

PILAR ALBARRACÍN: ONE AND A THOUSAND WOMEN

A woman lies in a pool of blood in a street in Seville. Another appears camouflaged among some dummies in the window of a big department store in the same city. On top of a car belonging to some Moroccan immigrants there is a girl in traditional dress, roped to the rest of the bundles on the luggage rack. Dressed in traditional Andalusian costume and in the commanding presence of a bull's head, a magnificent woman is gagged and tied to a chair. They have all been used or abused by a system that considers them chattels, consumer goods. They are all Pilar Albarracín.

Through her *mises-en scène* and performances, Pilar Albarracín reveals the drama of the structures used for domination and shows us the violence to which women are subjected. However, she does not do it through moralizing dogmatism, but with the irony and sarcasm of surreal visions and in her own jocular style. Although only one, she personifies many: the gypsy, the peasant, the housewife, the prostitute, the *folclórica* (popular singer), the immigrant, and the injured girl. In representing subordination to gender, social class and national or ethnic identity, she shows that her analysis of symbolic structures is consistent with what has been said in the most influential pronouncements of recent decades.

Levy Strauss said that identity could be a game of "floating signifiers", but that it is above all a set of representations that tie us to tradition and the status quo. In the Romantic period, a return to specific identity came about as a reaction to the internationalization of the Industrial Revolution, the same thing is occurring again at a time when globalization dissolves local differences or reduces them to easy-to-digest ethnic clichés. Hence the proliferation of artists who dig down to the anthropological roots of their culture, especially the women who, like Shirin Neshat or Pilar Albarracín herself, question the role they have been given in this game.

Albarracín takes the most stereotypical aspects of "Andalusian-ness", which the Franco régime turned into a cliché of "Spanishness", and dives playfully and critically into them. Food, folklore, religion and the rural economy are fundamental themes in her work. In her performance *Spanish Omelette (Tortilla a la española)*, 1999, she cuts away pieces

of her dress to “cook herself” in a metaphoric ceremony of self-immolation, while the sculpture *Iberian Luxury (Lujo ibérico)* 2001, is made up of a beautiful string of chorizos and black puddings in silk, and black and red velvet, hanging from the ceiling on giant meat hooks. The *Reliquaries (Relicarios)*, 1993, are sold as modern day lucky charms. They contain a photograph of the artist and a piece of the shirt she wears to paint in; in them she ridicules the protective, mystic and almost sacred role of the artist. The series *Ora et labora*, 2001, presents a self-satisfied peasant going about her tasks in an idyllic context. They convey the fictional nature of the happiness brought by work when one accepts one’s place on the social scale.

Basing herself on a post-modernism which facilitates transition from discipline to discipline, and aware of the power of new technologies, Pilar Albarracín uses video, sculpture, photography, installations, painting or fashion design with ductility. However, performances are her most radical statement and they mark out a territory on which she has projected her rebelliousness in a direct, primary way. Her art is a metaphor for insubordination and her appearances in public spaces make use of the surprise factor and act as social shock therapy. *Untitled. Blood in the Street (S/T. Sangre en the calle)*, 1992, were seven events played out in seven locations in Seville in which different types of women had experienced some type of incident. In *Shop Windows (Escaparates)*, 1993-95, she also interacted in an urban context, this time taking the place of the dummies in shop windows. References to beauty as a prison appear in *Night 1002 (La noche 1002)*, 2001, where she demonstrates what Virginia Woolf called the “hypnotic power of domination”: a fascinating visual fusion converts the tinkling eroticism of a belly dance into the jangling sounds of the chains of oppression.

Pilar Albarracín’s world is full of parodies and tragi-comedies that verge on cathartic paroxysm. There are flamenco dancers with spots on their dresses that are bloodstains: *Dots*, 2001. There is a savage dance where her partner is a wineskin which spills liquid on her with each movement: *The Goat (La cabra)*, 2001. There is a session of *cante jondo* (flamenco singing) where she shouts out her laments *in crescendo* and ends tearing off her dress, clawing out her heart and throwing it literally on the floor amidst orgasmic groans: *No Singing (Prohibido el cante)*, 2000. All of these are farcical scenes of dances where eroticism and death are intertwined, and are

extraordinary examples of the outbursting that leads to release. They express in contemporary terms the idea of a "pathetic body", a body that suffers all types of wounds and tensions, and connect with the theatre of the grotesque and rituals of cruelty. In contrast with religious ceremonies which seek to perpetuate systems of belief, contemporary performance has a critical potential that aims to destroy those rituals to achieve a regenerative catharsis. Shock, tears or laughter are all valid ways of doing this. Art is therefore a therapy: it allows one to become immersed in one's own devils, but with the awareness that these are the product of ideology and social structures.

The construction of dynamic situation-provoking objects which require active audience participation has played an important part in Pilar Albarracín's development. Duchamp said that it was the spectator who, through their interpretation, create the play. Pilar goes even further as she believes that intellectual analysis is not enough, and looks for convulsive interaction with the spectator who must, literally, suffer (or enjoy) the play, both physically and emotionally. She achieves this with pieces such as *The Trip (El viaje)*, 2002: a car full of immigrants which is crammed with packages in which the spectators, between unavoidable bursts of laughter, experiment the sensations (the smells, the jolts, and so on) of the journeys of thousands of North Africans on Spanish roads. *Seeing is Believing (Si no lo veo no lo creo)*, 2002, consisted of panoramic viewers which she created in the cove of San Vicente in Pollença. Scenes from other waters (boats full of illegal immigrants, pirates, the slaughter of tuna) came together virtually in the tourist-thronged sea of Mallorca. Eco-crimes, people being exploited or fantasies about freedom clash with a relaxing hedonistic context. In *Divan*, 2002 the spectator is invited to lie down on a replica of Freud's couch as if he were about to begin therapy, and as he does so the weight of all his misfortunes invades him. This emotional clash is again produced in *Mirror, Mirror (Espejito)*, 2001, a hilarious mirror that reminds us of Snow White, but in which every passer-by who looks at him or herself is insulted with "You're ugly!"

In the urgent need to communicate and the challenge to established modes of expression present in Pilar Albarracín's early work, we could sense a rebellious taste for the coarseness of language. In her latest production we observe a greater sobriety of style, but the communicative intensity is not diminished. The photographs that portray Christian myths,

such as the expulsion from paradise or the conversion of Mary Magdalene, allude to the transformations associated with punishment or forgiveness. Judaeo-Christian tradition has given form to this specific perversion that connects blame with the disobedience of the laws of the Father. Pilar Albarracín looks for a way out of this dialectic, a cure that will ease the constant tension between these two poles. She achieves it primarily through heterodox laughter, though she is also capable of transmitting the most devastating repugnance in works like *Passion Depending on How you Look at it (La pasión según se mire)*, 2001, or *Pity (La piedad)*, 2001, which deal with rape. In this way, her visions connect with a tradition of Spanish criticism and its echos of Valle Inclán's *esperpento* (theatre of the grotesque or macabre) or in the positions illustrated by a Goya who would have looked favourably on women's liberation. Her taste for excesses and contrasts borders on the baroque, and her passion for what is kitsch connects with Pop. She is thus part of a creative movement that questions the puritanism of the Anglo-Saxon mainstream and is in favour of the validation of the extravagant poets, of erotic "coming out" as Bataille once said.

Analysing the images created in art or popular culture dissolves the patriarchal design that imprisons women in castrating moulds. Her art is a full testimony that women

exist as subjects of enunciation (whether Lacan likes it or not). However, what makes Pilar Albarracín a phenomenon (not to say a miracle) is her excess of generosity and courage, as well as her tenacity and the fact that she is extremely demanding with herself. That and her courage to go out and grab the bull by the horns, or the tail, as the situation requires.

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