

From 21 February through 13 April, the National Museum of Fine Arts in Havana will showcase the paintings and graphic works of Dutch artist Marie-Antoinette Courtens at an exhibition entitled:

El Arte de la Luz

For the first time, Cuban audiences can admire a rich and varied selection of works by Dutch painter and graphic artist Marie-Antoinette Courtens, who was born in Oss, the Netherlands, in 1944). It comes as no surprise that the painter should make her Cuban debut in this particular museum. The National Museum of Fine Arts is the most illustrious museum on the island, with a reputation that precedes it all over the Caribbean.

Although rooted in the Dutch painting tradition, her expressive abstraction and intense colour palette is more reminiscent of the fiery heat of Spain than the grey light of the Netherlands. Courtens has spent the majority of her time these past few decades on the warm-blooded island of Ibiza which, together with Majorca and Menorca, is part of the Spanish Balearic Islands. Ibiza has gradually become her adopted homeland and the creative inspiration behind her treatment of light. She is inspired not so much by the artistic climate, which has been a feature of this island since it came to prominence in the 1960s, as by the climate in a literal sense: the way the light hits the land and the sea that surrounds it. Courtens translates the purity of that light into abstract masterpieces. She builds layer upon layer of acrylic paint to create little more than a square or rectangular mass.

Much like the founders of abstract or concrete art – including Malevich and the Russian Suprematists, Americans Mark Rothko and Clyfford Still and the Dutch-American Piet Mondrian – Courtens is not interested in creating an illusionary image of nature. What she paints is captured in the evocative title of her exhibition: the art of light. Her goal is not to trap that golden light artificially, like an explorer in search of gold, in two-dimensional form, but to use her paint to accurately translate and transfer the myriad weather conditions onto canvas or paper.

Graphic works occupy a special place in her portfolio. In her etchings and aquatints Courtens recreates that same visual language of abstract volumes, but the paper itself plays a greater role than colour. The aquatints in particular require and inspire a much more tender approach.

Her fascination with light cannot be credited to the Spanish island alone: Courtens is keenly aware of her 17th century ancestors' pursuit of the golden light that hung over the Dutch polders, rivers, lakes and meadows. From Aelbert Cuyp to Jacob van Ruisdael to Jan van Goyen, they were all searching for that unique Dutch light. Courtens simply gave her search a Spanish Mediterranean twist, which is what makes her work truly unique.