

WAX MUSEUM

On Mónica Giron's Neocriollo

"A dread of ancient metamorphoses"

(Leopoldo Marechal, *Adán Buenosayres*)

Cire perdue

In the beginning was the Word (Saint John). But in the origin was and will be the Matter. Its *thing* (Heidegger), its *aura* (Benjamin). The vast spiritual resonance of the coarsest materiality. The mud, the earth. And afterwards, everything that human action generates from them. The work of art as well, inseparable from its matteric substance, its inevitable foreground, its first and primal presence.

Like beeswax, the aureate translucent wax that traps and condenses the intimate historical pulsion absorbed into the sequence of pieces articulated by Mónica Giron under the disturbing name of *Neocriollo* [*Neo-Creole*]. A substance whose utmost malleability provided Descartes with the deceptive example for the delegitimization of sensorial knowledge when confronted by the hierarchical imperatives of understanding—deductive reasoning mystified as a superior tool in the intellection of essences.

Giron's handiwork exercises, without necessarily intending it, a perverse twist on that sophistry. A manipulation of wax that acts as an optical and tactile vindication of the reflexive—also spiritual—powers of the sensual, the sensorial, the perceptual. The place of the senses in sense itself. Social sense as well: the free associations with honey engage these works in the complex oscillation between culture and nature that element and others perform within Levi-Strauss's culinary triangle. The raw, the cooked, the rotten. And fermentation or refinement as reversible vectors of cooking. Inverted transformations, regressions.

Giron translates these tensions to the more factual aspects of her encaustic facture, priming through heat a slow accumulation of waxes on gauzes steeped in *retama* oils and paraffine. (The three realms: animal, vegetable, mineral). Remarkable for the empathetic effect thus achieved is the fragility, the precariousness of these pieces, apparently ready to break or disintegrate, even melt. All as a result of that crucial instance in which the artificer subverts her initial proposal of works cast in bronze through the lost-wax technique (the *cire perdue*) to instead make of that very wax the work of art.

Of that very *loss*. A decision whose matteric radicality is exalted by the simultaneous artistic recovery of the raw clay used to shape the studies and the molds. Clay and wax are here the complementary opposites of a presence that wants to be organic and primordial. Much in the same way as, in other times, Giron used soils and stones for her crude telluric gloves (1995). Or lambswool in her softly knitted apparel for birds in risk of extinction (1993). A delicately personal weaving of powerful allegories for that Patagonia to which her grandparents emigrated from Switzerland.

A Patagonia that exists no more—and its official mythologization is no longer functional. That "conquest of the desert", in fact inhabited by originary peoples. The foundational invention of a void. Also in the keenest ecological sense. The hollowing of the earth, the thinning of its biota, the depredation. Part and expression of that *darkening of the world* amongst whose decisive episodes Heidegger also locates the flight of the gods.

The disappearance of the sacred, the annihilation of the earthly. The erasure of history. From that rarefied air emanates the subtle matter that, before and now, Giron breathes from behind the impressive formality in works whose essential presence is absence. With an imperceptible and dramatic difference: what at times

would seem to take shape in the present pieces is the loss even of that identity made up of losses.

Give Me Shelter and Guide Me

Which nevertheless regenerates itself. Like the menstrual stain, that other loss in which the trace of the aborted is at the same time the sign of a fertility renewed. As in the obsessive reiteration of the figure of the baby or the newborn, profiling his/her impending identity from the entangled graphic proliferation of countless drawings with which Giron over the last ten years has broached the most direct plastic expression.

A regressive rather than a reproductive vocation. A withdrawal: personal self-engrossments from which new practices gradually emerge, integrating creative processes into multiple therapies and introspections.

Decisive for this apprenticeship of cleansing was the installation created by the artist in 1999, under the loaded title of *Obrador* [Maker]. Minimal but strategic interventions in space served there as the scene for the liberation of the voice and the word by means of sound and visual effects with successive exercises of vocal alternations.

Vocal-buccal: the linguistic difference thus announced is also corporeal. And psychosomatic: even in the ascetic pulchritude of its staging, the phonetic and abstract speech then recovered contrasts with the concreteness of the deaf-mute's scream which a year before initiated Giron into her waxy immersions. A subtle working where the grotesque acquires a literal, primal sense, as it exhibits the grotto of its and her own body, animalized and recumbent: a *huemul*, the solitary and almost extinct Patagonian deer, is exhibited here crouching into itself, proffering the disturbing cavity of its trunk, blistered with pustules. As in a fetal allergy. And at the same time like a chrysalis, a cocoon above whose organic presence four watercolors describe the empty Patagonian refuges of different temporary shelters used by the explorer Perito Moreno and by native groups such as the Alacaluf and the Tehuelche—including something that could well be a floating igloo melting into the earth. Amongst them all, a crucial and poignant fifth piece interprets the artist's own red sleeping bag —branded "Cacique" [native chieftain].

The personal moaning becomes entangled with a bitter irony about history. And both with the Heideggerian illusion: art offers cure and care, it provides a home on earth. *Give Me Shelter and Guide Me*, prays the pious title of this precise work.

Observation of Hysteria

This precious work, whose exact revelation took place at the 2006 exhibition in vindication of memory articulated to commemorate and condemn the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the genocidal dictatorship and its systematic policies of disappearance and voidance. Behind that intersection of codes there was implicit a symbiosis of registers. As in the two impressive different groups of decapitated, deformed, impaled heads—some of them exhibiting bloody traces in friction with the alchemical connotations of bronze, of silver, of gold.

From a distance, those groups seem to refer to the iconography of horror during the grand violence experienced in Argentina during the nineteenth century, particularly the crimes attributed to the Mazorca, the rabble used for Juan Manuel de Rosas's political persecutions. Created between 2003 and 2006, those so expressive bundles also condense the more analytical processes of the artist's subjective process. "Observation of hysteria" is the motto inscribed in one of the prints that accompanies the first sequence, explicitly titled *Cabezas reducidas* [Shrunken Heads] and displayed as though in an incubator. Or in an archaeological showcase: a museographical parody for pieces that are contemplated in their self-contemplation, explained through categories ("Masoquismo autocompasión" [Masochism self-compassion], "Fusión compensatoria" [Compensatory fusion]) which in turn parody a certain Freudian obsession. One incisive detail is that the engravings reproduce not the final neat objects of polished wax, but their initial modeling in raw clay, whose greater dramatism is contrasted—and stressed—by the alphabetical and numerical segmentation of the labels.

Somewhere in between the arbitrary and the maniac, that (dis)articulation of the texts refers to the (dis)figuring of trephined skulls and faces that, dauntless, duplicate organs or erupt skins. Auto-plastic effects that are exacerbated in a second series—*Ósmosis* [Osmo-

sis]—where sexual alterity and psychic flows between the ego and the id are embodied in monstrously lyrical Siamese projections. The artistic materialization of *the difficulty of the body, the difficulty embedded in it*, to say it in the artist's own words.

Concepts and shapes that become inevitably associated with the psychoanalytic metaphor of hysteria as *a word trapped in a body*. The liberation of that word is perhaps the supreme effort of the works now exhibited. An even matteric effort.

Neocriollo

Matteric even. Starting with its technique and its title, this exhibition is conceived by Giron as an eccentric, marginal anachronism. We could almost say a wax museum. A parallel chant to *Adán Buenosayres* (1948)—Leopoldo Marechal's agonal and genesical novel, with his grotesque homage to the mythical lucubrations elaborated by Xul Solar and the Martinfierrista generation of rupture and foundation for Argentine modernity. But while the writer relishes in sketching future hybrid identities, fabulous frankensteins of techno-pampa graftings, the artist proposes a ventral introspection, a regression towards the ancestral and the Real, in the Lacanian sense of the word. Not the strictly social, but the primordial in its more organic phantasms. The viscous and the visceral as the essence of what is left out of the Symbolic. And mediating between both, the specular fixation of the Imaginary, coalescing with the panic-fear of castration in the game of self-absorbed decapitations.

The culmination of these passages is a matricial biopoetics whose most extreme formalization could well be that recent *Laguna [Lagoon]* (2007), which offers itself suspended like a protozoan meteorite with hanging udders and obscene protuberances. The breeding ground for the archaic and the yet to come, whose formless forms struggle to sprout and emerge from the wax that confounds and configures them at the same time.

The multipara womb of a new and protean body. An organic emergence that in another recent piece (2003-2007) acquires monumental dimensions and an almost epical name: *Neocriollo*, like the "laboratory monster" in which Marechal personifies the linguistic artifices conceived by Xul as a utopian solution to the Babelic

tensions in the Río de la Plata. The Adamic language of a future city that Giron embodies in the collective volume of a semi-human cluster: unfinished creatures whose individualized outline of children and adults fails to distinguish or separate them from the amorphous mass that coalesces and constitutes them as an assembled entity. A perhaps heroic mass, whose also sinister aspect is exasperated by the disturbing display of pupils that act as its keen visive *punctum*. The literal and unsettling configuration of that rare aura postulated by Benjamin in the gaze the observed object returns to the viewer—and to his/her gaze thus disrupted.

The destabilizing element in that insinuation becomes even more intense in *Laguna*, where it is however attenuated by the circular marks that render a cultural and cosmic sense to the voluptuous crevices and folds in this entirely erogenous body. Almost anatomical incisions, which Giron associates to those other spiraled ones of the Neolithic stones that mark the threshold and the culmination of the underground passage of Newgrange, in Ireland. A space with uterine rather than funerary suggestions. Not a burial place but a womb, pierced during the solstice by a fleeting sunbeam that impregnates with light the esoteric inscriptions.

The fecundation, the fecundity of the *prima materia*, could well be the other and alchemical sense of these fascinating, revulsive pieces. Starting with the accumulation of spherical matter that associates the ceramic model of *Neocriollo* to a prehistoric steatopygic Venus. And culminating in the different life that emerges from the gelatinous mass. Like the iridescent sperm swimming in the milky turbidness of semen, like the ovular phosphorescence floating in the embryonic flow. Metaphors that now acquire a new density in the face of the final dissolution of our corporeal frontiers by the advances of genetic engineering.

This nascent humanity is also the species contemplating its probable extinction, its inevitable but uncertain technomutation, its unfathomable prospects. The darkening of the world. And the posthumous illuminations of the aura.

Civilization and Barbarism (Digression and Coda)

Posthumous. What is ultimately disconcerting, and also paradoxically contemporary in these works, is

their anachronistic anxiety over identifications and references that already are experiencing their definitive extinction. The creole, the regional, the national even. An epochal twilight that nevertheless confers a visceral currency and presentness to primordial questions. And to archaic techniques.

“In the origin” Heidegger said, “lies the most horrifying, and the power of most extreme violence”. In contrast to what happens in Peru or Mexico, the primal scene of certain Argentines is built not out of the muted clamor of the Conquest or in the glorified struggles for Independence, but in the 19th century civil wars, prolonged until the extermination of the indigenous peoples. The ghosts of those fratricides accompany writers such as Marechal—obviously in his “traditional” pampa tragedies (*Antígona Vélez*), but also in the “modern” katabasis of *Adán Buenosayres*.

The descent into the underworld. It is suggestive that, among the references for her *Neocriollo*, Giron alludes in a privileged manner to Rodin’s *Gates of Hell*. Above all because of her other incisive links, though perhaps unconscious, to a closer derivative of that sculptural group: the monument for Buenos Aires that, at the end of the 19th century, the French sculptor dedicated to Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, the paradigmatic enemy of Rosas.

Of interest here is not so much the effigy in itself as the structure—factual and ideological—that upholds it. Its *art-political* condition, inscribed even in the site-specificity that erects it on the location of the disappeared Caserón de Palermo, built by the caudillo for his residence. And turning Sarmiento’s back on the “aroma del perdón”, the *acacia aroma* of forgiveness, the legendary tree under whose humidity and shades Manueleta Rosas, it is said, softened the deadly wraths of her terrible father.

The partisan intention of the placement chosen for that monument is projected in the iconographic program of the work, whose fullest meaning is finally cyphered not in the darkened bronzes of the main figure but in the luminous complementary reliefs of its marmoreal base. At one end, Phoebus emerges heraldic over the national coat of arms, amply inflated to reverberate the radiance of dawn. On the opposite side, another sun—Apollo—defeats Python, the monster of ignorance and darkness. The mythical sublimation of the supposed

dichotomies between “civilization and barbarism”, Sarmiento’s emblematic maxim.

The intentionality of that representation was surely accorded with Rodin by Miguel Cané—a liberal Argentinian writer and politician who accompanied closely the making of this work and had an important role in the determination of its site (“Palermo is a monument to barbarism and to the tyranny of the tyrant”, he proclaimed with deliberate redundancy during the unveiling of the statue).(1) But that literary meaning also becomes visual as it takes the form of a liberation of the corporeal line struggling to shape itself by emerging from the mass that traps it and keeps it indistinct (“let [...] our Apollo being to come out of its marble cloud”, Cané wrote Rodin in 1896).(2)

The Olympian figurative combat with the ctonic serpent thus materializes in the mortal matteric battle with the telluric magnetism of brute form. Also in symbolic terms: Python is the daughter of Gaia, the Greek Mother Earth. And for the gesture and outline of Apollo, Rodin took from his *Gates of Hell* the representation of Mercury, the psychopompic god that conducted the souls of the dead Romans to the underworld—one of the details most closely related to the shapes and forms of the *Neocriollo*.

But this digression might seem esoteric in view of the apparent extinction of everything, almost everything that has thus been codified. When, in 1975, Enio Iommi and Ignacio Pirovano propose the sculptural translation of Sarmiento’s monument into modern geometric lines of force, their vectorial gaze penetrates and cuts out only the dynamic semblance of the hero, his progressive sense of history. Giron, on the other hand, works the mythical sediment of its accessory images. And their larval reemergence as latency, as psychic matter, viscous and putrid and germinal.

The artistic implosion of the Real as an unconscious effect of the political hypertrophy of the Symbolic, its explosive oversymbolization. Sometimes literally: Rosas’s residence was dynamited—not demolished—in 1899, the same February 3 on which decades earlier he had been defeated at the battle of Caseros. And a year later, for the national anniversary at the turn of the century, Sarmiento’s monument was erected on what had been the private sleeping chamber of the so-called Restaurador.

History of art, hysteria of the world. There is no document of civilization that is not at the same time a document of barbarism, Benjamin reminds us. And Giron somatizes in the unctuous craving body of her wax museum.

(THE END)

Gustavo Buntinx, 2007

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Notes

(1) *El País*. Buenos Aires: 26 May 1900. Cit. in: María Teresa Constantin. "El Sarmiento de Rodin". In: AA.VV. *Rodin en Buenos Aires*. Buenos Aires: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes and Fundación Antorchas, 2001. p. 70.

(2) *Ibid.* p. 6
