

## Ordain Me Queer, or Not at All

Estelle Hoy

*I am a saint.* – Leonora Carrington

If there's a disorienting strobe light flashing on anything these days, it's the work of Argentinian artist Mercedes Azpilicueta and her excruciatingly unique way of bringing back artistic and cultural histories liquidated in the past. Liquidation is a notoriously slippery artistic theme, and Azpilicueta knows this, achingly, so she throws herself into one monumentally convulsive attempt: the act of seeing a thing clearly, then *unclearly*, and unravelling the kinked, unconventional whispers of the Baroque. Riding conniption, the artist executes a *telefono roto*, writing distorted stories with valiant aesthetics that erase as much as they manufacture. Charging up embroiled versions of the historical figures of South America's colonial past with textile, performance, installation, and video, Mercedes Azpilicueta goes on strike, picketing the fouls (and foals) of the patriarchy and trusted modes of consistency, wearing a woven strap-on and leather bondage vest. It's a rough day for *history*.

Having wild linguistic black holes in my neural pathways, I took to Google Translate with *Susurros Burrocos*, the melodic title of the show. *Donkey Whispers*, it tells me. After discovering I'd misspelled *Barrocos* (Baroque) as *Burrocos* (donkey), I decided that either was equally suitable. Donkeys are the perceived imbeciles of the animal kingdom; the dullards, the nincompoops, the jackasses that move around the world with mopey, Eeyore depression, a dynamic army of death on their backs like they're so *hard done by*. Which means they're probably all cis white males. The *history* of men is a favourable one *for them* that leaves no legroom for the vital and dazzling stories of those living on the margins, including, and definitely not limited to, trans men – a gender shift that was especially peripheral when you were living in the 17th century. In *Bondage of Passions* (2021), Azpilicueta scrutinises the life of Spanish conquistador Catalina de Erauso

and his pixie-bob hack job. Born a woman in 1592 but living as a man and publicly anointed 'The Lieutenant Nun,' Erauso's original anointing was a religious one, his familial grooming funnelling him into the long, silent wings of the nunnery, lined with Mother Marys and pulsating Sacred Hearts, in the limestone estuaries of the Basque Country. (Just quietly, wearing a nun's black-and-white religious habit to cover that hacked mane wouldn't have been a terrible idea.) Now pay attention: Catalina has changed their pronouns. Is that so fucking hard?

Peeling off a white satin bodice, Erauso put on a waistcoat with delinquent breeches and travelled to the New World. Things get complicated now, as history tends to do, since Catalina earned the reputation of a ruthless conquistador, a Spaniard killing the Indigenous Mapuche Chileans with sooty muskets and flintlock pistols. On one occasion – and I guess it could only ever be one occasion – even killing his own brother. Such a headfuck.

Mercedes Azpilicueta is a bit of a brilliant liar; there are no two ways about it. Actually, there are two specific ways to go about it, which we're getting to: weaving the kinked roads of conquest and sparkly queerdom into her work, Azpilicueta has created two tapestries. One of them, on view in *Susurros Barrocos*, lords over and conquers the exhibition space (with installations up to 160 cm x 400 cm), braiding the knotty, Daedalean threads of feverish contradiction. *The Lieutenant-Nun Is Passing: An Autobiography of Katalina, Antonio, Alonso, and More* (2021) and *Abya Yala (Tierra Madura)* (2021), rise in colourful merino wool and cotton, with cocky, metallic yarn shining through jacquard tapestries; she takes looming, a traditional, conservative artistic practice iconic in the Baroque period, to glittery Berghain or some other foxy hotspot. A Leonora Carrington on heat.

Hectic, rutilant textiles and opposing, extroverted forces barricade the exhibition space, with horny nuns, Saint Bernadette, and maybe Saint Vincenta Maria López Vicuña, given over to the heavenly delights of fucking after a lifetime of prayerful chastity. Good for them!

Confrontational 'exchanges' present visually in other unspeakable ways: horse-riding scenes depicting colonial exports of

pillaged, dusty cocoa beans on their way to fermentation in foreign countries, *tejate* maize violently stolen from the indigenes of Anahuac (Mexico), indigo dyes purloined from the mature land. The bucking horse doesn't stop there; Azpilicueta leaves smudged fingerprints, crescent hoof marks, and the primitive smell of domesticated leather in her series *Kinky Affairs at Home* (2022). Getting her long tendrils into just about everything, Mercedes Azpilicueta capitulates to BDSM restraints in *The Wise Octopus* (2022), a wall-mounted sculptural monstrosity with copper foil charging the ends of nine leather tentacles like an electric circuit board. Octopuses have eight tentacles, but mothers, particularly activist-mothers like Azpilicueta, have nine, growing the extra one themselves. A kinky, excoriating DJ-octopus moves to electronic music and disintegration loops, stepping up its mixing skills using the spare tentacle to flick her buzzing cocoa bean, disciplining, in a very talkative way, the throngs of patriarchal domination. An artist fully in command of her version of scratch-recorded narratives, true or *truish*. The debaucherous series *Kinky Affairs at Home* continues with *The Spicy Kangaroo* (2022) (and by the way, kangaroos are known for their big-balled, primal aggression, which is why they're dutifully culled and eaten in Australia – they're drab-tasting, you need paprika), and *The Coquette Spiders* (2022), flirting shamelessly on walls painted warm blood-*roja*, likely red from having tabooed sex during the 'forbidden' menses, or maybe due to poor after-care when S&M went a little too far. Sculptural black leather, copper, and hair-tufted creatures that refuse to genuflect before all the interdiction imposed on women, instead pursuing all the ways that the history of power can be, *and is being*, reclaimed.

Mercedes Azpilicueta leaves saintly ordination behind, raising queer voices lost to history, a Lieutenant-renegade leading the way to mature lands of milk and honey, of a more evolved society—for the love of the Pope, it's 2023 already! (To be fair, the Pope did give Erauso his blessing to be legally recognised as a man upon his return to Europe, so he was *partially* forward-thinking.) *Susurros Barrocos* is a new, inclusive dialogue, damning colonial pasts with an outrageous, aesthetic retelling of personal

and political stories and militarised tugs-of-war with contradiction. *Baroque Whispers*, or even *Donkey Whispers*, gets its loaded musket out, persecutes all the bondages of our fucked-up history, the torture directed at queers, fluidity, and casts a kinky *horchata caliente* spell, whipping the objectification of women with cat-of-nine tails. Her ninth tentacle is flicking the tenets of patriarchy yet again.

*I warn you, I refuse to be an object* – spits Leonora Carrington, drinking milk, the cinnamon *leche mexicana* of insurrection.

*The milk of dreams* – whispers Mercedes Azpilicueta.