

Becoming Body

0. In a text from 2002, Mónica Giron spoke of a discovery that allowed her to see more than twenty years of work from a new perspective. She says: “The Patagonic images¹ made it possible for me to stage a very clear sensation of the empty body. I drew an analogy between my body and the body of Patagonia. Now I understand that, from 1997 on, my work has been an attempt to discover how to fill the body. A full, living body needn’t speak of its origins or its past; all it needs to do is renew itself, even though there is always an allusion to a certain context.” This passage suggests three important questions: 1) Giron’s work partakes of an autobiographical mode, 2) the body is its constituent image, 3) that image goes (progressively?) from the empty to the full. On this basis, it seems possible to reconstruct the image of the artist that Giron is formulating. Let’s see.

1. Giron’s work never serves as a platform from which the artist stages the self. She never relates episodes from her life or uses images of her person, not even to develop a theatrical character or idea. While the references to the landscape of Giron’s childhood and adolescence are explicit in the “Patagonic images,” what matters in those images is the referent and the modality of the statement rather than the subject who is making it. The autobiographical component of the work, then, must be sought elsewhere. But where?

First, the “analogy between my body and the body of Patagonia” leads us to think that something of the artist’s body is rendered landscape, and something of the landscape rendered artist’s body. And second—and this point is both more decisive than, and wholly bound to, the first—in the fact that the work is the space in which to enact “a self-analysis,” that is, that through the work it is possible to investigate the making of the subject (which depends on the body being stirred). This practice, though, is not limited to the Patagonic period of Giron’s production. Indeed, it could be said that it is clearer in her later work, a period that Giron dates as starting in 1997.

2. Most of Giron’s art works though a problem by elaborating a certain bodily image. Sometimes this entails giving shape to a human body, sometimes to an animal or vegetable body, and sometimes to a mineral body (ranga, architectural). This is evident early on, in two series of drawings from 1981 and 1986 respectively. The earlier one depicts a female figure, nude or partly nude, whose body incarnates, indeed is afflicted by, a certain moral defect. Despite the unvarying allegorical organization—each of these figures represents a concept that the title makes explicit: *Indifférence*, *Calomnie*, etc.—indeed despite the drawings’ unvarying and somewhat academic style (Giron made the first series while studying at an art school in Switzerland)—the figure is marked by a relatively controlled chaotic force, which is what defines its shape. The affective instability is manifest as erratic gesture, well captured by the nervous line. And hence, despite the underlying allegorical scheme, the figure exudes the density of the sensation that has seized this body.

The other series—*Consenso* [Consensus], *Transgresión* [Transgression], etc.—“allegorizes” the vital tension of a body as it meets with another, whether to form an alliance or to engage in a confrontation. In this series, the line almost disappears, and color, which in the first series of drawings is used to semantically emphasize certain figures (the river of blood, for instance) is, in some of these drawings, independent of the figure; color here is used to emphasize, from outside the body, that body’s rhythm, establishing a correlate between the immateriality of inner sensation and the dynamic materiality of the body. In both series, the allegorical resource delimits the field of expression of the singular body, but the relationship between the order of the corporeal and the order of allegorical is tense.

These suffering or desiring bodies reveal that, from the beginning, ethics is fundamental to the work of Giron. And, in light of the passage quoted above, it could be said that a single, initially tentative, search guides

her art as a whole. A search for the transmutation of the vital process into artistic sensation, which will be perceived more and more clearly as individualization within a body greater than one's own: the body of the world, the world conceived and experienced materially (as opposed to ideally). Hence, the autobiographical would consist of the procurement, through and *in* the work, of a body capable of realizing what, from the very beginning, it entailed as determination and potential. That is, as struggle to extend and differentiate the body, which grows or shrinks according to its ability to develop in the power plays that constitute all existence.

Considering the image/title relationship, the first series of drawings displays a flaw (which could be called, jumping ahead, emptiness) and the second a willingness, an initiative, a grasping of the world (fullness?). Between the two tendencies, what would be put to the test would be the body and its process, as if the question of becoming body –through the work– is in itself the ethical question.

Thus formulated, becoming a body would consist of developing a mode of existence/art that exceeds the conditions of the current capitalist mode of production of life and its Christian-Cartesian substratum by which life is governed according to laws of property (the self as the crux of the system, the individual conceived as the owner of his or her decisions and desires) and the exploitation of the world (cosmic ecology upset by the intervention of man, man separated from that ecology).

3. In Giron's work, the search for a healing alternative (a recovery of the powers of the de-individualized human) demanded reworking the memory of a body excised (cut and emptied) by capitalist rationality and, especially in the early years of her work, by the traumatic effects of the Argentine dictatorship, a militarized rationality that, individual by individual, operated by effecting physical, psychic and spiritual mutilation and self-mutilation on the social body as a whole. It also operated, of course, on the body of the artist, who lived in Argentina until 1979.

After the dictatorship, and now capable of beginning to subjectively work through the social trauma (violence to the individual body is, immediately, violence to the social body and vice versa), other historical situations involving lacerating the body and emptying it out began to resonate in her work, a way to formulate the distant causes of the immediate past as well as the

specific conditions of the present where speech, thought and art are produced. Carlos Basualdo's essay on Giron's "El largo del amo," [The Breadth of the Master] which formulates a parallel between the image of the incision in 20th century Argentine literature –verbal precision and extreme violence in Borges and Lamborghini– and Argentine history,² gives a sense of the dimension of the circumstances that affect the body in Giron's work.

Nonetheless, ten years before "El largo del amo," in Giron's *Categoría* [Category] – eight acrylic heads of birds– the image of the incision is rendered decapitation. In this painting, the figures are laid out on the surface just as they are in the zoological, botanic and ethnic handbooks of modern naturalists and anthropologists. But in Giron's work they are not just samples of species: a thick black line under each animal suggests impalement, the head now virtually placed on a stake. But this impalement is disconcerting: the heads dance and chirp. In this gap in meaning, what is perceived as violence (political or scientific) cannot be reduced to victimization. The image is dynamic and the meaning open. There is ethical interrogation and, as we shall see, despite all efforts to understand Giron's work as developing linearly, each image is riddled with a dialectical tension.

In *De frente – Tierras de la Patagonia* [Head On – Lands of Patagonia] (1995), catalogation as incision becomes museological. This is also a set of samples, but the exhibition device is the display case, not the book. And here the hands of earth, hands rendered dust, can be both protective glove and hardworking hand bound to the earth and the elements, a member separated from the body by an act of mutilation.

Incision and emptiness. This second term appears as early as the all-over surfaces covered with animal skins in *Carnada Patagonia* 1880 [Patagonia Bate 1880] and *Patagonia* 1527, both from 1993. Indeed, in *Ajuar para un conquistador* [Trousseau for a Conqueror], also from 1993, the dialect between fullness and emptiness is particularly complex. Marcelo Pacheco describes this work as: "...funeral attire, those hot trousseau, that clothing that protects and encloses, shelters and kills; [...] objects strange and suggestive in their neglect, in their absence of bodies, in their animal nature, in their childlike warmth."³ And then the torsos-trunks in E-M: *radal, ñire, ciprés, maitén, coihue, alerce, lenga, pehuén* [E-M: Radal, Beech, Cypress, Mayten, Coihue, Larch,

Lenga, Araucaria Araucana] (1994), rich emptied corpses, warm casters of bad light.⁴ These works are, Giron says, “commentaries” on the ideology that until the 1980s organized the selection and display of pieces at the Museo de la Patagonia (Bariloche), “monument to the army of the Argentine State’s conquest of that territory.” Army, science and museology. One could even imagine the trousseau covering the museum’s embalmed animals in another reversal of the movement of bodies (enabled, once again, by Giron’s work).

In any case, what I want to emphasize is the fact that something specific to the image of the body runs through all of Giron’s work, and it does so with relative autonomy from historical references. If, as Giron says, she “draws an analogy” between her body and the body of the land where she grew up, where would that body be more “purely” seen than in the shapes of the pictorial objects of her landscapes from the early 1990s? Certainly not in the body of Giron, but perhaps in that body transmuted into image. Where if not in those pictorial objects is that bodily image reduced to a greater state of latency, whether that image is hollow, immobilized or protected from the violence of the setting?

The shapes of these objects are rendered in a way similar to the one described by Didi-Huberman in reference to the body of the goddess in Botticelli’s *The Birth of Venus*: “Chiseled, because the drawing of her shape is so piercingly sharp, so sharp that it ‘seizes’ the nude body from its own pictorial background like certain low reliefs.”⁵ These shapes are constituted by incisions and, hence, entail piercing rather than mutilation. Hard, compact bodies –of mountains, rocks, animals, trees, architectures– made from impenetrable material and rendered landscape, as landscape is rendered rigid body, through addition. Indeed, in paintings like *Cordillera* [Mountain Range] (1990), *Cordillera-límite* [Mountain Range-Border] (1990) and *Llegada* [Arrival] (1991) the fragility of rock is like glass that might break at any moment.

4. According to Giron, with *Corner Pieces* (1998) sensations that suggested the “filling of the body”⁶ appeared. In retrospect, it is clear the passage from the empty to the full was not exactly progressive: there is a tension in all the works mentioned and, if considered strictly chronologically, after the fragile and hollow molded ceramic sculptures of *Corner Pieces*, the chiseled body reappears in the five watercolors of ephemeral architectures –tents, awnings, igloos, sleeping

bags– that accompany the sculpture of the partly open body of the huemul deer in *Ampárame y guíame* [Keep Me and Guide Me] (1998), as well as in the ground on which those architectures are built.

As early as the ceramic stones in *Corner Pieces*, the organic is stone-viscera, as fragile and brittle as a cocoon. The organic seems to suggest the full body; if we return to the huemul deer in *Ampárame y guíame*, it is evident how in this work the organic is fully exteriorized, and the order of the organism inverted. Even warmth and softness (all the more so because this work is made using wax) amounts to the putrid.

From this perspective, what lies under the allegory in the drawings from 1986? Could the body of the dancer in *Consenso* be the rhythmic body, and the body in *Transgresión* –where the defiant attitude turns the ashamed but stubborn face and hands of the figure into blotches of color– be a heated body? Those hands, whose rhythmically contradictory positions provide a measure of the violence that this body needs to impose on itself in order to unleash inner movement?

At the risk of being overly insistent, we could say that what engines the thinking in the work is not, basically, concepts or inventions or strategies, but forces. What is microscopically multiplied in each image is the body, composed by units set or variable, stable or mutating. An accumulation of forces, of matter in motion, upholds the visual and conceptual engineering in which the plundering of Patagonia or the extermination of native populations during the entire 19th century is addressed. Under the landscape lies the body, just as before allegory lay there.

5. Fluid lines, with focused energy and a floating course, serve to structure the works that Giron has been making since 2000. These are images of bodies, now more than humans (beings undergoing mutilation, processes of condensation and lightening, etc.), that express variations in the sensibility of the body that draws (that is, the body of the artist). The line on the paper seems to evolve autonomously because it consists of the protracting of that growing body. The vibration of the activated body is translated into drawing, which is also performance, and performance into the material resonance of ethical progression as discovery and revelation.

The ostensibly physical fragility of the *Corner Pieces* –a fragility befitting bodies just venturing into interiority

(that is, just starting to be filled), bodies that test out the possibilities of life with the defenselessness of a newborn— is, in this new work, strong fragility (a bodily condition whose power lies in its paradoxical nature). Unlike the retracted body, this other fragility is open to the chaos of experience, a pre-condition to giving shape to a body of one's own. And this is what the lines of these new drawings demonstrate as a source of expanding energies.

The stability of this new movement lies in the speed inherent to that protracting. On the one hand, in *Miedo existencial democrático* [Existential Democratic Fear] (MED, 2004) a markedly foreshortened perspective shows bodies floating in extreme positions, true forms of vertigo. On the other, the process of de-identification undergone by the bodies in *Uno en atmósfera – Dos en atmósfera – Tres en atmósfera* [One in Atmosphere – Two in Atmosphere – Three in Atmosphere] (2004-5) is deduced from the progressive interpenetration of the lines of the figures.

If the “bodily protraction” discussed above were confronted with the fear that the MED works address (“a commentary on the perception of physical insecurity experienced in the contemporary world,” says Giron), the entire idea of “becoming body” would be radically questioned. Because that becoming body, I have said, is coordinated from Giron's observing body, on whose horizons that growth might well have been taking place.

From another perspective, it could be said that what's new here is not the body perceived as a whole, but in that body experienced as part of the world and its multiplicity. Which implies that both the body retracted in fear and the body protracted by de-identification exist insofar as they face each other before the chaos of experience. In visual terms, this means the use of the same resource in both cases: the structuring of the figures by means of different intersecting beams of mostly concentric lines that generate spaces where the concentration of energy is greater or lesser.

Finally, the image of the growth or progression of the body, an image present throughout Giron's work, is here revealed to be of an eminently perceptive order. Being able to see that in retracted bodies (empty, mutilated, sharp) there is, nonetheless, a fluid (if retracted) configuration means the progression of a body that can see beyond its own condition: if it is seen as retracted, the environment is seen solely as retraction;

and if it is seen as protracted, it is seen that, despite retraction, there is, underneath, a body that struggles for an opening. Just as before the body lay under the landscape and under allegory.

Santiago García Navarro, 2011

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Translated from spanish by Jane Brodie

Notes:

(1) “Patagonic images” refer to, among other things, the paintings from the early 1990s, as well as sculptural installations created in the middle of that decade, such as *Ajuar para un conquistador* [Trousseau for a Conqueror], (1993), *E-M: radal, ñire, ciprés, maitén, coihue, alerce, lenga, pehuén* [E-M: Radal, Beech, Cypress, Mayten, Coihue, Larch, Lenga, Araucaria Araucana] (1994), *De frente – Tierras de la Patagonia* [Head On – Lands of Patagonia] (1995), *El largo del amo* [The Breadth of the Master] (1996) and others.

(2) Carlos Basualdo, “El corte del largo”, exhibition catalogue, *Runt om Oss Inom Oss – Around us inside us*, Boras, Boras Kustmuseum, 1997.

(3) Marcelo Pacheco, “In Absentia: Marcelo Pacheco visitó el taller de Mónica Giron en Buenos Aires”, *Trans –arts.cultures*, media, 1997, vol.1/2, N° ¾.

(4) Translator's note: *Luz mala*, translated literally here as “bad light,” is a figure from legends of the Argentine countryside. It refers to a dim, ghost-like light that floats above the cadavers of animals.

(5) Georges Didi-Huberman, *Venus rajada. Desnudez, sueño, crueldad*, Madrid/Buenos Aires/Oviedo, Losada, 2005, p. 19. (English title: *Open Venus, Nudity, Dream, Cruelty*)

(6) “One of the first things that the body experiences when it begins to be full is the fear of expressing itself, because it does not yet know how to. I would say that at that moment, the body does not know what it is like to be full or how to express its current state or presence. For me, ‘Obrador’ [Worker] represents that fear of expressing, whereas “Corner Pieces” represents the difficulty of naming the new fullness, which is not really understood,” in: Mónica Giron, *Nacer igual*, cat. ex., Ruth Benzacar gallery/dpm Gallery, Buenos Aires/Guayaquil, 2002.