



Maruja Mallo con manto de algas, 1945. Maruja Mallo Archive. Galería Guillermo de Osma, Madrid.

SEA

MARUJA MALLO, THE EXILED SPANISH ARTIST WHO TURNED HER BACK ON CONVENTION TO PAINT WITH AN OCEANIC SENSUALITY.



MONSTER

Words by Tilly Craig. Art by Maruja Mallo.



Naturaleza Viva, 1942.
© The Estate of Maruja Mallo.
Courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York.

On a rocky Chilean beach in 1945, the painter once described by Salvador Dalí as “half angel, half shellfish” is draped in swathes of kelp. Maruja Mallo smiles out lightly while composing the strands of a tentacled headdress around her shoulders. Tubes gather and coil around her legs, enveloping the rock she stands on. The dark, raw tendrils transform Mallo into an oceanic Giger creation, drawing her into the fabric of the seashore and belying a profound connection with the natural world and a drive for reinvention which weaves through so much of her work.

Mallo was a Spanish surrealist—one of the few women artists associated with Dalí’s circle in Madrid. Mallo rebuked convention; she lived alone in Paris in the early 1930s, rode a bicycle into church during Mass, and established herself as a successful artist in Spain using surrealism as a tool to divine new orders in nature. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 would force Mallo into exile in Argentina the following year. Defiant in the face of tragedy, she kept up her painting practice in Buenos Aires, continuing her idiosyncratic explorations into form and pattern. Working from drawings of Spanish fishermen made before her exile, *Arquitectura Humana/El Pescador (Human Architecture/The Fisherman)* painted in 1937 shows a strong, androgynous figure in a net cloak bolted with rope. A distinctly soft, sombre palette and almost-reflected motifs set an uneasy tension, the figure’s open hands offering up a fish in quiet tribute.

Mallo would travel Latin America extensively, revelling in the unfamiliar landscapes she encountered. She became captivated by these rich and luscious environments, in particular the marine worlds, describing the Pacific Ocean as “waters that mix with the enormous geraniums and spherical hydrangeas that flower along the beaches between the starfish and the giant seaweed.” In her ongoing quest for creative innovation, Mallo began to channel these vibrant, sensory worlds into her work. Most evocative of her natural-world discoveries are the aptly titled *Naturalezas Vivas* or *Live Nature* series, begun in 1941. A far cry from the restrained, pale tones seen in *Arquitectura Humana/El Pescador*, *Naturalezas Vivas* burst with hypnotic jewel tones; hot pinks, rich corals and bright turquoise. These psychedelic and sensual interpretations of natural phenomena depict assemblages of flowers—orchids and roses—blooming from cowries and conch shells. Starfish and corals weave geometric patterns, and the contrasting deep spirals and cushiony ruffles evoke a mythic and definitively female eroticism.

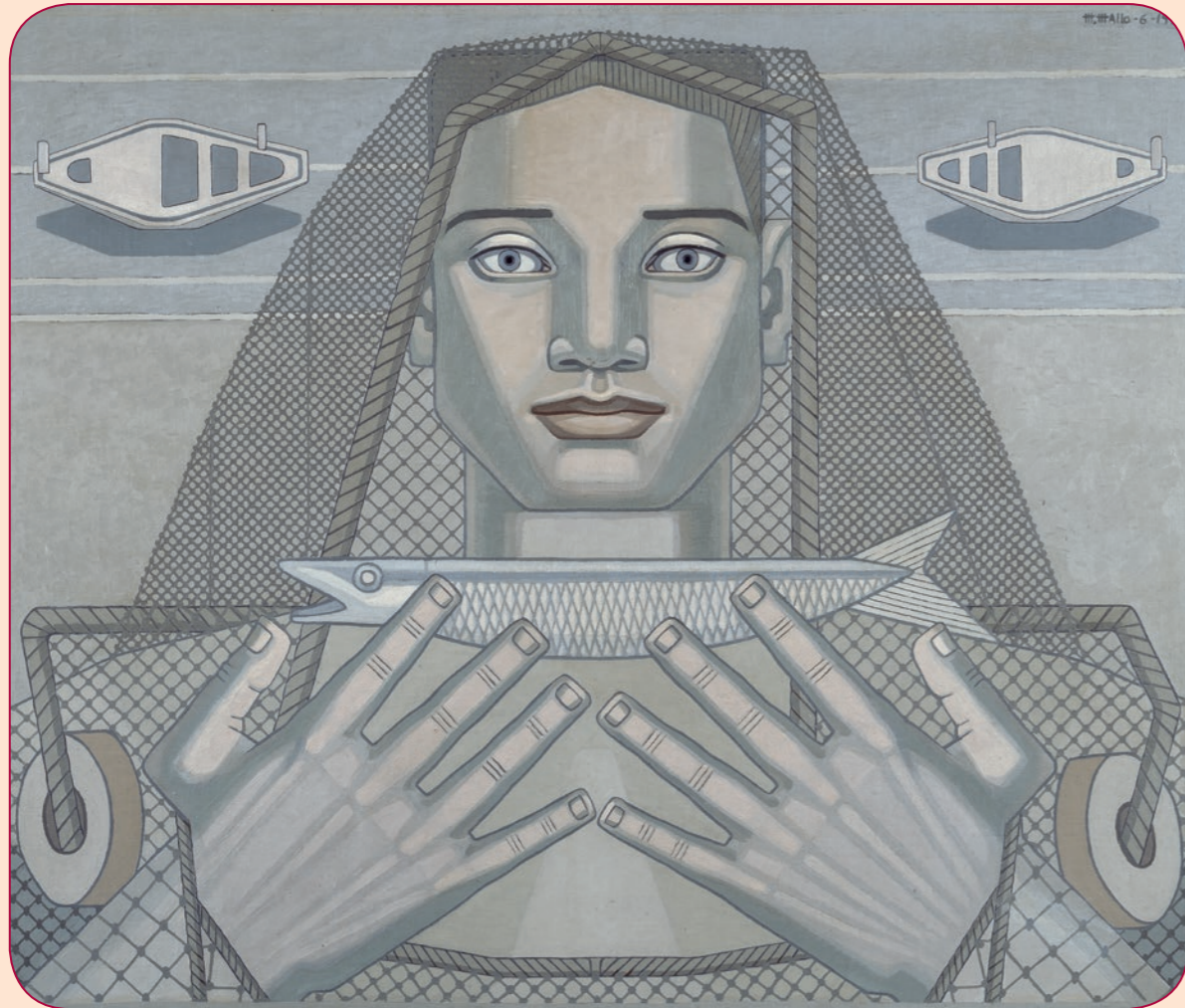
Compose your own Mallo-inspired stoner still life with the Paola, a golden shell-shaped grinder made by Laundry Day (laundryday.co), and Summer School’s Opal Glass Seapipe, which glows under blacklight like phosphorescent flotsam (summerschoolshop.com).

“Shell” in Spanish is *concha* (which is also a euphemism for female genitalia); if Mallo were alive in the Instagram age, she would follow Concha Eléctrica (@conchaelectrica), a platform dedicated to sharing the work of female-identified artists from the Spanish-speaking world.

Mallo's fascination with shorelines went beyond the canvas; her home was filled with shells and items collected from the beach, while her clothing and jewellery echoed these aquatic motifs. She continued her coastal travels with a fellow shell-enthusiast, the poet Pablo Neruda. The pair appeared in a series of photographs taken in 1945, Mallo having adorned her floral swimsuit with wild lengths of seaweed and a neat red lip—a chic, self-fashioned sea monster.

In 1965 Mallo would return to Madrid, where she continued working, but never forgot her Pacific explorations. Little over a decade before her death in 1995, Mallo recollected her travels with Neruda in a 1981 lecture, describing: “hermetically practicing ancestral rites, enigmatic testimonies of the unknown past ... eyes that contemplate the stars. And from the depths of the Pacific [we felt] the hyperesthetics of the substance of ether, of the inhabitants of the void.”

This page: Arquitectura Humana/El Pescador, 1937. Ortuzar Projects, New York. Opposite page: Naturaleza Viva, 1942. © The Estate of Maruja Mallo. Courtesy of Ortuzar Projects, New York.



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Centre
Pompidou,
Paris, France

Fundación José
Ortega y Gasset,
Madrid, Spain

Museo Nacional
Centro de Arte Reina
Sofía, Madrid, Spain

Museo Nacional
de Artes Visuales,
Montevideo, Uruguay

Museo Nacional
de Bellas Artes,
Buenos Aires, Argentina

