

ARTFORUM

Josep Grau-Garriga | Galerie Nathalie Obadia
Veronica Santi
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Josep Grau-Garriga, *Nova imatge (New Image)*, 1973, wool, cotton, synthetic fibers, 32 1/4 × 31 1/2”.

Experimenting with materials in an ambiguous and disturbing manner, Josep Grau-Garriga (1929–2011) pushed the art of tapestry into new territory. His work is marked by his human and civil commitment—which put him in conflict with the Franco regime in Spain—and by his personal dedication. This first solo show in Belgium, with tapestries and drawings spanning nearly forty years, provided a full overview of the Catalan artist's pioneering oeuvre.

Born in Sant Cugat del Vallès, near Barcelona, Grau-Garriga's promising career in textile art took a decisive turn when, in the late 1950s, he went to France, where he perfected his technique at the workshop of Jean Lurçat, the first great innovator of modern tapestry. During this same period, he got to know the work of Alberto Burri and Jean Fautrier and met his countrymen Antonio Saura and Antoni Tàpies. Thanks to them, he came to understand the expressive and semantic value inherent in materials and brought these insights to his own work. After returning to Spain in the early '70s, he stopped making preparatory cartoons. Abstraction—already present in his tapestries—began to emerge via spontaneous expression. The weave of the tapestry became more significant than the depicted motif, and Grau—Garriga supplemented it by intertwining humble, sometimes domestic materials, such as jute, hemp, spartina, iron wires, and plastic cords, as well as blankets or pieces of used clothing. In *Record d'estiu (Summer Memory)*, 2008, for instance, he blends jute with wool and embellishes the weave with wires intertwined at the knots of the warp, which are left hanging



and worked with scissors. In *Somni de mariner (Sailor's Dream)*, 1985, the black-and-blue mantle of the weave rises and falls while a white sheet knotted in and out of the tapestry disrupts the center like a dream that has the sleeper tossing and turning.

In contrast, high dramatic tension pervades *Nova imatge (New Image)*, 1973, and *Porta oberta (Open Door)*, 1974, two masterpieces that, like living presences charged with feeling, commanded the walls of the gallery's third floor. The latter perhaps reflects the mood of a country that, at the time of its making, was frozen in the grip of dictatorship. At the tapestry's four corners, a weft of brown jute reveals a red carpet onto which tufts of burgundy wool gush everywhere, while at the center, at the height of the solar plexus, a vertical braid of carmine—colored knots emerges, imbuing the work with incredible visual depth. Here, the material is flesh that cries out, and the tapestry becomes a metaphor for the martyred bodies of so many fallen Republican comrades. In *Nova imatge*, a white fabric composed of a rigorous rhythm of knots appears to unzip, opening up from the top down to reveal a chaotic tangle of red, orange, and ochre wires; an unequivocal phallic excrescence emerges from this crimson-toned mass. In such works, the artist coaxes out the gestural possibilities hidden in his materials. Tapestry, in Grau-Garriga's hands, is anything but decorative; it conquers the third dimension, invading space with unpredictable movement, evoking the outcome of an unrestrained expressive urgency.

Translated from Italian by Marguerite Shore.