

112. **A REBELLIOUS VIEW:
BETWEEN SEXUAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY**

“The line between womanliness and masquerade [...] does not exist, [...] womanliness and masquerade are the same thing,” [Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a Masquerade” (1929)]

The work of Pilar Albarracín, polemical within the artistic field of the Spanish state, enjoys outstanding international recognition. In order to understand the reasons for this ambiguous position it is important to know that much of this artist’s work deconstructs, with humour and irony, a network of radically sexualised folkloric images linked to Andalusian culture, through which the Spanish stereotype has been forged, internally and externally. Some of the works of Pilar Albarracín, born in Seville in the late sixties, seem to revive old ghosts that some think disappeared with Franco’s dictatorship. However, anyone familiar with the history of the so-called “Spanish democratic transition” knows how far the Spanish stereotype was reactivated politically in the nineties, and how far the media tirelessly broadcast it. Public and private television channels have spent years showing images of *folclóricas* (popular female flamenco-style singers) married, by the church, to toreadors; of princesses, duchesses and bullfighting festivals; of processions devotedly followed by politicians of different colours; of female and male flamenco dancers...; in short, they have spent years broadcasting a series of stereotypical images that, for those abroad, condense what is typically Spanish. We do not mean to question the cultural value of artistic manifestations as complex and rich as flamenco, but to stress that it has been flamenco and not, for example, the Aragonese *jota* or the Galician *muñeira*, which has been politically established as an emblem of a monolithic Spanish cultural identity that does not reflect the multiethnic reality of the Spanish state.

This brief introduction is, in fact, a warning to prevent those who visit the exhibition from making the mistake of thinking that Pilar Albarracín’s works only speak the language of a specific ethnicity, of one culture, the Andalusian, more “macho” than the Swedish, the American or the French. It would be too easy to approach the works from this reductionist perspective, too comfortable to think that the stereotypes so subtly deconstructed with the artist’s rebellious view only prevail and act in her native Andalusia. These stereotypes have served to construct images of The (Spanish) woman, this “The” which as Lacan rightly said does not exist, and also of the Spanish Macho, which still form part of the exoticising imaginary of those who, year after year, visit Spain and are surprised not to find what so ironically the filmmaker Berlanga reflected more than four decades ago in “Bienvenido Mister Marshall”: an Andalusian masquerade in a village in Castile. A masquerade knowingly orchestrated to deceive the yank, to give him what he expected in the Spain that Franco imagined as One, Great and Free: flamenco, hand claps, songs and women wearing flamenco dresses. Hanging from the ceiling, the one thousand flamenco dresses exhibited by the artist bring us the image of the ex-votos that the faithful leave in some Catholic churches as a sign of a gift received from God, from the Virgin or from the saints. Perhaps, in this case, the gift for women has been to be able to get rid of them, to break with the repetitive deathly cadence of the rituals that mark femininity and masculinity, confronting them as if it were a dance of opposites. Whether it is the one thousand flamenco dresses or the four videos presented, the works of Pilar Albarracín are “reduced models” whose understanding affords knowledge of the meanings socially attributed to the “female being” and to the “male being”. From *Prohibido el cante* and *La cabra*, to *Lunares* and *Tortilla a la española*, each work is a complex synthesis of aesthetic, artistic and political concerns, and a magnificent example of the “reduced model” character which according to Claude Lévi-Strauss is typical of all works of art. Given that art is never a reproduction in the strict sense, but that all works manifest a structure that is never immediately perceptible, every time that, as receivers, we look at a visual work we are confronted, through our senses, with an act of knowing. This is why we must ask what knowledge is gained by the understanding of these exhibited “reduced models”.

Walking around the exhibition puts visitors in a difficult emotional, aesthetic and intellectual frame of mind. Difficult because the works destabilise their most intimate identity certainties, those they consider as the pure product of their individuality. Difficult because they undermine the foundations of the socio-sexual order in which they have been enculturated and whose veracity they have not questioned. Difficult because, in unveiling the hidden structure of this order, these “reduced models” impel them to apprehend from another point of view everything that western thought has placed on the side of nature: the body (and especially the female body), sex and sexuality. Difficult because they reveal the sexualisation of the ethnic stereotypes associated with Andalusian cultural identity. And it is this understanding that leads to an act of critical knowledge of the socio-sexual and ethnic order that frames individuals. An act that would have been impossible without the creation of works that, like those of Pilar Albarracín and other contemporary female artists, when proposing new forms of presentation and representation of sexual difference and of ethnicity, challenge the dominant sex/gender distinctions and force a rethinking of the hypothetical essences of ethnic identities.

Alert to the changing realities which, in Spain, women have had to confront throughout the last thirty years, the artist, reflecting the feminist struggles and theories, expresses them in her works creating visual narratives that unmask the implicit on which the sexual difference has been constructed. Her work masterfully embodies Judith Butler’s idea that “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. [...] what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts.” From this theoretical position, gender identity would be the result of the repetition of performative invocations of heterosexual law, and the body would be the unnatural product of sexual technologies. For Butler, gender performativity is “a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body,” and she links this ritual with the corporal *habitus*. *Habitus* that for Bourdieu designate a system of rules for the body that includes ways of thought, perception and performance, interiorised by the members of the same culture or social group. A system of rules characterised by the fact that it is never expressed completely and rationally, and because it implicitly organises the relations that all people maintain with their body and with that of others.

Pilar Albarracín feeds off these superficially outlined ideas to create works that destabilise the collectively interiorised certainties about the incarnation, in the body and mind of every individual, of a predetermined sexual and ethnic identity. The feminist struggles and theories and the “reduced models” shown subtly feed back into each other. They are the tripod on which new forms of understanding the world are created and recreated, on which new ideas and images which concern all human beings are forged. Visitors to the exhibition will see that the works exhibited in La Maison Rouge, an ironic deconstruction of the stereotypes of the feminine and the masculine – stereotypes that are never constructed outside ethnicity – ridicule the socio-sexual patriarchal order that orchestrates relations between women and men in Spanish society, and in others.

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1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage*, Paris, Plon, 1962.
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London, Routledge, 1990.
3. *Ibidem*.
4. *Ibidem*.
5. Pierre Bourdieu, *Le sens pratique*, Paris, Minuit, 1980