

## Central American Women Artists in a Global Age

Virginia Pérez-Ratton

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.<sup>1</sup> 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, "woman'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."<sup>2</sup> 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

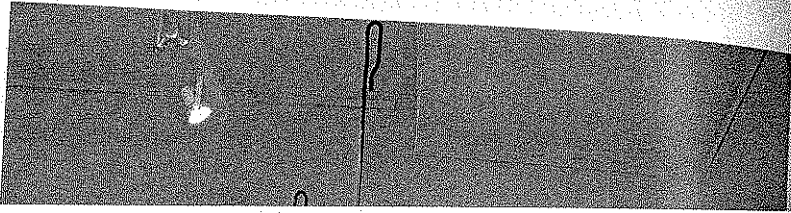
de la Cruz (1651–1695), born in San Miguel Nepantla, in speaking about the condition of womanhood became a major inspirational figure, an intellectual of such prowess that she is considered a "Tenth Muse" by literary scholars. Still, though gender issues have only recently become a central subject in most fields of study (particularly insofar as they are linked to the new global economies),<sup>3</sup> gender theory has become an important way of critically reading artistic practice and cultural production, which have 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.<sup>4</sup> Their work, which often turned to nontraditional media even as it spoke about the veiled dramas of everyday life, has also been important as a source for the renewal of painting since 1999 (in which young male artists have been particularly active).

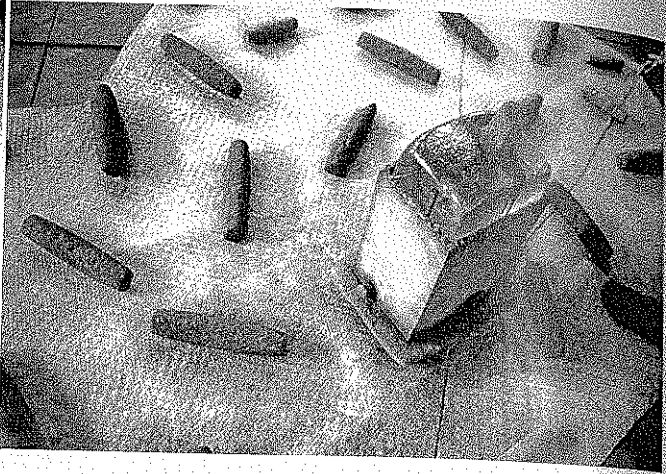
Indeed, as Rosina Cazali rightly notes,<sup>5</sup> it is interesting to consider how the women's movement in Latin America has manifested itself as a parallel revolution to the region's political revolutions. Like any grassroots movement, the feminist movement in the region has built revolutionary change 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

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Diana of Regina José Galindo,  
Who Can Erase the Traces?, 2003  
(see page 201)

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.<sup>6</sup>



p. 124 - 129  
Omitted



engaged in a soliloquy—a dialogue with their own inner selves.<sup>19</sup> 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. Lucia Madriz, for instance, openly states that her intention is to examine “symbolic constructions of women and the subtle social practices that perpetuate gender inequity.”<sup>20</sup> 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, *Stigmata* 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 as 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, 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 *chicha*, 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 Adela Díaz (Guatemala, b. 1970). During an exhibition event in a public space,

Fig. 12

**Regina Aguilar** (Honduras, b. 1954). *Daily Bread (El pan de cada día)*, 1999. Mixed media with sculpted volcanic rock, metal, oil paint, cast lead crystal, and mortar and pestle, 118 × 157 × 24” (300 × 400 × 61 cm). Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 13  
Lucia  
Madriz  
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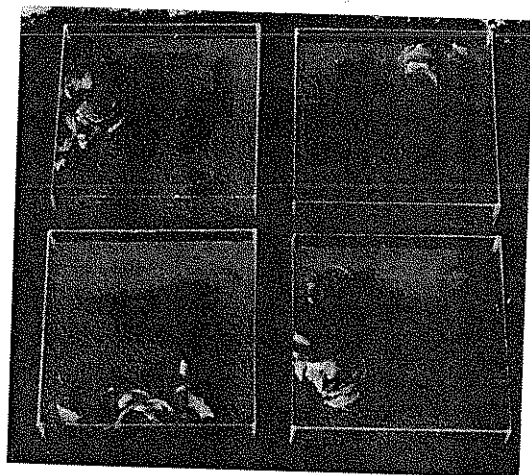
Fig. 13

Lucía Madriz (Costa Rica, b. 1973). *Money Talks*, 2003. Floor piece with rice and black beans, approx. 8' 1" x 8' 1" (2.5 x 2.5 m). Courtesy of the artist



Fig. 14

Sandra Monterroso (Guatemala, b. 1974). *Phoenix Bird (Ave fénix)* (detail), 1999. Installation with gelatin silver prints and performance. Courtesy of the artist



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.

Lezlie 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.<sup>21</sup> 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



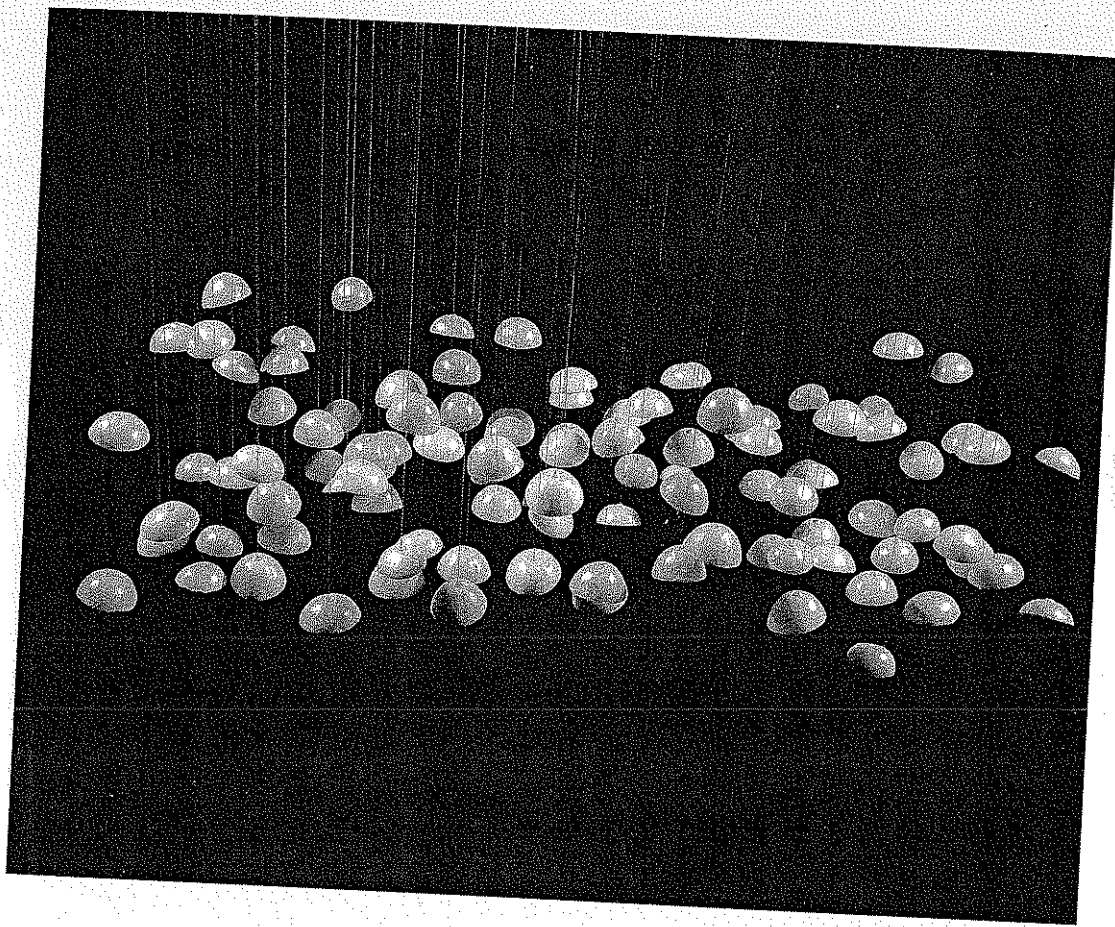


Fig. 15  
**Lezlie Milson** (Panama, b. 1953),  
*Of Tits and Puppets (De tetas y  
 titeres)*, 1998. Installation with  
 mixed media and monofilament  
 iron, dimensions variable. Private  
 collection. (Photo: courtesy of the  
 artist and Mónica Kupfer)

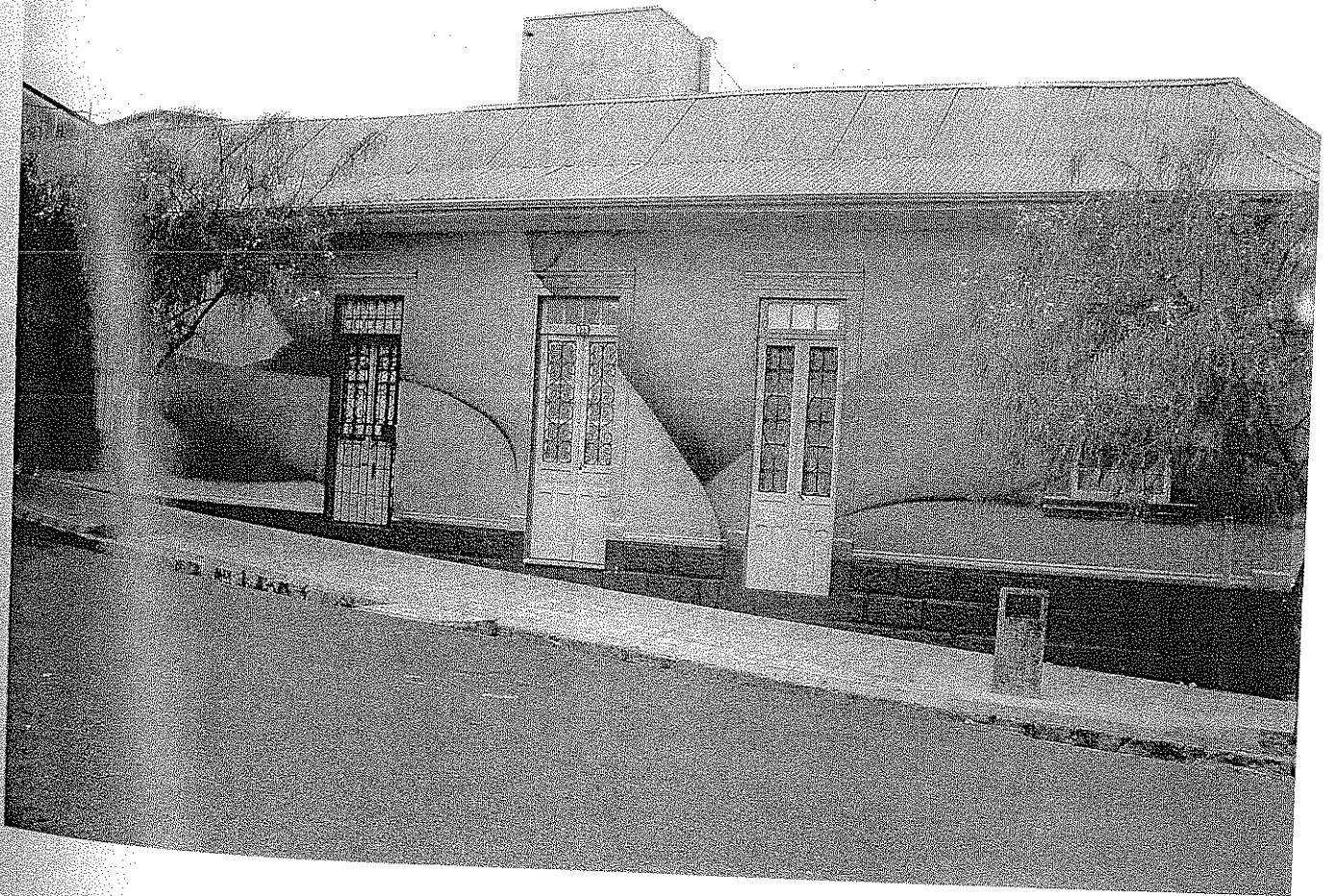
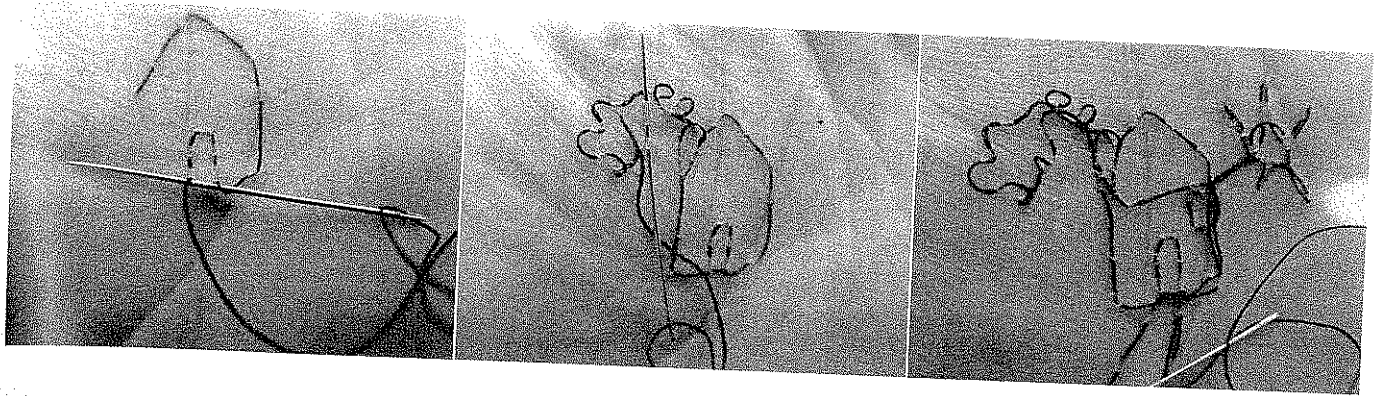
on the passage of time in the lives of her mother, herself, and her two little daughters. A video called *Home* (fig. 16) shows her embroidering her own hand ("skin stitching" used to be a girls' game in grammar schools in the 1960s in Costa Rica); with a needle and black thread, she creates a childish 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 Lagunas (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—Lagunas 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 Urquilla (El Salvador, b. 1979), in which nail biting and loss of hair are used to protest against a conservative society that imposes its prescriptions on women.

Fig. 16 (opposite top)  
**Karla Solano** (Costa Rica,  
 b. 1971), *Home (Hogar)*, 2004.  
 DVD projection, color, sound.  
 10 min, 20 sec. Courtesy  
 of the artist

Fig. 17 (opposite bottom)  
**Karla Solano** (Costa Rica,  
 b. 1971), *Sleeping (En mis  
 laureles)*, 2006. Digital print on  
 vinyl in several sections, length  
 65' 1/2" (20 m) overall. Mural  
 installation at TEOR/6Tica, San  
 José, Costa Rica, May 2006.  
 (Photo: courtesy of the artist)



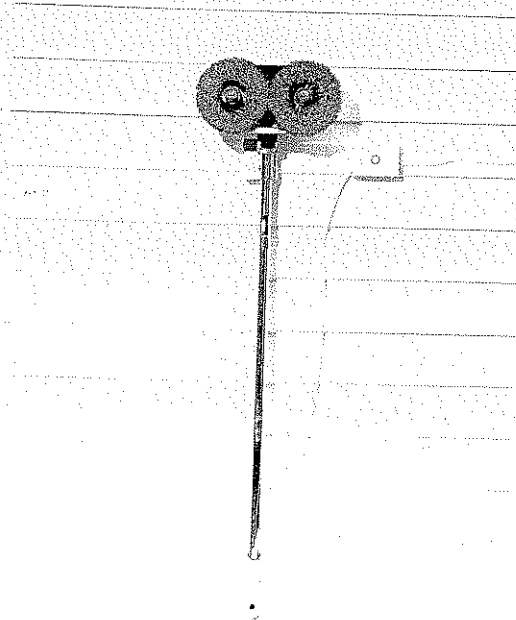


Fig. 18 (far left)  
**Lezlie Milson** (Panama, b. 1958)  
*Twins (Melizias)*, 2003. Two  
 brushes; iron, wood, and wax;  
 each 8 x 2 x 2" (20.3 x 5 x 5 cm).  
 Courtesy of David de Castro,  
 Panama City, Panama. (Photo:  
 courtesy of the artist and Mónica  
 Kupfer)

Fig. 19 (left)  
**Lucía Madriz** (Costa Rica,  
 b. 1973). *Multifunctional*  
*(Multifuncional)*, 2003. Electric  
 polisher and latex teats. Courtesy  
 of the artist. (Photo: from the  
 catalogue *Tecnológico 2, espadas  
 de doble filo* [San José, Costa  
 Rica: TEOR/éTica, 2003])

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 wished to insist, ironically, paradoxically, on elements of the supposed female universe. Paintings by the Panamanian artist Haydée Victoria Suescum (resident in the United States, b. 1961) are done in bright colors that recall popular ads for electrical appliances. In Lezlie Milson's *Twins* of 2003 (fig. 18), household shoebrushes are deployed to resemble female genitalia. Such a work is close to Lucía 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, *Ballerina* of 1999–2000 (fig. 20), in which an electric drill is mounted on a pedestal, the bit replaced by a silver ballerina who turns when the viewer touches a pedal. It has been observed that "*Ballerina* poses a settling 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."<sup>22</sup> 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 Harald Szeemann for the 2001 Venice Biennale, it acquired a deeper resonance when it was installed in two later exhibitions.<sup>23</sup> 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 males, 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

Fig. 20 (opposite)  
**Priscilla Monge** (Costa Rica,  
 b. 1968). *Ballerina (Bailarina)*,  
 1999–2000. Electric drill, activating  
 pedal, and rotating silver ballerina.  
 13 3/4 x 5 1/2 x 2" (35 x 15 x 5 cm).  
 Private collection. (Photo: courtesy  
 of Galeria Luis Adelarado,  
 Valencia, Spain)



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 the 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 filmed from the back while she arranges and caresses her beautiful hair; at one point, a certain movement 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 poetical concerns. Through these objects, Belli conveys the burdens of the people, even as she exorcises her own childhood experience as a little girl suffering from congenital alopecia.

As I have written in other essays about Patricia Belli,<sup>24</sup> 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).

Fig. 21  
**Patricia Belli** (Nicaragua, b. 1964). *Hair (El pelo)*, 2003. Video installation, 3 min., edition of 5. Courtesy of the artist





Fig. 22

**Patricia Belli** (Nicaragua, b. 1964). *The Circus (El circo)*, 2000. Installation of handmade stuffed and decorated figures with pulleys and stainless-steel cables, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist. (Photo: courtesy of TEOR/ética, San José, Costa Rica)

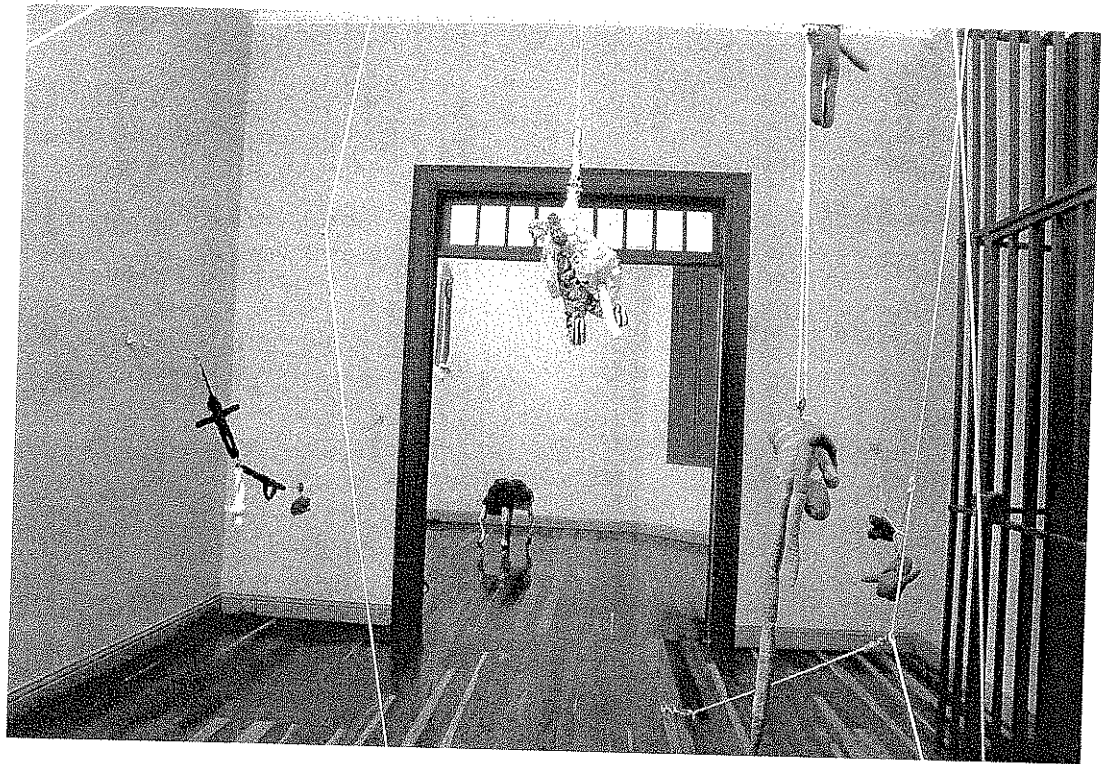


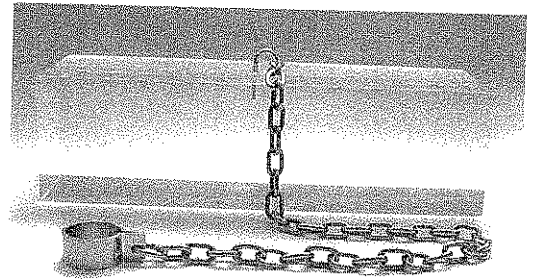
Fig. 23

**Nazareth Pacheco** (Brazil, b. 1961). *Untitled (Sem título)*, 2001. Acrylic and stainless steel, 7 1/8 x 27 3/8 x 8 3/4" (20 x 70 x 22 cm). Courtesy of the artist. (Photo: Romulo Flaldini)

### Themes of Violence

A lengthy discussion took place at a symposium organized in San José by TEOR/ética in 2000.<sup>28</sup> 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 works the 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, Rachelle Mozman (b. 1972), works around the idea of "ex-urbia," the suburban world as familiar in Panama City as in New

Fig. 26 (right)

**Regina José Galindo**

(Guatemala, b. 1974). *Throwing My Words into the Wind (Lo voy a gritar al viento)*, 1999. Photo documentation of performance at the archway of the National Post Office Building, Guatemala City, Guatemala. Courtesy of the artist

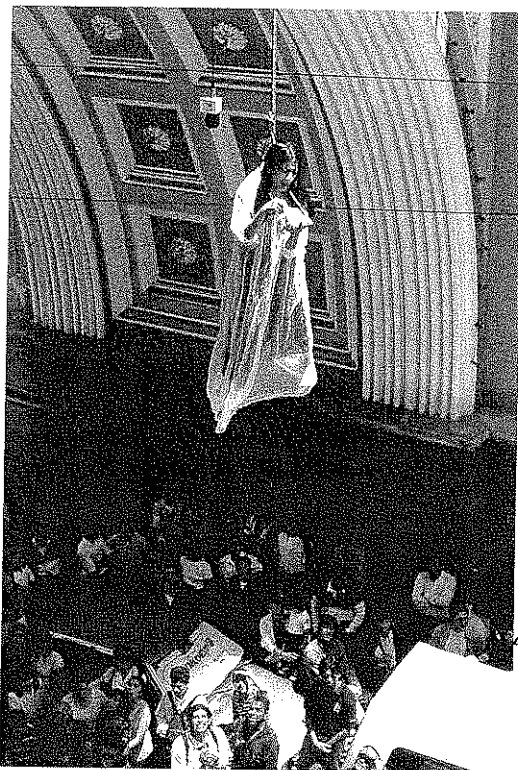


Fig. 27 (right)

**Regina José Galindo**

(Guatemala, b. 1974). *We Don't Lose Anything by Being Born (No perdamos nada con nacer)*, 2000. Photo documentation of a performance for the exhibition *Blue October*, Municipal Dump of Guatemala City, Guatemala. Courtesy of the artist. (Photo: courtesy of the artist and Bella de Vico, Guatemala)



Jersey; she portrays young girls posing in their homes, with their own clothes, preparing themselves for their expected female adulthood, and produces intriguing, disquieting photographs. Cecilia Paredes (Peru, b. 1950), who lived for twenty years in Costa Rica and is now based in Philadelphia, has also developed her work through personal expression of difference. Her work seeks order in the teeming complexity of the world around her. Obsessively organizing seashells, seeds, twigs, feathers, and other natural artifacts, Paredes

inscribes the corporeal poetics of woman onto objects from the landscape.

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 Leda Astorga's (Costa Rica, b. 1957) work of the nineties: resin sculptures of overweight women wearing ridiculous clothing, rollers in their hair, smoking, all the 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 routine: 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); turmoil followed, as people below scrambled to pick up the poems. Some time later, for the exhibition *Blue October*,<sup>26</sup> 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 2003, 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 days) 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.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Teresa Margolles 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 Margolles has also developed her work by using the judicial morgue in Mexico City as a studio (page 222). Amid that 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.<sup>28</sup> 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 Guatemala, 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 thematics. 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



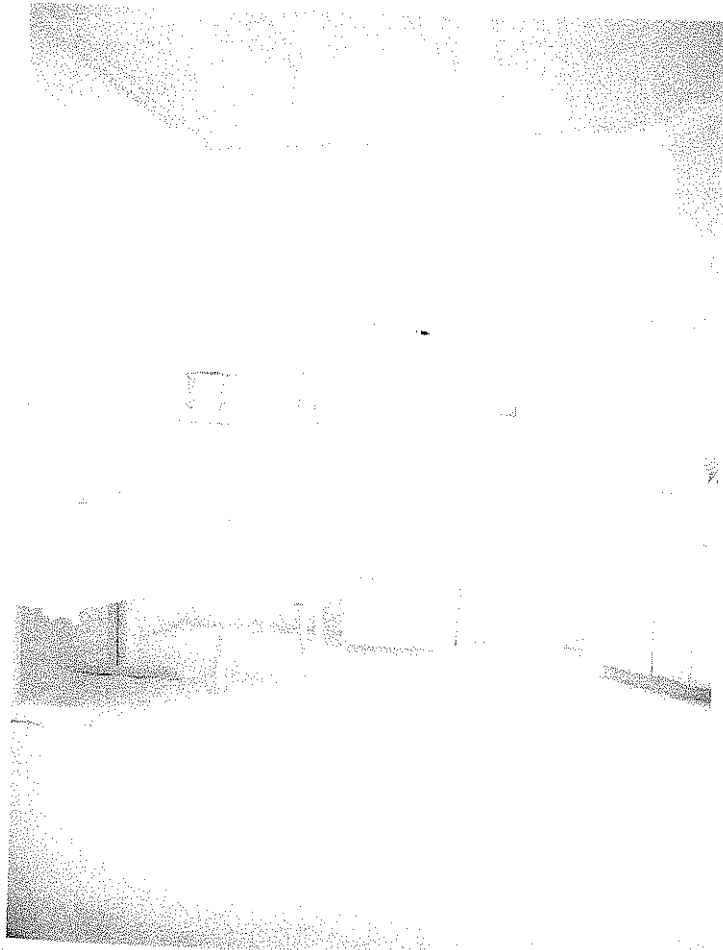


Fig. 28  
**Ronald Morán** (El Salvador,  
 b. 1972). *Home Sweet Home*  
 (*Hogar dulce hogar*), 2004.  
 Installation with cotton-covered  
 domestic objects, furniture, and  
 utensils, dimensions variable.  
 Courtesy of Martin Margulis, Miami.  
 (Photo: courtesy of the artist and  
 TEORÉTICA, San José, Costa Rica)

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.<sup>29</sup>

Installation work also seems to be a medium favored by women, perhaps pursuing Belli'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."<sup>30</sup>

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 Morán 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 Herrero, 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 Herrero 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, he photographs the grass that grows around the manhole covers of the sewage system, thus creating an abstract work on the sidewalk or street; or empty billboards awaiting new ads and looking like large white monochrome abstractions (fig. 30).

Why speak of these artists in the present context? Feminism does not concern only the work of women themselves, but also a generation of young men, affected by the influence of the 1990s, who are unafraid of allowing themselves a different kind of gaze. They deal with everyday matters, instead of searching for some messianic dimension, and thus let a hidden part of their psyche come forth. This is something rather different from gay discourse, which, in the face of social repression, has come into its own only in Costa Rica and Panama, and much less so in the other countries of the area. It represents, nonetheless, a deep change of attitude on the part of male artists—toward power, gender, and politics.

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, work, and produce in different cultures, in faraway parts of the world, even as they share certain similar circumstances. This has contributed to more understanding, to a growing sense of gender solidarity, not only regarding the position of women in society, but also, and in particular, regarding the ways in which women assume any kind of work they engage in: whether in art, politics, or any professional field, their gaze and their minds can interpret reality and read a situation through the glass of a more complex, less linear, stream of thought. In a way, women pick up the instruments that exist to produce what they do, but at the same time they accomplish a reformulation, and the permission to use “feminine” languages is used exactly to the contrary: to interrogate the very definition of the feminine.

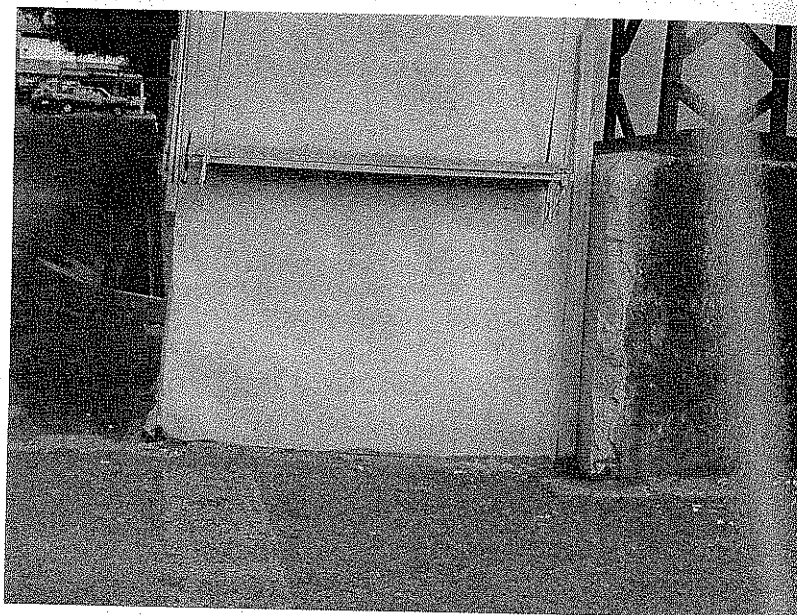
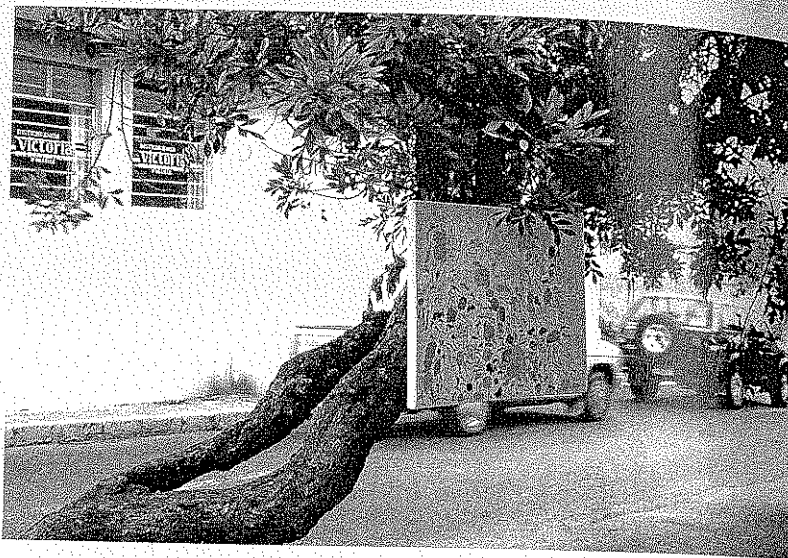


Fig. 29 (top)  
**Federico Herrero** (Costa Rica, b. 1978). *Painting on a Tree* (*Pintura en un árbol*), 2000. Oil on canvas, 19 ½ x 31 ½" (50 x 80 cm), San José, Costa Rica. Courtesy of the artist

Fig. 30 (above)  
**Federico Herrero** (Costa Rica, b. 1978). *Untitled*, from the *Found Painting* series, 2006. 35 mm slide photograph, San José, Costa Rica. Courtesy of the artist