

A great deal has been written about Juan Del Prete's obsession with destroying his own works, in large measure, I suspect, due to *Obras destruidas*, published by Del Prete and Yente in 1971. In that slender volume, the couple lays out a journey in black and white through works that are no longer with us but that, with characteristic obsessiveness, they had documented and accumulated over the course of decades. Few editions are as beautiful as this one; only they were capable of such elegant handiwork. The book, designed by Del Prete, includes an extensive essay by Yente—once again the spokesperson of the taciturn artist who was her life partner. A number of the still unfaded color reproductions of works in the book serve as a reminder that Del Prete painted works as copiously as he destroyed them.

Back in 1946, that is, decades before that publication made Del Prete's odd destructive drive known to the public, Catalan writer and art critic Joan Merli wrote in a volume for the "Biblioteca argentina de arte" collection:

Since the beginning, Del Prete has worked with feverish intensity. Despite his apparently cold disposition—no pun intended—he must be painting furtively at high temperature.

He works a lot—night and day—and he tears apart almost everything he makes. In moments of introspection, of self-criticism, he destroys a healthy portion of his work. A few pieces snatched away by loving hands manage to survive, some of them on display in provincial museums and discerning private collections.¹

In his text, Merli associates production and destruction—two drives that go hand in hand and neither of which, arguably, could not have existed in del Prete without the other—in a single feverish gesture. Other voices chimed in about this topic as well. Yente speaks of "something like a compulsive revisionism";² Hugo Parpagnoli of "updating" at the hand of "indomitable youth";³ and in this book Santiago calls Del Prete's destruction "juvenile and, in a sense, naïve." Notwithstanding, neither of those drives that sent works

gushing out only to be destroyed, reworked, re-created, or transformed would have been possible without taking in great quantities of proteins, enough to provide the energy such a task requires. Del Prete not only produced a lot, he also consumed a lot. He was, to use Merli's term, a glutton of painting. But his gluttony was not—as the Catalan critic suggests—limited to painting, with its spatula impastos, or to laden sculptures. Del Prete devoured everything: materials, oil paint, tempera, watercolor, plaster, colored paper, twine, sheet metal, pieces of iron, wood, corrugated cardboard, and Styrofoam. He devoured colors—he gobbled up pink like no one else, and all known shades of green. He devoured techniques, styles, and tendencies. He ravished everything he saw, anything that came between his body and the possibility of making a work. He was like a spider that eats its own web—once that web has performed its function of catching the prey—for the proteins it provides with which the spider spins more webs and catches more prey. Del Prete too devoured his own works, the divine sustenance with which he then produced a new gush of paintings, sculptures, and collages.

In the twenties, after a short, and unruly, spell at the Academia Perugino, Del Prete plunged into nature to learn from it. He learned its colors, gulping down the local color, earth tones, purple-pinks, nocturnal blues, egg and daisy yellows, and then rendered them on his canvases and pieces of cardboard. In those years he painted landscapes and views of La Boca, a Buenos Aires neighborhood where he shared El Bermellón studio on the Riachuelo with friends and fellow local painters—Pisarro and Cúnsolo, among others. He painted the province and the city, and some of their characters, and "the series of the young boys." He was already known for his voracious production. His sustenance was the city, the Río de la Plata, Maciel Island, his studio mates (Fader and Quinquela), and classics like Giotto, whose work he had only seen in the occasional art history book. The small landscape from 1920 (r /01) reproduced at the beginning of this book shows how a view of a wooded field is inflamed with pinks under Del Prete's agitated spatula. The artist consumed everything, but he also returned it. Yente remembers Del Prete telling the story of how once, when the river rose while he was on Maciel Island, the current carried away his works on cardboard, furthering the feedback loop, our reciprocal relationship with nature.

A stay in Europe from 1929 to 1933, funded first by the Amigos del Artes and then by collector Rafael Crespo, was different. He didn't spend his Parisian days in the Bois de Boulogne or the André Lhote academy, as many other Argentine artists did during their tours of Europe. Instead, Del Prete was to be found at the Louvre, devouring with tireless eyes everything that came before him. He absorbed as well the avant-gardes and abstractions astir in the city—movements now so familiar to us all—as, right before his eyes, they crossed paths with universal art history. It was at this juncture that the first abstractions and collages with twine, colored paper, and other materials began appearing in his work *Abstracción con material* (1934) (r /02), for instance, was produced soon after his return to Buenos Aires). He also brought back with him from Paris beautiful watercolors in wild and lustrous greens, their light figuration free of impasto. Out of gluttony and need, Del Prete devoured everything that crossed his path; his appetite was insatiable.

Gluttony is what allowed Del Prete to engender a universe so wide that it is sometimes hard to look at. And the concrete artists of the forties reprimanded him for just that: for being so open-minded and flexible, being anything but dogmatic—a glutton by nature, a painter who caved to temptation. And so, like spiders who spin their webs in concentric circles sometimes several meters wide to catch anything and everything that might be in the air, Del Prete went, in his work, anywhere his curiosity might take him, embracing everything his arms could hold. That endless search makes him not only a modern painter—as he has been called in many essays—but also a being connected to all times. His appetite knew no bounds. He produced, exhibited, documented, revised, destroyed, and re-created for almost six decades. Starting in 1925, he submitted work to the Salón Nacional every single year. He exhibited in galleries and museums in Buenos Aires and outlying towns. Along with Yente, he returned to Europe in 1953 and 1954, and then every year from 1963 to 1967, always taking with him works, catalogues, and slides, as well as, in all likelihood, the albums that Yente carefully kept with press clippings and photographs of Juan's work. During those trips, he generally produced more than he showed. From 1947 to 1982, more than a dozen retrospectives of his work were held. He described them as figurative, non-figurative, abstract, pedagogic, or all of that at once, as if fresh out of

a blender gone mad. The retrospectives—another act of voracious revision—took place in the most diverse venues: Galería Peuser, Cavalotti, Van Riel, the Secretaría de Cultura, the Centro de Ingenieros, the Museo de Morón, the Museo de Artes Visuales de Quilmes, the Museo de Arte Moderno de Buenos Aires, the MAC in Chile, the Museo de Lima, LAASA, Praxis, and Pozzi. All that is left of most of them are black-and-white photographs in boxes the couple would stack in a forgotten corner of the studio. In 1952 and 1958 he was invited to participate in the Venice Biennale, and in 1957 and 1959 in the São Paulo Biennial. The results, as Yente records in her writings, were never satisfactory.

Nothing was enough for Del Prete. In 1946, Merli writes: “The artist's spirit is, generally speaking, left with an unsatisfied yearning. Sometimes that dissatisfaction can be quelled at the artist's own hand by destroying his work. When countered with luminous inspiration, that yearning is fulfilled by re-creating a work that spent years waiting for the coup de grace that will make it immortal.”⁴ The trace of that re-creation shines through in *El abrazo*, a work painted in 1937 and re-painted in 1944 which, Yente recalls, Del Prete gave her as a gift early in their friendship. That witness of their unwavering love was spared Del Prete's righteous hand thanks to a few “unexpected and decisive brushstrokes.”⁵ Other works were less fortunate. Some were disassembled like an old car, their parts reused in new works. Those are the mounted paintings—the procedure that gives this book its name. A mounted painting or work is a sort of combination of cardboard collages from the thirties; works with found materials from the fifties and sixties like *Composición con vidrio* (1955) (e /03); and objects made using discarded materials and old appliances (a piece of a stove hood, a dish rack, and oil paint) from the seventies and eighties like *Composición móvil* (1974) (e /11).

Each procedure is bound to the next, no matter how different they may seem, by small displacements of the pieces in Del Prete's system of revision and ingestion. Those displacements ensue in space but also in time—elements might show up elsewhere a few months or over a decade later. Another brushstroke of a more saturated color; a chunk of metal soldered to the side of a sculpture; a line that reinforces the non-figuration; an organic curve that challenges the stability of the abstraction.

There is no evolutionary chain or fate on the horizon in Del Prete's procedures. What there is is an arachnid construction and a voracious appetite paired with somewhat slow digestion. Discussions of his modernity and affinities, of his lines of kinship (ancestors and descendants) matter little today. What does matter is his powerful contemporariness and turning his work into a piece of candy for today's artists.

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1 Merli J. (1946). *Juan Del Prete*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Editorial Poseidón. p. 14

2 Yente (1971). *Obras destruidas*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Self-published p. 7

3 Parpagnoli H. (1965).

Del Prete. Buenos Aires, Argentina: Museo de Arte Moderno. [exhib. cat.]

4 Merli J. Op. cit. p. 23-24

5 Yente (2019). *Anotaciones para una semblanza de Juan Del Prete*. Rosario, Santa Fe, Argentina:

Iván Rosado. p. 61