

Confabulare d'artiste

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“The animal represents the non-human psyche, the instinctive subhuman, as well as the unconscious psychic side.”

Carl G. Jung

In Middle-Eastern cultures, in the great Asian civilisations, in pre-Columbian America, in the Graeco-Roman world and, consecutively, in the nearest European societies, the relationship between the human and the animal has played a central role. It has been the source of the main founding myths; it has helped to explain the origins of cultures, their rules, their prohibitions and dictates; it has accompanied religious explanations and the formulation of specific cosmogonies; it has made it possible to build bridges, on a mystical plane, between the profane and the divine.

So, while popular wisdom has a plethora of adages, aphorisms and sayings in which men appropriate certain behaviours, vices or virtues that are characteristic of animals, in spoken or written fables it is animals that adopt human traits in order to articulate a pedagogical discourse or some form of social critique.

Pierre Pithou and Jacques Sirmond spearheaded the revival of fables – a genre whose origins date back to ancient times – in France, at the end of the 16th century. Following in their wake came Jean de La Fontaine, who is credited with retrieving the works of Aesop and Phaedrus and bringing them to a wider audience around Europe. The interpretation of a rationality underlying animal camouflage and the recognition of its great educational potential can be attributed to the literature of the Enlightenment, whereas modern artistic interpretation, and Goya in particular with his *Caprichos*, is credited with making timeless a socially and politically critical pictorial discourse. These premises place us at the gate of a world of “fabulations” which Pilar Albarracín explores and journeys through in order to reformulate it through her unique narrative form. The writings of ancient scholars are transformed into sculptures, videos and

installations in which the original educational aspect of the genre shifts towards the invective tone characteristic of Goyaesque reinterpretations. The artist develops an underlying criticism, which is never completely explicit and often tempered by a veil of humour; she refers to a series of symbols and figures whose socially consensual meaning lies in the collective imaginary and is firmly rooted in our culture. The use of allegory and the metaphorical figure enriches the language she uses throughout the work.

In *Fabulations*, the ideas that form the backbone of Pilar Albarracín's work act in a sequence, as if they were a series of securely connected links in a chain. This is because each work has a semantic relationship with its companion piece and, at the same time, engages in a dialogue with the artist's earlier works. This creates an itinerary whose end leads back to the beginning.

Pilar Albarracín is in favour of an art whose value doesn't restrict itself to the aesthetic plane but aspires to make the viewer reflect, to provoke a discussion in him and to make him question the status quo, and she opens her fable-like narrative with a reference to the world of culture, artistic creation and the dynamics of power that govern its workings. In order to do this, she turns for help to the animal that, more than any other in the western tradition, has been identified as the antithesis of wisdom and great knowledge: the ass.

In direct reference to Goya's famous *Asnerías* (a series of etchings whose main character is depicted as an ass), and, in particular, to plate 37 of *Los Caprichos*, *¿Si sabrá más el discípulo?* [Might the pupil know more?], or plate 39, *Hasta su abuelo* [And so was his grandfather], in which the ass is the epitome of ignorance and represents the stupidity of the powerful, the artist creates an installation showing an ass poring over a treatise on art, sitting on a pile of books that it has supposedly read. She wants to speak of the power of the dominant elites who purport to be cultured and enlightened, who base their authority on ephemeral knowledge and on making a show of their erudition, and to use it to challenge the system whereby we attribute value to a work, an artist or a set of ideas.

Through this, Pilar Albarracín addresses, in the first person and from a more dissenting stance, a question that has aroused an interest of a more explanatory order from the field of social sciences. Attracted by the political, economic and social mechanisms that govern the workings of the artistic and cultural fields, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, more than any other, sought to show that "it is the field of production, understood as the

system of objective relations between these agents or institutions and as the site of the struggles for the monopoly of the power to consecrate, in which the value of works of art and belief in that value are continuously generated”.¹ This would justify the assignation of “exceptionality” to the creator (the artistic “genius”) by the experts, who traditionally belonged to a cultured, ethnically dominant, male elite. As Pilar Albarracín seeks to point out, art wouldn’t be exempt from the “principle of domination” that governs most aspects of social life.

The erudite ass is the first link in the chain which *Fabulations* develops along, and it introduces another of the key themes in the artist’s work: gender asymmetries in artistic, cultural, social and political life.

A video intervention shows the artist mounted defiantly on a live donkey, which is lying on the ground. As a symbol of women artists, she conquers her own place within a cultural context in which the masculine norm predominates. The ass, a brutish, obstinate animal, which is not renowned for its great intellect, embodies patriarchal power.

In clear reference to the famous work-manifesto by the Guerrilla Girls which lists the “advantages” of being a woman artist, Pilar Albarracín takes a stance in favour of feminist demands and a notion of art as an active element in society which, according to the anthropologist Alfred Gell, is endowed with *agency*, *intention* and *causation*.² She creates a work which, together with those of other artists in western or post-colonial contexts, is geared to destabilising the order of the dominant gender in contemporary art.

Gender criticism was already prominent in some of her previous works, with particular emphasis on the everyday conflict experienced by women between adopting a traditional, conservative role and their desire for emancipation – as seen in the photograph *Torera* [Bullfighter] (2009) –, the profanation of their identity and the nullification of their innermost aspirations, desires and dreams in the interests of the multiple obligations that are assigned to them in everyday life – as shown in *Desventada* [Winded] or *Mantón de Manila* [Silk shawl] (2009) – or, finally, the ability to take on board, with patience and submissiveness, the burden of the family, work, personal sacrifice and the stigma of being a woman in everyday society. This is the case of *Porteadora* [Carrier] (2001), a photograph from the unfinished series *300 Mentiras* [300 Lies] which shows a peasant women carrying on her shoulders a number of sacks that are too big and too heavy for her body.

In spite of this, in *Fabulations* the artist explores a subsequent aspect: gender role reversal. In order to do this, she refers to another animal that has been endowed with great symbolic value throughout history: the peacock.

This bird was the symbol of incorruptibility and the resurrection in Byzantine art and then in Christian Rome; in Greek and Roman mythology it was sacred to Hera, the goddess of marriage, and Juno, the goddess of childbirth; in Islam the peacock is associated with Iblis, a demon; in the Hindu tradition the bird is shown being ridden by Skanda, the god of war. Moreover, in the collective imaginary, the peacock represents vanity, pride, fleeting beauty and the ephemeral nature of appearances.

Pilar Albarracín focuses on this last set of meanings, attracted also by the animal's peculiar morphology, which reveals marked differential traits between the sexes. Thus she strips the peacock of its colourful plumage, a highly valuable element as it allows it to engage in the courtship ritual and to defend its territory, namely, the activities that mainly define its "masculine essence". Through a subversive act, the peahen wears these feathers, acquiring for herself the nobility and attractiveness that once characterised her companion, giving rise to an act of subversion that shatters the supposed "naturalness" of gender roles. The plasticity of these roles and the arbitrary nature of the characteristics that, in each culture, define what it means "to be a man" or "to be a woman" are brought to the fore. Simone de Beauvoir's famous phrase, "*On ne naît pas femme, on le devient*",³ is represented in an image by Pilar Albarracín.

Like another of the links in the chain, the themes that converge in the figure of the peacock connect with a new question: the reality-appearance binomial, and the ephemeral nature of the latter aspect. The beauty of the peacock is eye-catching yet fleeting, because it ends with him shedding his feathers; but the image of the peahen embellished with stuck-on feathers is also eye-catching and ephemeral. The boundary between both fields is hazy and leads us to consider the many reformulations which gender, as a socially and culturally built category, can subject itself to.

If we look at the artist's career, we see that, from the very outset, she had shown a certain interest in the sphere of indefinitions and the thorny territory of the border that separates the apparent and the real, although with different shades of meaning and a less allegorical figuration than in *Fabulations*. We are reminded of the series of photographs *Mujeres* [Women] (1993) which show attractive images of women, who have taken great care over their physical features, with seductive expressions, intense gazes and inviting lips. They are "performative" or identify themselves as women, to adopt a

concept introduced into social sciences by Judith Butler, as they were born male. They are images of transsexuals, or, put another way, subjects who assume identity positions that diverge from heteronormative ones, who, in this way, place themselves on the frontier between socio-sexual marginalisation and the liberalisation of the boundaries of sex and gender.

According to another social theoretician, Leticia Sabsay, “gender and its norms are shaped from their own repeated representation which becomes naturalised over time”,⁴ so that it is social practices themselves that create the effect of a supposed naturalness. This imbalance, between what is authentic and what isn’t, is the connecting thread between the following links in *Fabulations*. Now the viewer stands in front of a corridor of mirrors, placed in a space in which he can only confront his own reflected image. The mirrors are of various shapes and sizes, the symbol of the different gazes one receives and the variety of looks one receives, as well as the different ways in which each individual presents himself to others and his inherent multiple identifications. Talking about image trickery, Pilar Albarracín also deals with the difficulties of our self-representations, of the often uncertain paths through the processes of identity definition and the troubling distances between the perception of oneself and external attributions.

Just like the other pieces that make up *Fabulations*, the mirror is also an object charged with high symbolic connotations and a frequent presence in fables. In one of the first scientific studies that examined the origins of human cultural forms, *The Golden Bough* (1890), James George Frazer explained that primitive peoples regarded their reflections in a mirror as their souls. In other epic narratives and literature the mirror conceals or is a doorway to mysterious worlds (as in *Alice in Wonderland*); the mirror is also a symbol of duplicity: the wellspring of deceit and also of truth, given the accuracy of the reflection. Finally, it is the symbol of vanity and egocentricity (as in the myth of Narcissus).

All these meanings come together in Pilar Albarracín’s work, in which the artist re-examines the ideas that emerged in 2002 with *Espejito mágico* [Magic mirror], an installation in which a “magic mirror” turns to the viewer, telling him about his ugliness and unpleasant appearance. In both works, the viewer looks for recognition in the mirror, however, while the earlier work provides an answer the viewer doesn’t identify with, in *Fabulations* the mirrors confine themselves to reflecting back the viewer’s own image or fragments of it, without giving him an answer and with the intention of

prompting him to ask new questions about his own identity (multiple, fragmentary, dual, stratified, or... ?).

The final thrust and end link in the chain through which, as you will see, we go back to the beginning, is devoted to the smallest of the main characters in fables: the ant. It may not be necessary to remember its symbolic association with industriousness, frugality and perseverance; in Pilar Albarracín's work, its small size doesn't prevent it from carrying a huge load on its back.

In this work by the artist, the ant is an allegory of the lower social strata, of the new immigrant workers and those who hold low-status positions socially and professionally. Once again the criticism has political overtones and turns its attention to the system of power: at the start of the itinerary the powerful groups who controlled the field of culture were in her sights, now she targets the economic elites, class and ethnic subordination.

The chain finally closes through another association that leads us to reflect on gender again: the parallels between the image of the *Porteadora*, mentioned earlier, and the ant. The first is a woman and the second an insect which is "feminine" in Spanish and in our imaginary: both figures are carrying an inappropriate weight.

This concludes a circular route through an artistic intervention that seeks to make us think, ask questions and, although there are no fables without a moral, leaves everyone free to find their own answers. To paraphrase a well-known quote by Marcel Duchamp, it is the viewer who makes the work, not the artist.

Notes:

1. Pierre Bourdieu, «La production de la croyance: contribution à une économie des biens symboliques», *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales*, 13, 1977.
2. Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency. An Anthropological Theory*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1998, p. 5.
3. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, Gallimard, París, 1949.
4. Leticia Sabsay, *Las normas del deseo*, Cátedra, Madrid, 2009, p. 18.