

Visitations

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Josely Carvalho has long been visited by birds and turtles. In her art, she in turn visits the places they evoke, the places she has lived. Brazil and the United States the prime sites of her dual citizenship and the cultural duel that takes place in her art.

Much has been said about the Brazilian obsession with the body, the “somatic discourse” dissimilarly reflected in the arts of Hélio Oiticica, Lygia Clark, Regina Vater, Jonas dos Santos, and others. Carvalho’s is a geopolitical version, at once entirely personal and incorporating broader socio-mythical implications. Creating her own “country”, her own turf, is both an expression of nostalgia for childhood and a declaration of independence from the two nations to which she owes allegiance.

Carvalho has never recognized boundaries between mediums either. She was trained as an architect and printmaker, has painted, performed, made sculpture, installations, video and writes poetry. She has said she uses different voices as “a metaphor for the fragments that make up our lives” – a condition women seem to experience more than men do. Her view of history (her own and that of other women caught up in global events) is not linear but is taken from multiple vantage points: “I look for that fantastic truth in history and yet know that fantasies, memories, interpretations can blur the truth”.

Carvalho’s activism began in Mexico City in the early 1970s when she was a visiting professor at the School of Architecture at the National University. When she came to New York in 1976, she started The Silkscreen Project, where she made large banners or “walking murals”, for marches and demonstrations by community and political groups. For several years she has also been a member of the Heresies Collective, which publishes a feminist journal of art and politics. It is difficult, however, to see Carvalho’s more recent work as a “weapon”, as she once described it. Her transient photo-silkscreened images are poetically subversive, wounding with emotional pinpoints rather than sword thrusts.

She calls her series “chapters” from an on-going “Diary of Images”, insisting on the narrative character of all her work:

It’s like performing a perpetual ritual; each work is an offering. Lately I have begun to understand that each painting I make is a page in a long book that will only finish when I finish. The woman is the main protagonist in the long story. I use the female body to confront abuse, prejudice, attachments, achievements, power, and environmental destruction. She is everybody searching for a cultural identity... She is a subject, not an object. She has power. I couldn’t treat as an

object because I would be objectifying myself.

Carvalho has chosen photographic silkscreen as her basic medium in part because she can layer it so densely, and print it, as she often does, on filmy fabrics and other materials. It also enables her to “get closer to the world, yet maintain a screen through which I can view the various layers, differences, and meanings of reality”. The transparency of different planes of memory is evoked in the process. Her fragments are torn, burnt, glued, sewn, patched, reflecting tensions, personal conflicts, belonging and not belonging. “The obsession for categorizing and labeling in this culture”, she says, “stems perhaps from a fear of understanding subtleties, layers and differences”.

Maybe artists are always expatriated or internal exiled, but Carvalho in particular has explored the liminal experience of “in between”, which can be a kind of purgatory. In 1987, she collaborated with New York artist Sabra Moore on the Connections Project, a touring exhibition that brought together 150 women artists from Brazil and the U.S. As a result, rather than reconnecting to both countries, she found that she could emotionally remove herself to establish her own territory, to form the landscape of her personal origins. “I have co-opted my ‘difference’”, she says. By reintegrating her nationalities, she has in a sense come home, while recognizing that home will always be elusive. In a “Constitution” for this new realm, she creates a place where she can speak freely, where human and political rights flourish, borders and minds are open, and where the body may be liberated and represented without fear of censorship.

In 1987, Carvalho began the series “She is visited by birds and turtles” by burning paper that represented childhood memories, so that she could reconstruct history from the ashes: “Fire recreates, you know, as well as destroys”. The series is mostly red on red: “The fire evolved into ceremonial blood and became part of an investigation into the nature of sacrifice – both necessary and unnecessary”. The turtle, which lives on both land and water, became a metaphor for her hybrid statehood. In her 1988 Times Square Spectacolor Board piece Turtle news, the turtle stood for environmental issues and the burden of the Latin American debt.

In her latest series, the focus of this current show, the reds intensity has been bleached to paler hues, although bleeding woman as bleeding Gaia (Earth) remains a central figure, referring as well to cultural survival. Iridescent colors have been added. Delicacy, fragility, and vulnerability, always elements in Carvalho’s art, have risen to the surface. Painful subjects do not quite merge with their visual beauty, evoking a sense of restlessness and tension. “The body is the landscape of my soul/ A procession of memories/ to the origin of being female”. The central image of this series is that of a bird that was killed when it flew into the artist’s plate glass studio window, a sacrifice to the art that commemorates it through photographs and prints of its image. In The turtle returns to the sea after depositing its uncertain future on the honeyed

sands (1991), frantic birds appear to attack a screaming woman. *Mea culpa!*, screams the bird in flight (also a title of a 1984 work), as though the victim blames herself. Yet, there is always a reclamation. “In my work, birds die and fly at the same time... I grew up with a combination of Catholic and African spiritual concepts of sacrifice”.

In *She Hides her face while the birds devour her eyes of glass* (1991), five panels tell the story of two antagonistic female whales in captivity, one which bled to death before an audience; it is juxtaposed against an everywoman figure. In the three red steles of *My body is my country, at night red and roaring...* (1990), the female body is again a battleground. Carvalho often integrates her poetry into her visuals, as she does in this catalogue. Here the flanking texts, typeset on plexiglass, read: “at night roaring and red, the forest looks to be at war”, and “an orca in captivity is like an eagle in a parakeet cage”.

My body is my country is also a political response to the cultural and racial discrimination that Carvalho has experienced in the U.S. It has been exacerbated by the “one thousand and one horror nights in the name of Pax Americana” that began on January 16, 1991, the apotheosis of the nationalism Carvalho is trying to erase in her art. “I cry sunset tears/while he broadcasts the surgical operation”, she wrote in a recent poem. In this context, an installation in this exhibition – with Brazilian and American flags, folded on the floor, forming a passageway to a vessel of blood on a column, and behind, the light of an open window leading to hope and escape – may be seen as another painful journey through warring fanaticisms. A second installation, a coffin/light box on the sand with photographic images including some of the Baghdad, refers directly to the war in the Middle East.

A Box of ancestors (1990) asks the question “Does culture have color?” (the title also of her brief essay published in *M/E/A/N/I/N/G*, in May 1990). Resisting restrictive “cultural dependency”, she points out that most Latin Americans prefer to classify themselves by country or origin rather than as “Hispanic”, which blurs their historical identity. Carvalho as a white Latina has been classified as a “woman of color”. “Do I have to color myself to be with my sisters?”, she asks. “If I keep a colorless memory of my ancestors, do I become ‘an other’ within the ‘other’? Do I have options?”

She does, of course, and in her work she offers them to other women, other artists, who find themselves between cultures. In fact this place between places is where an increasing number of us live, and perhaps it will become a place where nationalism and bigotry can’t breathe the air.