself a marker of his quality as an artist, but Planells' contribution to surrealism is remarkable for his use of astronomy, fantastic scenes redolent of Edgar Allan Poe's narrative as well as ludic elements and meta-pictorial techniques that contest Fascism.

Anna Vives is a writer, teacher and researcher living in Scotland. She completed this book whilst holding an Honorary Research Fellowship in Hispanic Studies at the University of Sheffield, UK.

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Abbreviations

ADLAN: Amics de l'Art Nou
AMBL: Arxiu Municipal de Blanes
FAP: Fundació Àngel Planells
MNAC: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya

Translations

All translations are mine unless otherwise stated in the endnotes. Special thanks are due to Roger Brett for translating some excerpts from French into English for Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5.

Unpublished Texts by Àngel Planells

Quotations of unpublished texts have only been corrected with regard to basic grammar mistakes, keeping Planells' style.

Images

Readers should note that they can visit my website on Àngel Planells in order to view images of works that I have not been able to reproduce here: www.angelplanells.org

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Introduction

This is the first book-length study of surrealist painter and poet Àngel Planells i Cruanyes (1901, Cadaqués – 1989, Barcelona). My first encounter with Planells happened as I was studying little-known artists of the Spanish avant-garde. I noticed a number of references to him in passing. Despite having been included in Joaquim Molas' seminal volume *La literatura catalana d'avantguarda 1916–1938* (1983), Planells remains the only writer (included in such a volume) who has not had his work properly valued. It has not helped that some critics have been too ready to regard Planells as a mere imitator of Salvador Dalí. His trajectory may be compared to that of American landscape painter Louis Eilshemius,¹ who was, ultimately, eclipsed by Marcel Duchamp (de Duve 1996: 112–115, 124), or that of German surrealist painter Richard Oelze, who despite producing important artworks and being included in major exhibitions is now little known. Coincidentally, Oelze and Planells share a surrealism anchored in the romantic tradition.

Planells was born in Cadaqués, moved with his family to Blanes in 1929 and lived between Blanes and Barcelona from 1939 to 1950.² Yet the Costa Brava remained an important place both personally and artistically during his life. In his late teens, he studied lithographic engraving and drawing in Barcelona. However, with respect to pictorial art, the artist defines himself as self-taught as he started painting 'darrere el taulell de la fleca i pastisseria que el meu pare tenia a Cadaqués, sense haver anat a acadèmies ni enlloc' [behind the counter of the bakery and pastry shop my father had in Cadaqués, and I never went to art school or anything of the sort] (Pairolí 1988: 7).³ As Planells himself states, '[n]o vaig tenir en concret cap mestre en pintura. Vaig començar a pintar tot sol' [I did not have any particular painting teacher. I started painting on my own] (Gimferrer 1974: 16). Before he started painting in the early 1920s, Planells concentrated on creating fantastic drawings, reading Edgar Allan Poe, and planning hallucinatory tales (MYLOS [Gasch, Sebastià] 1954: 23). He published surrealist poems, articles on art, and even a surrealist manifesto, but he left most of his written works unpublished. Among the latter one finds poems and short stories, both realist and surrealist, which suggest that Planells busied himself with writing in the 1970s and 1980s.

Whilst this book is on Planells' surrealist production, it is important to note that he produced realist works throughout his career, even between 1920 and 1939, when he mainly devoted himself to works that we could classify as surrealist. His realist work includes still lifes, scenes of daily life, mountain landscapes, and

2 Introduction

seascapes such as *Santa Cristina, Costa Brava* (c. 1945), and *Blanes, Beach of Sant Francesc* (c. 1945). These two works are good examples of how Planells' realist work is indebted to the landscape painting of Eliseu Meifrèn, Joaquim Mir, and Segundo Matilla, whom he had met alongside Ramon Pitxot in the social gatherings that used to take place in his father's bakery (Bota-Gibert 2003: 104). In *Santa Cristina, Costa Brava*, one sees two fishermen's boats on the sand of the beach and two sailboats on the calm sea (see Plate 1). The appearance of these two types of boat suggests a stark contrast between social classes: whilst the fishermen use the boats as working tools, sailboats would be used to enjoy the beauty of the area.⁴ This distinction resonates in Planells' biography. His family had a bakery called La Mallorquina, known by the people of Cadaqués as 'can Xicu', and Planells would help run the business (Tharrats 1993: 120). His working-class status sets him apart from other Catalan surrealists such as Remedios Varo, Joan Massanet, Josep de Togores Llach, Jaume Sans, and Salvador Dalí. In fact, Planells is probably one of the poorest, if not the poorest, among the Catalan surrealist artists, which I believe to have been detrimental to his career. His working-class background is emphasised in the catalogue of the exhibition *Surrealist Diversity 1915–1945*, where he is presented as a 'Catalan painter, baker and grocer' (Mesens 1945: 8). Planells seems to be ashamed of his social class when he talks about how he met Dalí in Cadaqués in 1920. The following reads as if Planells considered himself less worthy because of his social background:

Els Dalí els coneixíem de quan ells eren petits perquè tenien una casa a Cadaqués. Però no ens havíem fet gaire amb els Dalí perquè ells eren senyors i en aquella època les distàncies entre els senyors i els menestrals encara eren molt acusades. Va passar, però, que un dia algú va dir a en Dalí que jo pintava coses estranyes. I a ell això li va cridar l'atenció i em va venir a veure' [We knew the Dalí family from when the children were little, because they had a house in Cadaqués. But we never had much to do with them because they were well-off, and in those days the distances between the wealthy and tradespeople were very clearly marked. But one day someone told Dalí that I painted strange things, and that grabbed his attention and he came to see me.]

(Pairolí 1988: 7)⁵

This narrative of self-deprecation and extreme humbleness persists in the way in which Planells tends to refer to himself and finds a framework in a recent psychological study that suggests an increased likelihood of positive self-evaluations when people perceive themselves as belonging to a high social class (Kraus & Park 2014). Whilst it would be difficult to know if this was what Planells was experiencing, it is certainly true that he lived with a social status complex. He used to undermine his work and himself, even in 1981 when he was enjoying a certain level of recognition. On the occasion of the exhibition *Àngel Planells i Lleixà* in Tudela, Navarra, in November of that year, Planells wrote a short presentation that presumably was read by conceptual surrealist artist Daniel Lleixà to the public attending, as he himself could not attend it due to illness. A part of this presentation read as follows: 'No habiendo sido posible mi presencia física – bien gris y poco relevante, valga la verdad' [Not having been possible to be physically