

Trousseau for a Conqueror

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I will venture a hypothetical construction by which it is possible to break the installation "Ajuar para un conquistador" down into two distinct consecutive moments.

In a first moment, we explore visually the delicate construction of the woven wool wrappings in the shape of animal life, more specifically of birds from a particular geographical setting: the vast and largely deserted plains of Patagonia. Our gaze pauses at the visible volume of the bodies, their warm concavity and takes in the fact that they are receptacles to be inhabited by something that is not here, by something missing. Nonetheless, we continue to stare, enraptured in the material consistency of the bodies, in their pure perceptible evidence. It is this very empirical enrapture that prevents us from heeding the requirements of what is lacking and keeps us at a distance from the meanings that might be born from the absence of living bodies. Our gaze is thus held by the immediately visible: in the soft folds of a red hood that emerges from small black wings, in the almost dramatic dismemberment of the body of the rhea and in the sensual joining of the parts of a flamingo. It would seem that, in their mere sculptural presence, the very volume of these wool "dresses" attempts to reproduce an appearance of animal life and, hence, is not satisfied with being a distant allusion or a vague shadow. On the contrary, the life that this almost tactile vision strives to experiment is neither an abstraction nor an idealized representation of nature. What it seems to want to assimilate as content is what philosophy once called combatant life (*kämpfenden Lebens*)⁽¹⁾. This still Romantic term attempted to grasp the movement –devoid of concept– of animal figures hurled into one another, separated by mutual hostility and joined by reciprocal tearing. Hence, the essential determination of animal life could only be death, and in this context death must be understood as the movement of a life torn between annihilation and re-emergence. That is where animal figures are individualized, confront and destroy one another, and are then individualized once again in the endless continuity of the vital flux.

Aren't the folds, textures and colors of woven wool and its voluminous corporeality and constant dismembering responses to that gaze frozen in the sensible evidence of what it sees, permanently placed within the limits of the visible? And is this mode of seeing not determined above all else to experiment the woven objects as receptacles that, in a certain way, house the breath of animal life?

If this is the case, the nature that opens up before the eyes of the artist could never be the distant and idyllic landscape of a sort of Switzerland in the midst of the desert of Patagonia. On the contrary, each one of these objects, one before the other, must grasp onto the combatant life. Indeed, that necessity is precisely what makes it impossible to visualize them as mere abstractions or conceptual sketches of absent bodies.

B) But vision is not fully satisfied or exhausted by this exploration of the object's materiality. Nor can what is displayed to the eyes be reduced to the sensible referent of a specific meaning. In other words, vision is not solely aesthetic. Contemporary hermeneutics has thoroughly analyzed this problem, and its crucial statements revolve around the modalities of vision and the limits of the visible. "There is no doubt that seeing as an articulated reading of that which is there (...) is also led by its anticipations to read in what is absolutely not there"⁽²⁾. Seeing, according to a hermeneutic axiom, always entails harboring meaning such that the meaning harbored exceeds the limits of sensible materiality to become an element that guides and anticipates the process of visualization.

This is the second moment of this hypothetical construction, where the visualization of Mónica Giron's work alters the modality of the visible through sensible perception and shifts to another dimension the mode of being of the work as a whole.⁽³⁾

The hanging wool bodies no longer offer vision only a visual fullness that attempts to hold onto the halo of absent living bodies; now this very absence is what comes to the forefront.

Something threatening, something disturbing emerges from the empty hood, from the lifeless members, from the clawless gloves. The sensuality of these objects gives way to a mute absence and the bodies are displayed as wrappings that house emptiness. The gaze that once moved amongst visible volumes suddenly falters before a bottomless abyss; all the old certainties dissolve such that all there is between them and the growing surrounding darkness is a definitive splitting. That darkness that is the fate of all living bodies. And this is when what we see is revealed to be incapable of returning our gaze because what does not see –that dreadful invisibility– can recognize only the word death as its name.

Like a sign of silent graves, the word death is inscribed on bodies once soft and warm. But this is another death; it is not the process marked by birth and perishing in which the sensible gaze is recognized, but rather a slow and relentless death, the death that from beyond threatens with absolute extinction. It is the death that culminates in nothingness. Hence, the woven figures turn into graves, receptacles for a nature doomed and with no hope of redemption.

The death of the species is the threat cast like a vast shadow over these wool bodies, and contact with it turns them into fanciful clothing, blurred wrappings, blind byproducts of the threat that they still strive to represent.

C) It is only possible to experience the double dimension of Mónica Giron's installation by assuming the split in vision. She brings forth between the extremes of an animal nature both displayed and threatened, between sensual richness and despairing absence. But the key question is: What does the work bring forth through this constitutive split? That question could be formulated differently through a necessary detour: What is it that remains in the midst of threatened life? The answer is the name. The names of those singularities that now barely belong to those who receive them or recall those who imposed them. Names now almost exotic and riddled with unfitting traits and referential misunderstandings. Those names inhabit the desert

that opens up to the south of the city and constitutes the historical and geographical horizon explored by the artist. A desert at once our own and exotic, foreign and present, like those wool animal figures of bodies that, in its midst, are ceasing to exist. The desert is also a spatial figure, a figure of place, of pure place.⁽⁴⁾ And that means that this is a place no longer objective and earthly –indeed it barely has a geography– but that blurs any possible temporal data.

The bodies of woven wool bring forth the desert because the split between wrapping and content suggests a relationship increasingly deterritorialized, a relationship that also names the endless desertization of our language.

Mónica Giron's objects do not attempt to recover a lost fullness or condemn those responsible for the threat of extinction. All they want to do is speak of themselves, of our threatened language. That is why she prepares wool receptacles as once the trousseau, the wrapping of the body duly promised to the husband, was prepared. The trousseau is what belongs to the bride both externally and intimately. The foreign languages both distant and present, her own and others' are also Giron's mother tongues, and this is decisive here. Trousseau, the word is the same in English and French. Trousseau is bridal apparel and furniture. The accessories, the outer furnishings that belongs or will belong to the future married couple. But more precisely the word refers to the white under garments, the bride's most intimate promise. Trousseau also refers to the act of gathering a bunch of flowers, *trousser*, folding the members of a body into its trunk to separate the skin from the meat. Gather, arrange, collect what the woman brings to the marriage. Displaying the external possessions as a means of announcing the most intimate dispossession.

The woven clothing of bodies in extinction constitutes a trousseau, an obligatory and irreversible offering to a threatening shadow. The threat is indicated with the strident resonance of the word conqueror, he who divests.

But, regardless of its promising and anticipatory nature, Mónica Giron's trousseau is also what is left afterwards: mere remain, empty wrapping. If, on the one hand, trousseau is anticipation, a sort of prefiguring and even incitement, it is also a testament to divestiture, a deepening of the desert.

"Trousseau for a Conqueror" maintains an unresolved tension between the hidden promise of the woven clothing's warm sensuality and the endless sadness of dispossessed wrappings as remains of an unfathomable looting.

Lucas Fragasso
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Translation from Spanish by Jane Brodie 2015.

Notes:

(1) The phrase is taken from Hegel and appears in the context of a discussion of the religion of animals at the beginning of the *Religion* chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

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(2) Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Warheit un Methode*, Tübingen, 1986, p.96.

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(3) On the problem of split vision, see: George Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde*, Paris, 1992.

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(4) Jacques Derrida, *Sauf le nom*, Paris, 1993.
