

Interview with Mercedes Azpilicueta

J: Let's start with something that connects the works of our exhibition like an invisible strand. Many of the works deal with characters across history: Catalina de Erauso, the gender-non-conforming 'Lieutenant Nun', who lived in the 1600s; Artemisia Gentileschi, the famous Baroque painter; a group of female workers who rebelled against food shortages in 1917; Anne Marie Jehle, an artist connected to the Fluxus movement; as well as the women of the present-day #NiUnaMenos movement who campaign against femicide. So, to start with these – and there could be many more examples – how do you select them?

I take a lot of inspiration from stories that I find in things I read, whether it is history, the news or poetry. But I guess I have a soft spot for people, characters, who travel and take themselves through a myriad of experiences, ahead of their times. They encounter different territories, languages, histories, and connect via those with unexpected and different modes of doing and being in the world. That exchange blurs divisions in chronological time; for example, the past returns and makes total sense in this very present. These atemporal synchronicities break any linearity and fixed categories and bring complexity to our realities and capacities in unimaginable ways.

H: Your research is often transhistorical and you speak of it as atemporal synchronicity. Could you elaborate what you mean by that?

I have referred before to how the concept of *chronopolitics*, envisioned by Renate Lorenz, has influenced my work. Lorenz's use of chronopolitics questions 'orderly and rigid temporal concepts and their effects on bodies and the social'.¹ Atemporal synchronicity has often found a way into

my work. I very easily connect and enjoy working with atemporal gestures, movements, images, words, or sounds – in sum, with stories from a different time. I like finding a human scale within the big narratives, and by engaging with them, by reworking them, I bring them closer to me or make them more relatable. Maybe the possibility to bridge to the past, juxtaposing alternative times in space, reframes our daily present, drawing ourselves into potentially infinite, or multiple directions where no meaning can override another in seeking a single truth. In that sense, we create multiple perspectives and rhythms in our lives.

J: Many of your works focus on the Baroque in particular, and carry aspects of it – the exuberance and even the bizarre – into contemporaneity, or deal with the contemplation / the reception of works in this style. Carrying extravagance and voluptuousness, the Baroque period was also a time of great contradictions, therefore also a time of existential anxieties and witch hunts, and the Thirty Years' War among other conflicts. What brought you to connect this era to our times?

I am more interested in being in dialogue with the Latin American Baroque, which is almost a different concept from the Baroque in Europe. For Latin Americans, the Baroque is a period that keeps on returning to our lives; it is a moment of failure, the failure of Modernism – and therefore of Europe – to impose its ideas, categorisations and rational understanding of this world. The Baroque travelled to the Americas in the late 16th and 17th centuries to become one of the central literary and artistic expressions of the 'New World'. The style was part of an aesthetic movement that used contrast, movement, exuberant detail, intense colour and grandeur as an imperial imposition on the Spanish and Portuguese colonies, while indoctrinating Indigenous people and *criollos*. But the *New World Baroque* also signified a localised expression of resistance that brought forth multiple translations of the Baroque in Latin America: those that used the literary and artistic styles of

a 'displaced' European Baroque, financed by the exploitation of forced African and indigenous labour, and the artistic interventions by marginalised Indigenous peoples, *mestizos*, and *criollos*, who have inserted their own artistic motifs into the Baroque; in other words, an exuberant syncretism of cultures.

J: Many of your works engage with Latin American history, including, for example, literature, colonial history or contemporary protest movements. As European recipients we might have a different idea of the Baroque, with blind spots about the Latin American influence on the Baroque, especially when looking at Spanish literature. Is there something that you would like to point us to, in connection to your work?

As I mentioned before, the *New World Baroque* is understood nowadays as the result of transatlantic colonisation, slavery and transculturation that at the same time introduced the base of a failed Modernism. It became the mode in which colonial subjects began their own complex processes of identification and genuine performative practices that have continued to this day. I would like to offer an interesting quote from Cuban poet, author and critic Severo Sarduy: '(...) to be Baroque today means to threaten, to fool and to parody bourgeois economy, to attack the stingy management of wealth at its very core: the space of signs, of language, the symbolic base of society and the guarantee of its functioning, of its communication. To overspend, to spend, to squander language only for pleasure—and not for information as in domestic use—is an attack on common sense, on morality and on what is "natural" (...)'²

On the other hand, the revival of the Neo-Baroque in Latin America during the 19th century coincides with the nation-building of Argentina. The 'return of the Baroque' is often explained, in part, as an artistic and ideological reaction to the continuing production and performance of identity in Latin America. Neo-Baroque narrative strategies are in favour of differentiation, polycentrism and rhythm. Precisely, the Neo-Baroque prefers frantic rhythms, instability,

polydimensionality, regulated disorder and planned chaos. Both the 17th-century Baroque and the 19th-century Neo-Baroque can be seen as periods of crisis. Both eras also find their most striking manifestations in their own forms, creating intermediary spaces where tensions, dichotomies and opposites – such as ‘civilisation/barbarism’, ‘self/world’ or ‘self/other’ – remain unresolved and can no longer be applied to a simplified context.

H: This connection to Latin American art history also appears in the drawing series *Bestiario de Lengüitas*: do these include references to Latin American magical realism?

I always take inspiration in literature from Latin America. I would rather call it fantastic literature, as magical realism, labelled by Europe, somehow became a marketing term. Elena Garro, Silvina Ocampo, Marosa di Giorgio are among the many wonderful writers who populate my daydreams. What I like about fantastic literature is the capacity to give space to the strange within the familiar. When things seem calm as usual, we can actually start looking for the oddness in them.

J: And the tapestry *Abya Yala (Tierra Madura)* tells Catalina de Erauso's story with collage elements taken from Cusco paintings, which once bridged European Mannerism and Indigenous painting, and became a high-value export. Why was it important to tell Erauso's story with these, and could you maybe elaborate on a few visual details?

I wanted to bring forward what Erauso might have discredited at their time. In *Abya Yala (Tierra Madura)*, we see several pictorial and graphic references from the times Erauso lived in (1592-1650). Among other images, there are *ángeles arcabuceros* by the Master of Calamarca (a Bolivian artist who created two series of angels painted on the walls of a church in Calamarca, Bolivia); the Inca *Tupac Yupanqui* by Huamán Poma³ (a Quechua nobleman known for chronicling

and denouncing the ill treatment of the natives of the Andes by the Spanish after their conquest); *Los mulatos de Esmeraldas* (made in 1599 by Andrés Sánchez Gallque); and the *Battle of Las Cangrejeras* by Francisco Nuñez de Pineda y Bascuñán (a military confrontation on 15 May 1629, in the context of the Arauco War, fought in southern Chile during the defensive war between Spaniards and Mapuches). If we think of this from today's perspective, Erauso would be the author of the only chronicle of the conquest of Chile written by a woman.

H: In their autobiographical memoirs, Catalina de Erauso makes light or fun of their male opponents and the patriarchal structures they are part of, and at some points does criticise them. However, at the same time Catalina gains success as a conquistador, their self-conception and their self-worth at the expense of Indigenous people(s) or Spanish-born women – what can anti-heroes like Catalina tell us about the complexity and ambivalence of histories that the virtuous hero hides from us?

I once got fascinated with Mannerism, which in the normative art history lineage is considered the period just before the Baroque. I read something once that described Mannerism beautifully as the moment when the 'wind that has fallen' is fully conscious that it has fallen. We live in a time where we are falling, and we are very much aware of that. And I think it is important to bring forward stories and narratives that are ambivalent and imperfect and that simply help us deal with our complex, decaying present.

H: Can ambivalent figures like Catalina de Erauso and their contradictory stories be of help navigating current discourse around identity politics, cancel culture and wokeness – or help solve the often-proclaimed identity crisis of feminism?

Yes, definitely. Especially because we are living in a cancel culture period, which I understand when it comes to dismantling corporations and capitalist giants, but when it comes

to culture it can become dangerous and counterproductive. That approach doesn't allow space for errors and therefore for dialogue. Identity politics and cancel culture have to be handled with care, otherwise they kill the irreverence that the arts need to have to properly (or improperly) unfold. I would suggest being fully aware of things while still being able to deal with them – to stay with the trouble, as Donna Haraway would say. Recently I was invited to participate in an exhibition in Madrid commemorating the life and work of Pablo Picasso. I was dealing with a similar dilemma: decline the invitation because I consider him a misogynist and cruel artist or rather participate and make my position clear. I decided for the second and wrote a poem that stated the difficulty of dealing with this person.

*Busco varias formas / de nombrar / pero todas se me escapan
/ como cuando pesco / mojarritas / o agarro semillas de chíá
/ lavadas / o doy palabras al desgano / ¿Cuáles? ¿Cuántas?
/ ¿De las buenas / o vulgares y nimias?*

*¿Qué motivos / tiene que haber / para dejar de abrazar / a
mi hijo / o dejar de jugar con él / a las escondidas? / ¿Acaso
seguir denunciando / a un gran pintor / por misógino / y por
cruel?*

*Tal vez / valga la pena / seguir intentando / seguir aclarando
/ la vieja encrucijada / de que la vida y la obra / ya no se
separan.*

J: Another work of yours that I would like to mention here is *Cuerpos Pájaros*, because I see this sense of longing for historical paintings as a way to help us deal with complexity and ambivalence. In this video you pair the reception of Baroque paintings, discussing in particular their affective gestures, with the bodily movements of young adults today. By doing this, their affective gestures become apparent as universal, and you point to how they might enable or support our own narratives, that they could potentially even free us from physical constraints and gender stereotypes?

I wanted to elevate what we see daily to the point that it becomes just like a Baroque painting. When I worked on *Cuerpos Pájaros* I was living in Milan and was very much influenced by Italian architecture and art history. I made several trips to Florence and looked at other paintings by Artemisia, in Naples for example. I placed myself inside a Mannerist or Baroque painting and tried to bring those impressions back to Buenos Aires when I shot the video. I was partly living inside well articulated history books and pristine, sacred spaces of museums and partly in the loud and sticky streets of Buenos Aires, approaching strangers and passers-by. From that combination, almost an ontological riot, a third time, an almost omnipresent moment, came out of it.

H: If we leave behind physical constraints and gender stereotypes, would affinity enable us to connect on another, universal level?

I want to believe that. We are too mediated in how we need to behave, how we need to dress, what we need to say, every single bit of us is designed to perform in the societies that we live in and that are designed for us. Only by looking for affinities beyond time and space will we be able to break those patterns.

J: Is this asynchronicity maybe even a thought that goes completely against the idea of the rigid belief in progress practiced by (art-)historical narratives?

I have such a fascination with (art-) historical narratives and I learnt them in such an old-school way that I guess I was always trying to mess around with them. These asynchronicities go against the bigger progressive narratives that we have been exposed to. On a more personal note, I want my child to learn differently when being at school. I would want him to understand that everything that has been written needs to be revised, and that that should be a fun thing to do.

J: Writing and its support in the quest for identity is also a big part of *Cuerpos Pájaros*. What role does writing play in your practice, i.e., for your work in general?

More than writing I enjoy reading. I read fiction and poetry and I need that space to unwind, to feel inspired, to understand that other worlds are possible. I have always read since I was child, even though there were almost no books at my home. But I would borrow them from the library in my town or from one of my best friends, who had a big fiction library with all the classics. With the years, I started buying my own books. The persistent practice of reading took me to writing. I think the economical aspect of writing is very important as well: you need nothing to do so, just a pen and a piece of paper, same as for drawing. I guess that the fact that you need nothing to do it also drove me to write. It was a question of means or resources. When I was a bit older, at the age of 20, I discovered contemporary poetry and realised I could hang out with people of my age who were writing and publishing the way they see and feel this world. That was a huge discovery. I can think of my friend, writer and publisher Mariano Blatt: reading his first book *Increíble* was a huge awakening for me. Contemporary poetry has been my big solace, my refuge. And since then, writing has appeared in pretty much every project. Always there is a line, a verse, a song that connects with what I do. I need the lyrical part of language a lot, and hence, I like how it takes me to music: that transition is something I expect I will do at some point.

H: This brings up something else – What spell is *Mama casting in Mama's Casting a Spell*? Is this a combining of the languages of science and spirituality?

Mama's Casting a Spell is a video work that, even though it was part of *Bestiario*'s script, coincided with a tough moment in my personal life. The engagement with a learning experience via Ana Roquero and her expertise on natural dyes, and

the connection with the choreographies with the students at the Botanical Garden in Madrid helped me with going through that difficult moment. It was a moment where I had to deal with loss and death and needed to transmute those mourning feelings into something generative.

J: Let's close this conversation with something essential: To me, this exhibition is also a quest for the potential of art and its relevance to life in general. You don't only often collaborate with countless artists, dancers, scenographers, historians and experts across disciplines, but also 'communicate' with artists transhistorically, looking for the relevance to you, as a contemporary artist, of Eduarda Mansilla, Anne Marie Jehle, Jacopo Pontormo or Artemisia Gentileschi, for example, and also giving voice to their work from your perspective. *Mama's Casting a Spell* then includes your learning of do-it-yourself techniques, getting to know the basics of dyeing with natural materials, and your textile costumes always include techniques using recycled materials. The *Bestiario de Lengüitas* drawings deal with the relevance of a bestiary (a compendium of beasts, a genre that has existed from the Middle Ages up to recent literary fiction or video game compendiums) that helps us imagine the unthinkable. Last but not least, your furniture sculptures combine art and life, and *Potatoes, Riots and Other Imaginaries* looks into the relevance of textile codes to support protest movements (from the white aprons of the rebel women workers in the 1917 *Aardappeloproer* to the green bandana of the Ni Una Menos movement). In your opinion, do we underestimate the power of art in our daily life?

I like to think that art and life come together, I cannot separate them. It's the way I understand this world. Art helps me navigate the daily challenges, softens me up when things get complicated, teaches me how to think the unthinkable, gives complexity to any circumstance, brings me joy with the tiniest gesture or helps me to unlearn the past; as cheeky as it might sound, art simply makes this life worth living. I have the impression many problems could be solved with the unexpectedness

and irreverence that art can bring, or the way it connects to things we didn't see before. In a spoiled world that demands austerity, it's pure abundance.

1 Renate Lorenz, *Not Now! Now! Chronopolitics, Art & Research*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014, p. 15.

2 Sarduy, Severo, *Barroco*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974.

3 Also known as Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala.