

# Carlos Basualdo for Catalogue

## “Runt Om Oss, Inom Oss”

– “Around Us, Inside Us” – Borås Konstmuseum  
Borås – Sweden – year 1997

**Curated by Carlos Capelán and Elisabet Haglund  
Monica Giron, El largo del amo**

### Incision as symbol of power

El Largo del Amo, (The Owner's Length) Monica Giron's latest work, is an installation that on the surface appears to be three independently executed works, each firmly rooted in the tradition of its genre: painting, water colour or sculpture. On one wall is a series of 15 rectangular water colours with figures of animals mounted on a plate –also rectangular– along with a painting divided into 15 sections of differing colours, from pale pink to milky white to velvet. Finally there is a collection of oblong, straight-edged plastic sculptures strewn every which way on the floor.

But if you look a little closer, you realize that the three works form a whole and you begin to understand why. The two upper rows of water colours depict domesticated animals with parts of their bodies sliced off. An ox, a pig, a sheep, a chicken and a duck all are dissected by a number of red and blue ovals, changing their appearances dramatically. In the bottom row of watercolours, the same animals lie on wooden plates about to be metamorphosed into fodder. Here the incisions coincide with the yellow fields they are standing on. The watercolours are done with great scrupulousness; the precise brush strokes and the clean surfaces convey a pedantic, almost Cezanne-like impression, contrasting sharply with the mute violence of the incisions and the disharmony between the saturated colours and what they represent. What is remarkable is that the indefinite rectangular fields –which may be viewed as a schematization of a plot of land– on which the animals stand in the upper rows of watercolours are clearly cutting boards in the bottom row, although

no real change has occurred. If you look hard enough, you notice that the apparently random brush strokes tend to become stringent in the carved-out fields. The uncertainty arising from the conflict between art and poetry on the one hand and realism and concretion on the other is what gives this part of the work its fearful character.

The other group in the installation is an oversized rectangular painting, each of whose fields has a counterpart in the watercolour montage. At first this second group appears to be an abstract geometrical composition: coloured oval fields against contrasting backgrounds. But a second glance discloses that the ovals correspond to incisions in the watercolour sequence. Thus what you are seeing is an interpretation of the same incisions taken from their place of execution, i.e. the animals, the obedient victims of the slaughter. The “abstract painting” attempts to conceal the fact that represents a series of incisions and thus neutralizes their dramatic significance almost entirely. Minus associations with corporeal bodies, the incisions are pure and simple shape hovering above the flat and monochrome rectangles. Isolated forms on what appears to be an endless, flat surface chiefly defined by its proximity to other similar surfaces.

The installation's third group consists of a number of small plaster sculptures placed on the floor in no visible order. The shapes and placement of the sculptures seem to indicate that their purpose is to disturb the uniformity of space, thus offering the viewer images of order and chaos. But once more appearances are deceiving. The sculptures are no more than 3-dimensional representations of the incisions in the watercolor series. They correspond to the part of the animals that have been sliced off and that are represented by the oval fields in the second group. It is clear that the art-

ist's purpose is to bring out the conventional nature of all representation. One clue is the colours she has chosen for the incisions: red, yellow and blue, which are basic to the repertoire of modern painting (and by the way, who's afraid of them?), and it might be appropriate to point out here that all contemporary art is based on mistrust of art's legibility. Whereas the classical tradition regards meaning as self-evident, contemporary art proceeds from the ambiguous nature of representation –i.e. it brings the work and its creator both closer to each other and further apart– and places the emphasis on the representation instead of the work. El Largo del Amo, a work in which classical representation, abstract painting and modern sculpture confront each other, aims to make visible the random laws behind all representation. But what makes it possible to neutralize the capacity of language – or each of the languages to which these systems refer –to seduce is the affirmation that the common representation repeated in the three groups manifests that which absolutely may not be manifested, i.e. the incision.

Oswaldo Lamborghini described Argentinian literature as a “programmed system of incisions.” What he was trying to point out was the close correlation between art and violence that characterizes his country. Lamborghini's own prose is evidence of his thesis. While being proper and elegant, it is also bombastic, i.e. it combines stringency with a strong propensity for jarring events and systematic violence. Lamborghini was a brilliant and many-sided author who wrote poetry, narratives and short stories. Born in 1940, he died in Barcelona at the age of 45. He belonged to a generation of Argentinian writers who, in their varying and often contradictory ways, followed in the footsteps of Jorge Luis Borges. Despite the enormous differences between Lamborghini and Borges, they had something essential in common: verbal precision allied with the most extreme conceivable violence. In Lamborghini's case, violence is both a theme and a means of expression. His language is consonant with the violence of his drama. Borges, on the other hand, does not insert violence into his language, but rather creates it by means of a delayed reaction which carries ideological undertones. Borges calls into question the ability of thought to express the objectivity of what we call reality. In his world only concepts exist, an endless stream of reflections and sensory illusions, beyond which is the void. Thought totters on the edge of a precipice, hovering in empty space, deprived of all concretion.

Perhaps it is no coincidence that both authors come from Argentina, a society that inevitably reflects the tendencies that they emphasize in their works, i.e. violence as a permanent aspect of human relations, mistrust of institutions (what I mean here is a permanent loss of faith in leaders and the political system) and the fictionalization, or distortion, of existence itself. The military dictatorship that decimated the intellectual population in 1976 and 1983 fortified these tendencies. (There is no better or more horrible example of this than *los desaparecidos* –the vanished ones– the name given to the political prisoners so barbarically executed by the dictatorship. During these years, to vanish meant to find oneself outside of reality, to cease existing, to be relocated to a cruel unreality where life itself had stopped and become subject to the whims of prison guards and torturers). If it were possible to find a correlation between social conditions and intellectual production, it would be tempting to posit the fundamental insecurity and studied violence endemic to Argentina as the key to the works of both Borges and Lamborghini, although the dynamic is very different in the two cases.

Thus it is not surprising that the same elements can be found in Giron's latest work. These tendencies are recognizable, one after the other: distrust of systems and their rhetoric, the discrete repetition of the themes of violence and cruelty. The paradox is all too obvious: the very credibility of the system of representation is endangered as soon as violence is to be depicted. Her dilemma is comparable to the “programmed system of incisions” Lamborghini spoke of, and with the cut, the stab, that is almost a guiding principle for Borges, the symbol of power.

The Spanish word *corte* means cut, incision, segment, wound. But it is also the word for the various parts of a cow that are butchered in the slaughterhouse. *Corte* reflects both the action and the effect of the action. Thus it is a word that is both within and outside of verbal bounds: it refers to an object that falls away – both from the body and, as we shall soon see, from reality itself– as a result of a particular act, but it also specifies the action that is about to be performed. The word both depicts and flees depiction: it comes into existence through the act itself. It is a borderline word, a snip in the verbal web. Nevertheless, there are few words that have such an ability to accomplish what they represent, to create the object they refer to. It is a

word that blocks the very flow of language. It can mean a piece of meat, but it is also the edge of a knife, a glimmering knife blade, the elegant gesture of cutting, but also pain.

The title *El Largo de/ Amo* alludes to power's total dimensionality, its breadth. It is a dimensionality that goes beyond the problem of representation and finds its point of departure in pain, the very core of emotional life, something that we constantly experience a need to shield ourselves from. El *amo* is the ruler, the master, the one who determines how and where the incision will be made. He hands out the punishments and rewards, he is pain's faithful steward. He rules over his cattle, everything is his. The title of Giron's work implies nothing about the ruler himself, and the extent of his power is suggested only indirectly. Perhaps it is the incommensurability of his power that the work seeks to demonstrate. The sign of this power is the incision, and the measure of its enormity, its infiniteness, is pain.

Giron's watercolours can be traced to traditional 19th century Argentinian painting, her abstract painting to the playfully geometrical art of the Eighties, and her

sculpture to American post-minimalism. Through the use of these traditions, the artist seeks to demonstrate the conventionality of her language. The installation camouflages by means of rhetoric, the plethora of references, and the way~ in which the incisions are represented in each of the groups. But, as we indicated earlier, the incision can only be seen through the traces they leave, the painful heritage of their horrible deeds. The emblem of the incision is pain, and pain is essentially a verb, a verb in present tense, a condition. And finally, the incisions repeated in each of the three groups may be compared to a timpani: you can only sense its presence, but it is audible nonetheless, inexorably, in each of the pictures.

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