Central American Women Artists in a Global Age

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The feminist movements that took place in North America and Europe in the sixties and seventies affected regions like Central America only to a degree at that time, and proved to be of a different character. In large part, this is because those years coincided with intensifying political unrest and armed conflict in several Central American countries, circumstances that conditioned life in general and the position of women along with it. It should be understood, for example, that even women who directly participated in the region’s wars and fought in guerrilla movements did not do so in conditions of equality, but often suffered mistreatment and abuse from their male comrades in arms, and in fact mirrored the general situation of women in society, particularly in rural areas.

Change came about in a different, more evolutionary way in countries like Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay, probably due to the existence there of a larger, more urban middle class with access to education. The Chilean writer Diamela Eltit could therefore write that, at the time, “women’s body broke its prolonged cultural status of physical inferiority, to become identical to that of men, in the name of the construction of a collective egalitarian future.” But in Central America, urbanization arrived later, and the very notion of feminism—as a movement, as a way of confronting inequality—was known mainly to those women with access to higher education or the ability to travel. And even in those cases, the idea of feminism was absorbed in particular ways, due to the differing social pressures and political structures in each country. Women in developed countries had expectations very different from those of women in the developing world, where inequality is flagrant, not only in questions of gender, but also in economic, educational, ethnic, and social matters, and where injustice involves entire communities of men, women, and children.

There has been a tendency in Latin America to consider feminism a foreign ideology. It is useful to recall, however, that as long ago as the seventeenth century, the Mexican poet, nun, and woman of genius Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651–1695), born in San Miguel Nepantla, in speaking about the condition of womanhood became a major inspirational figure, an intellectual of such prowess that she is considered a “Tenth Muse” by literary scholars. Still, though gender issues have only recently become a central subject in most fields of study (particularly insofar as they are linked to the new global economies), gender theory has become an important way of critically reading artistic practice and cultural production, which has changed so drastically in Central America in our time.

In recent years, Central America has witnessed a surge of work by dynamic new figures who operate on the margins of the old patriarchal or hegemonic discourse that certain interests still try to impose. In cultural production and management, we have seen not only the growing, active presence of women on the artistic scene in these transitional times—as curators, artists, cultural agents, and heads of institutions—in addition to their roles as professionals in many other fields, but also women’s transformation of the nature of the regional artistic landscape, changing its languages, scope, and meaning, as well as how art is read and interpreted. Their work, which often turned to nontraditional media even as it spoke about the violated dramas of everyday life, has also been important as a source for the renewal of painting since 1993 (in which young male artists have been particularly active).

Indeed, as Rosario Cazaltí rightly notes, it is interesting to consider how the women’s movement in Latin America has manifested itself as a parallel revolution to the region’s political revolutions. Like any grassroots movement, the feminist movement in the region has built revolutionary change out of the texture of everyday life. That is to say, in Central America, the laws made by men were in day-to-day practice formerly transmitted by women, who, as heads of family in a metaphorically fatherless society, play a key role in perpetuating existing systems. However, the very substantial changes, in thinking and in practice, associated with the feminism of the younger generations...
have found in this same "maternal" culture the anchor for their assertion of redefined, even revolutionary, identities. Indeed, it is through practice more than theory that this redefinition takes place: it would seem that the former guardians of the status quo have become the real agents of change.⁴
engaged in a soliloquy—a dialogue with their own inner selves. Such a soliloquy can be seen as a way to question a subordinate position and survive daily life.

Gender issues were mostly addressed in a tangential way at the end of the nineties, so the piece by Regina Aguilar was therefore somewhat unusual in its directness. In an installation related to the hand-grinding of corn, she pointed up the arduous domestic tasks that indigenous women must accomplish daily (fig. 12).

Subsequent Developments

Since the late nineties, younger generations have benefited from more open communication as well as an increased mobility, leading them to approach issues of gender from a different angle; they are less reticent in their proposals and more global in their concerns. Lucía Madriz, for instance, openly states that her intention is to examine “symbolic constructions of women and the subtle social practices that perpetuate gender inequality.”

Not surprisingly, this has led her toward themes of consumerism, globalization, and the abuse of economic power. Her early works include feminist-oriented photography, painting, and video. Among her video pieces, Stigmates is of particular interest: hair grows out of her hands, referring at once to the social stigma placed on female bodily hair and to a male martyrdom—the bleeding marks, displayed by St. Francis of Assisi and others, that resemble Christ’s wounds on the Cross. Less directly, the video also suggests the natural return of stigmatized features, whether the continuous regrowing of removed bodily hair or the periodic flowing of menstrual blood.

Madriz has also recently produced installation works that refer directly to other aspects of subalternity and which have a wider significance throughout the region, involving issues such as intellectual property rights, copyright, and free-trade agreements (fig. 13). These installations combine an extremely sophisticated design (through a technique perhaps inspired by the traditional Guatemalan street carpets, made of colored sawdust and seeds, for religious processions) with humble materials (rice, beans, corn) linked to the basic diet of regional populations, pointing as well to the danger of subsidized imports of these crops in future trade agreements.

Sandra Monterroso has also spoken directly about male/female power structures using images related to food and its daily preparation, usually a woman’s task. Probably her most accomplished work, Your Tortillas, Darling (2004), is a video in which she prepares cornmeal—not by grinding it, but in the traditional manner (a process referenced in the piece by Aguilar mentioned earlier [see fig. 12])—but rather by chewing it (following the ancestral custom in preparing ritual chiches, a fermented corn drink), spitting it out to make tortillas, and then decorating the product with her own blood. One of her first performances, in 1999, called Ave fénix (fig. 14), reflected the realities of the peace agreements signed in 1996 in Guatemala, and included photographic images on red gelatin, one of them being a partial view of a naked woman. When the piece was censored at the exhibition venue, a local bank, the artist did part of the planned performance in the street.

Nudity continues to be a controversial issue and a statement on the part of artists in Guatemala, particularly Regina José Galindo, but also María Adele Eliz (Guatemala, b. 1970). During an exhibition event in a public space,
organized by Rosina Cazali in Guatemala in 2000, Díaz sat naked inside a large window, in view of passersby, while plucking the eyes out of fish from a pail and putting them in a jar, as a reflection of the violence of her country.

Leslie Milson, whose gathering of groups of objects into assembled sculptures is her trademark, seems to refer in them to the dynamics of human social groups. Gender issues are at the core of her discourse; she approaches sexuality by dismembering the female body, reducing its complexity to the sexual organs, isolating them as symbols of desire. For example, she elaborates plaster breasts with lipstick-colored nipples—assembling them as trophies on the wall, or hanging them on strings like puppets (fig. 15), or inserting them into a flower- and ivy-covered night table.

Though the female body in Central America is frequently a site of pain, it can also be associated with contemplation, as in the work of artist Karla Solano, whose more anatomically based work we saw earlier. Solano takes herself as the subject for most of her photos and installations, and in them she has also reflected poetically.
on the passage of time in the lives of her mother, herself, and her two little daughters. A video called Home (fig. 16) shows her embroidering her own hand ("skin stitching" used to be a girl's game in grammar schools in the 1960s in Costa Rica); with a needle and black thread, she creates a childish image of a home, or writes words dealing with creation and destruction, in a soft, nonaggressive way. And she has used her body as a painted surface, filming herself with a camera in one hand while she makes up or cleans up with the other. More recently, Solano has covered gallery spaces or the facades of buildings with blown-up photo details of parts of her own body, concentrating on the aesthetic quality of skin as it creases, bends, and folds, and of hair, never showing the full body, but working with it as a surface. Her project in May 2006 for a group show called Three: Focus on Feminine Bodies involved covering the entire facade of the exhibition venue with a gigantic reclining nude portrait of herself (fig. 17); although a house usually encloses a woman, here a woman encloses a house, giving it a new skin.

Some artists question the parameters of traditional female beauty by addressing the topic of make-up. Jessica Laguna (b. 1971), a Guatemalan artist now living in New York, has engaged in several performances documented in video. In two separate videos that are a bit reminiscent of Priscilla Monge's Make-Up Lessons—a 1998 video dealing with the relations between seduction and aggression—Laguna shows herself compulsively applying make-up. In one of them, the camera focuses on her lips, smothered in layer upon layer of bright red lipstick; in the other, the artist is doing her nails, painting them over and over with red polish until her fingers are also covered in it. Other aspects of feminine beauty are addressed in the work of Ana Uribe (El Salvador, b. 1979), in which hair biting and loss of hair are used to protest against a conservative society that imposes its prescriptions on women.
It is interesting to note various artists' reference to household objects, such as domestic utensils, tableware, and appliances, as well as to children's toys and puppets, as if they were to insist, ironically, paradoxically, on elements of the supposed female universe. Paintings by the Panamanian artist Haydele Victoria Suwescum resident in the United States, b. 1961) are done in bright colors that recall popular ads for electrical appliances. In LeCiel Milson's Twins of 2003 (fig. 18), household shoebrushes are deployed to resemble female genitalia. Such a work is close to Lucia Madriz's Multifunctional (fig. 19) of the same year: a floor polisher hung on the wall, its two round brushes turned outward (a latex baby-bottle nipple in the center of each), ready to be activated by a button.

These last two works relate to one of Priscilla Monge's major pieces, Balerina of 1999–2000 (fig. 20), in which an electric drill is mounted on a pedestal, the bit replaced by a silver baleen who turns when the viewer touches a pedal. It has been observed that Balerina poses a setting of scores, ironic and retroactive, both in relation to the obsession of the avant-garde with movement and velocity, as with the sexual fantasies of modernity.... Beauty under pressure: the drill ... describes on another level the same situation of permanent aggression. Out of all the contemporary women artists in the region, Monge has probably been one of the most consistent in developing her discourse, even while working in many media.

As Monge's work has developed since the early nineties, it has gone back and forth from painting to video, from photography to objects, drawings, and installations. However, there is a thematic consistency to her work. From the beginning, it has been concerned with themes of the hidden life, initially as experienced in Costa Rica, but subsequently going beyond the local dimension to speak about human behavior in general. Room for Isolation and Restraint (page 225) is one of Monge's more mature and complex pieces. First selected by Harold Szeemann for the 2001 Venice Biennale, it acquired a deeper resonance when it was installed in two later exhibitions. With this eight-foot-square cubicle, completely upholstered with sanitary napkins and lit by a dim bulb hanging from the ceiling, Monge invites the spectator to enter and meditate. The implications of the title reflect the negative mental states that makes, and society in general, associate with menstruation (madness, hysteria, dirtiness, impurity), which are held to require both isolation and restraint for those who experience them. Yet, viewed in a different light, the piece evokes not only the vulnerability but also the creative power linked to the cycle. There is a latent visual power as well, for the piece, immaculately white, is also a statement of...
chromatic potential, since it is composed of material that could eventually become completely red with blood. That much is clear from a solo performance of Monge’s in the city of San José several years before: using a pair of her custom-made trousers of sewn sanitary napkins, she carried out several errands walking through town during one of her periods, staining the pants with her own blood as she strolled among the crowds. The power of showing what is seldom if ever allowed to be seen openly is an essential aspect of all Monge’s work, which unveils many of the repressed desires and phobias of an overly conventional society. It is a feature of her work that has greatly influenced artistic practice in the last fifteen years in Central America.

In this context, let me return to the work of another major figure, Patricia Belli. Belli makes work that speaks from the specific perspective of a woman struggling with her own sense of self. For instance, in one of Belli’s strongest videos, a blonde woman is lifted from the back while she arranges and caresses her beautiful hair; at one point, a certain moviment unrolls what the spectator discovers is in fact a wig, and we suddenly recognize the bald head of the artist (Fig. 21). Belli has in addition produced both sculptures and anthropomorphic furniture.

Yet Belli’s work does not refer so much to gender itself as to the idea of marginality. Pursuing the political implications of craft and manual work, Belli contrasts the handwork of the underdeveloped world with the industrialized nations’ access to technology. Thus her installation The Circus (Fig. 22), presented at the Havana biennale of 2000, mixed a mechanical pulley system, made of stainless-steel cables, with the craft of sewn and stuffed acrobats, or parts of them. Belli chooses the simple, common materials associated with traditional female occupations, making “paintings” out of stitched pieces of colored rags on canvas, or mounting second-hand clothing on a stretcher like a canvas, also often piercing it with sewn twigs and thorny branches. Such works, which suggest a very intimate discourse, project a kind of reconciliation of her political and her poetic concerns. Through these objects, Belli conveys the burdens of the people, even as she exercises her own childhood experience as a little girl suffering from congenital alopecia.

As I have written in other essays about Patricia Belli, the practice of reconstruction and recycling in her works functions like a metaphor for local political systems. However, there is undeniably a strong personal component in these works, whether of artists like Belli or like the Brazilian Nazareth Pacheco. A thalidomide child, Pacheco underwent reconstructive surgery during most of her early years. The aggressive language of her strictly unusable clothing and jewelry works, from the late nineties, made of sharp, cutting objects such as shaving blades, evidences her intense surgical experience but also the power of fashion in general to confine, reshape, and in a sense even dismember the body. In 2002, Pacheco showed a series of impeccable aseptic shackles, for hands, arms, neck, legs, and feet, custom-made of acrylic and stainless steel to her own measurements—as if her own body were her prison (Fig. 23).
Themes of Violence

A lengthy discussion took place at a symposium organized in San José by TECOR/TeCos in 2000. Two Guatemalan women scholars, Aida Toledo and Anabella Acevedo, had presented papers dealing with the aesthetics of violence in women's art in Guatemala, and several artists protested vehemently against the papers, which they felt misrepresented the broader artistic practice. They argued that the kind of work these two scholars were citing formed only a part of what women artists were producing, and that more intimate, less violent work was ignored. The issues raised by such a discussion have implications for the work of a number of artists.

Some artists have indeed been drawn more toward questions of intimacy, or understanding their personal history, than toward issues of violence. Muriel Hasbun (El Salvador, b. 1961) has tried to understand her own complex roots through works in which family photo-album pictures of her mother's Polish/French/Jewish and her father's Christian/Palestinian/Salvadoran ancestry appear superimposed on images of the volcanic land in which she was born. Diana de Solares has determinedly defended her right to a work stemming from concerns with personal intimacy more than from a political situation. Solares has done extensive conceptual work, mainly in painting and photography, in which investigations of the self are conducted in an extremely discreet, restrained manner—through veiled self-portraits, printed in soft grays; or through objects related to everyday life and childhood memories; or, more recently, through cutout photo-assemblages concerning the institution of marriage (figs. 24, 25). A younger artist from Panama, Rochelle Mozman (b. 1972), works around the idea of "ex-urbita," the suburban world as familiar in Panama City as in New York City.
Regina José Galindo (Guatemala, b. 1974). *Throwing My Words into the Wind (Lanzar mis palabras al viento)*, 1999. Photo documentation of performance at the archway of the National Post Office Building, Guatemala City, Guatemala. Courtesy of the artist.

Despite such approaches, however, violence, in one way or another, is tacitly, perhaps unconsciously, present in most of the recent work in the area. It is a violence that no longer arises from political upheaval but rather from the daily struggle for space and respect. Here we see effective use of irony and humor, as in Lecia Ascarza’s (Costa Rica, b. 1957) work with the ninetyies: resin sculptures of overweight women wearing ridiculous clothing, rollers in their hair, smoking, all while talking on their cell phones. Other examples include Florencia Urbina’s (Costa Rica, b. 1964) cartoon- or Pop art-like paintings that ridicule society’s foibles or the tourism industry in Costa Rica. In a different vein, Monge suggests the violence and aggression lying beneath the surface of the everyday.

Perhaps Regina José Galindo, who started working around 1999 and has become the outstanding performance artist in the region, is the one who most cogently reflects on the effects of violence, whether political or criminal, public or private. One of her first performances, however, was of a more poetic register, and created an unusual situation that took passersby out of their routines: she suspended herself, with a harness, from the archway of the National Post Office Building in downtown Guatemala City and read her poems, before letting the handwritten sheets of paper fall (fig. 26); turmoils followed, as people below scrambled to pick up the poems. Some time later, for the exhibition *Blue October,* she sedated herself, was put in a body bag, and was thrown onto the municipal dump (fig. 27). The title of the piece, *We Don’t Lose Anything by Being Born,* related to the loss of life in Guatemala.

Galindo’s recent performances have been more overtly political. When General Efraín Ríos Montt, tainted by the massacres carried out by the military regime in the early eighties, ran for the presidency of Guatemala in 2005, Galindo performed *Who Can Erase the Traces?* (pages 122 and 201). Barefoot, dressed in black, holding...
a basin of human blood, she walked from the Palacio Nacional to the Corte Constitucional building in Guatemala City, several blocks away, putting her feet in the basin as she walked. Dipping her feet in blood to leave marks on the streets of the city, like the writer who dips a pen into an inkwell, became a poetic metaphor for the act of inscribing unerasable memories—in this case, memories of those killed by the military. In 2005, Galindo’s performance at the Venice Biennale (witnessed only by those present on the preview day) took place inside a closed wooden structure equipped with a loudspeaker. There she whipped herself 279 times with a man’s belt, one lash for each of the 279 women murdered in Guatemala from January 1 of that year until her arrival in Venice on June 9.

Similarly, Teresa Margolies has addressed the widely publicized murders of women committed in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, since 1993, by traveling to the area and producing a video of the road where many of the victims were abducted; her 2005 video includes no images of women, just the eerie silence of an empty road cutting through the flat land at dusk. Yet Margolies has also developed her work by using the judicial morgue in Mexico City as a studio (page 222). Amidst the endless source of visual material, she mixes a strangely maternal attitude toward the dead bodies with a powerful indictment of the kind of corruption that allows her own work to be produced.

Galindo addresses issues that concern women, but her statements are not specifically feminist in origin; her position stems from general politics, which obviously include feminism. The video Hymenoplastia (2004), which documents the hymenoplasty, or surgical reattachment of the hymen, undergone by Galindo, was wrongly interpreted by several visitors to the Venice Biennale as being related to the work of the French performance artist Orlan. But it has nothing to do with an aesthetic of bodily intervention. It reflects, instead, a personal decision by the artist to undergo a procedure that many young women in Guatemala are having performed in clandestine clinics. They are responding to intense social pressure to marry as virgins, pressure heightened by the presence in Guatemala of religious groups with ties to the United States promoting a Bush-era conservative morality.

Galindo’s action is not only a feminist tract: it is a political statement in which a woman risks her own body, in order to bring out into the open the clandestine practices that other women are led into by social pressure.

Galindo’s most recent work at the time of writing is the action at Le Plateau in Paris. In response to the immigrant uprisings of November 2005, she chose to be placed in solitary confinement upon arrival in France, voluntarily renouncing the freedom to walk about in Paris—a confinement related to the loss of liberty felt by an outsider. Ideas of confinement were previously present in her performance at the Lima biennale in 2002: covering her eyes at the airport in Guatamala, she flew blindfolded to Peru and stayed that way all the time she was there, until she returned home. During the opening days of the biennale, she sat alone, in silence, in a bedroom installed in her exhibition space in the main venue, and spoke only to her curator, who also accompanied her back to the hotel every night and helped her to eat, wash, and dress. Galindo’s work is not only about the artist’s particular act of endurance but, more important, about how much the individual spectators in their own right come to understand, and even endure, a violent reality through the performance.

A Changing Practice
There are many more women artists in the region who work from the perspective of feminism and gender issues, as well as other kinds of themes. Most of them are active in video, photography, and photo-based work. Donna Conlon (b. 1965), who lives and works in Panama, is among the most compelling video artists. Her work does not stem from feminism per se but instead concerns conservation, with a subtle yet powerful critique of the consumer world. Her Coexistence (2003), shown at the
Latin American Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale, shows a parade of leaf-cutter ants that have picked up small papers left in their path by the artist—drawings of the flags of United Nations member countries. Conlon says that her work is a socio-archaeological exploration of her immediate surroundings, where the objects, images, and actions she encounters are reconfigured into videos that comment on human idiosyncrasy and the contradictions of contemporary society.26

Installation work also seems to be a medium favored by women, perhaps pursuing Bell's idea that installation is "a corporeal medium that subverts the stereotype of woman as skin and man as gaze; it subverts it in the sense that women use it to talk from there, with a consciousness of the self."27

While the nineties witnessed the emergence of many women artists, the pendulum has swung back and the younger generations of artists, under thirty, are mostly men. Ronald Mora is an installation artist who deals with the issue of domestic violence (fig. 28), a theme that no man of the previous generation had addressed. Most aggressive acts in family life take place in the household kitchen, where any object—a pan, a rolling pin—can be used to injure women or children. The artist presents this scene completely upholstered in a sort of cotton wool, as if this wrapping would silence the violence present in these lives. Many of the younger male artists, though, have returned to painting. Federico Herrera, invited by Harald Szeemann to participate in several exhibitions and winner of the young-artist prize at the 2001 Venice Biennale, has become a successful painter at a very young age (fig. 29). Rather than exclusively making canvases that can be sold in the art marketplace, however, he continues to engage in ephemeral work that functions almost as a public service. A different kind of sensibility informs his series of so-called found images, photographs taken by Herrera around the city of San José that seek to capture the most banal scenes, rendered absurd or surprising through some detail observed by the artist.
For example, in photography the grass that grows around the remains of the house is a detail, this creating an abstract work on the scaffold or a piece of面板, as well as being a way of walking, a way of looking at every image in a different way, allowing spectators to see it in a different way.

Why speak of these artists in the present context? Feminism does not concern only the work of artists who are women, but also the gender references that are made in the work, which are not always explicit. It is a matter of recognizing the gender references in the work, and then going on to discover, in the case of female artists, how their work is like the work of men. It is a way of understanding the position of women in society, and how they deal with everyday realities, and to do this is to open a space for understanding the different conditions in which women live their work, and produce in different cultural contexts.

One of the few positive aspects of globalization is the increased access to information it provides, which allows for a greater awareness of the different conditions in which women live their work, and produce in different cultural contexts. This has contributed to more understanding, to a growing sense of gender equality, but also to the possibility of work that can engage in whether or not the conditions are similar. This has been particularly evident in the post-war period, when women and men have been able to engage with global issues.

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Fig. 9: 1976, Vendo de flores, ceramic, 30 x 20 cm. Courtesy de la artistas.

Fig. 8: 1976, Checa, ceramic, 30 x 20 cm. Courtesy de la artistas.