

# Some Notes on My Work

by Mónica Giron

## Bariloche

The city of San Carlos de Bariloche was founded in the late 19th century, at the conclusion of what was called the conquest of the desert. The geographical-political structure that the Argentine state assigned to the city at the time of its founding was based on large private estates—one of which later became the Nahuel Huapí national park—and small lots of land given to immigrants, initially for agriculture and cattle ranching. Three major urban projects were carried out in the 1940s: the Civic Center, the National Park Commission building and the Llao Llao Hotel, which was designed by the architect Alejandro Bustillo and some of his colleagues.

Immediately after World War Two, the small population of Bariloche—which consisted, basically, of a few foreigners, Turkish and Lebanese immigrants, descendants of Spanish settlers and the survivors of the extermination of the Indians—grew as it received people who came over after the War, people who had fought on both sides, as well as Argentines who left large cities in search of new opportunities and natural beauty. At that time, the town's development revolved around two activities: tourism and science. My parents moved there in late 1958. This place, strangled by a pact of silence, is where I was born and spent my childhood and adolescence.

There was a large bookcase in my house with books about art from all eras and all cultures: encyclopedias, essays on history and anthropology, the social and medical sciences, classic and contemporary novels, as well as poetry. Every so often, my mother, Silvia Egger—who before dedicating herself to raising a family and activities in the cultural sphere worked with the graphic designer Tomas Gonda—would go outside to make naturalist works in ink and pencil. I went to see art exhibitions with her. We would also go on walks to see cave drawings and collect arrowheads and *bol-*

*eadoras*. We would spend long periods in an estate that her family owned in Coronel Pringles, in the southern section of Buenos Aires province. In Bariloche, we went to classical music concerts and all the lectures on culture that took place in the town. A number of oil paintings by painters who had lived in Bariloche hung on the walls of the house, most of them gifts from grateful patients of my father, Dr. Enrique Luis Giron, an outstanding surgeon and general practitioner.

I started drawing and painting, copying and studying the images in those books, as well as images taken from my own reality. Those were my first models.

## Buenos Aires

I arrived in Buenos Aires at the height of the military dictatorship. That period was also marked by imminent war with Chile and a series of economic crises, as well as growing government corruption. All of this, combined with a sensibility that was used to the mountain landscape, meant that at first I found the city brutal. I had to assimilate so many impressions and to negotiate communication codes that were entirely new to me. In that context, I started studying at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (1977 and 1978). That was where I learned how to draw and compose according to academic rules. At the same time, I delved into books and learning, and worked using representational techniques. I would walk along the Recova, near the river, in the fog of the early spring, the sidewalk across barely visible.

## Geneva

Some time later, I spent four years studying at the Escuela Superior de Artes Visuales (ESAV), in Geneva, Switzerland. As a citizen of Geneva (my family was

Swiss), I received a fellowship from the government that allowed me to pursue my studies. I went to Switzerland not only because I could not imagine going anywhere else at that time, but also because when I was born my Godmother –who lived in Zurich– had given me a round-trip ticket to Switzerland.

Crucial to my learning were the master classes in semiology and anthropology given by Daniel Wilhem, a Swiss writer and researcher. With him, and with the artists Anne Sausser-Hall and Nadine Amrein, I learned how to think and how to make contemporary art. When I say “I learned how to think,” I mean I learned how to compare contents and to put commonsense into practice, as well as how to discuss ethical and political ideas. I drew a lot, took some photographs and worked on some films. I carefully observed older artists and my peers. I learned how to listen to knowledgeable critics and how to discern the tendency or spirit surrounding each discourse on art. I visited museums and read theory, mostly contemporary semiology. I also read Borges.

A number of my works were very well received at ESAV. In 1981, Silvie and Cherif Defraui, my art teachers, took me to Lausanne to see the exhibition of the grupo CAYC. I believed that those works were connected to the visual procedures that I was studying, as well as the ones that I was learning. In 1977, a work by Cherif Defraui had been one of the three controversial pieces to win an award at the Sao Paulo Biennial and so, though he had not been to Sao Pablo and met them personally, he was familiar with the work of the grupo CAYC.

### **Back in Buenos Aires**

It took me a while to adjust both psychologically and emotionally to the new situation in Argentina after the return of democracy. This time round, I learned to appreciate the city and its architecture in the company of the architect Carlos Lopez y Bragaña, who also introduced me to architects and artists from my generation. I worked for an Italian antique dealer for six years. At that time, the exchange rate encouraged Europeans to buy artworks of European origin that had made their way to Argentina in different waves of immigration, thus effecting a repatriation of these works. This experience taught me about a commercial side of the art world.

While working at this job, to which I dedicated many hours every day and for which I traveled frequently, I started giving classes in contemporary art.

In those years, art institutions, museums and cultural centers started organizing retrospective exhibitions and writing the art history of earlier eras. I gradually came into contact with the different art circuits of the time, which were in the process of being greatly reconstructed and rethought, often on the basis of personal affinities and animosities.

During the 1990s, I changed a great deal as a person. I stopped working for the antique dealer and started leading a nomadic life, living in the houses of friends and relatives. Carolina Antoniadis invited me to share her studio in the Palermo section of the city. I worked on a number of projects with Carlos Basualdo before he went to New York, and then I met Liisa Roberts, who introduced me to the New York art scene. Since that time, Marcelo Pacheco, Gustavo Buntinx and Santiago García Navarro have taken a critical interest in my work.

### **My Homes**

The architect Thomas Bally and his wife María Teresa Bally-Gessner from Basel –friends of my parents whom I had met in Switzerland– offered to lend me money to buy a home-studio space in 1993. This meant that I would no longer have to move about so much, suitcase in tow. For a variety of reasons, adapting the apartment, which was located in the old Montserrat section of the city, for use as a studio took almost three years. I was finally able to move in in early 1996. Since then, I have lived and worked there. For the last five years, I have shared my life with Antonio Panno, an electrician and photographer who helps me with the production of my works. This book is produced in conjunction with Zavaletalab gallery in Buenos Aires, owned by Hernán Zavaleta, who has represented my work for just over a year; the gallery is currently located in the same building as my home-studio.

Another sort of home-studio or dynamic, vital and complementary dwelling is the one that consists of my old friends and my four siblings, with whom I share my intellectual and creative life.

## Observing and Teaching

**Ajuar para un conquistador [Trousseau for a Conqueror]** (1993) was exhibited with great success at the V Havana Biennial in April of 1994. An essay written by Lucas Fragasso accompanied the work in the Biennial catalogue. That edition of the biennial received a great deal of attention on an international level, and part of it was later shown at the Ludwig Museum, in Aachen, Germany, which then acquired my work. The Havana Biennial was also very important to me because it was where I met Victor Grippo and Carlos Capelan, with whom I established an ongoing bond.

The following years were intense. On the one hand, I traveled a good deal both internationally, in function of the exhibitions I was invited to participate in, and locally, as my activities in Buenos Aires were scattered throughout the city. In 1994 and 1995, I participated in the Taller de Barracas, the setting of a rich exchange that was in line with the policies of legitimation operative in the city at that time. The aim of the project, which was sponsored by Fundación Antorchas and directed by Pablo Suarez, Luis Fernando Bénédict and Ricardo Longuini, was to bring together and assist young artists who were working in mixed media like installations, objects and sculptures. In this same period, I began to teach more and more, both in Buenos Aires and beyond. I like giving classes; it serves as a means to dialogue with the challenge of making art.

## Learning and Unlearning

The associative, comparative and deductive teaching method used by Daniel Wilhem in his master classes in Geneva is without a doubt one of the bases for my tendency to associate seemingly incongruent or simply dissimilar elements. This is one of the tools I use in reflection or in attempting to find meaning at junctures where commonsense has taken hold and no questions are asked. In other words, it is a means of keeping the door to the sweetness of uncertainty open. I furthered my studies into German Romanticism, Surrealism, Arte Póvera, Conceptual Art, Minimalism and Land Art.

I have learned to adapt the technique or materiality of my work to the image that I want to express such that, to the extent possible, the structures of the form and the representation are connected on an essential level.

Hence, for instance, to make a work that is a reflection on landscape –which is in and of itself a cultural construction– entails not only translating some of the many sensorial and spiritual impressions imparted by a specific physical and temporal space, but also negotiating with the physical material (real, imaginary and symbolic) in which that impression is materialized when expressed in a work and rendered representation. This methodology means that I have to study new procedures if a given work so requires; I try to learn how to handle and grasp materials and techniques hitherto unknown to me. In order to obtain a certain precision or iconographic communication, I often consult image archives or books with illustration and texts. At the same time, to understand layers of meaning that are less readily apparent, I scrutinize the experience of exchange both with others and by myself, in the space of daily life.

Because of my active and extremely sensitive personality, I have a great many perceptions, impressions and thoughts or beginnings of thoughts. I long to share or exist with others or at the same time as others, always expressing. That desire for expression takes the form of attempting to articulate and discern the intensity and variety of sensations born of daily existence. My mind and sensibility strive to order impressions and expectations. There is a strange relationship between action and ignorance when one is making something new or different, experimental or unknown. I imagine that that has to do with what we call intuition.

Because I wanted to, and believed I could, broaden my expressive skills if I took apart some mechanisms of basic emotional response and misguided rational argumentation, I decided to expand my field of research. I wanted to further my understanding of the relationships between believing, learning, comprehending and representing.

In the late 1990s, I immersed myself in different sorts of trainings and therapies as a means to explore the perception, discernment, expression and transformation of what we call sensibility, meaning, intelligence, memory, etc. I did both behaviorist and Lacanian therapy. I practiced Buddhist and Taoist meditation, trained in Tai-Chi and studied Feng-Shui, mythology and astrology. I pursued behaviorist therapy in order to further creativity in writing and the visual arts. I did

workshops in Spanish grammar and writing, and I studied works by Leopoldo Marechal. This reassessment of how acquired knowledge is systematized helped me to question my own artwork, as well as my teaching methods. To look while looking, in the process of doing, is not easy; it can be unpleasant and, although in the end it is coherent and gratifying, it is like crossing the sea and then finding yourself in hell not due to error but curiosity. Only then do you come out breathing.

### The Eye, Volume and Materials

The pencil pressures the paper and marks it in a number of senses: color, density, width of line. It evidences the pressure, suggests a space and records an impression; it hints at a time and feels out mental, emotional and spiritual spaces. Just as every so often one must sharpen a pencil, the act of drawing requires precision, even when its course is not entirely known. Sometimes it is necessary to begin again because at a certain juncture certainty or concentration is lost.

Emotional volume as sulfuric muck mislaid amidst bodies in **Neocriollo**. That work was built on the basis of the suspicion that the large number of wax castings charred out of distraction implied the same amount of new wax needed to begin again. Perhaps it was the loss of the sense of gravity in the **Lagunas** [Lagoons] pieces or the unsteadiness of movement that led me to take in, suddenly, the scent of flowers while I was working. And then, as if that weren't enough, sensitive to touch and temperature, all of that needs light and entails passage –on the human scale– in the exhibition space.

### The Heads

Unlike **Neocriollo**, the **Cabezas** [Heads] are just a part of the body. These works address the ideas, concepts or feelings that we have about the human, the brain, thought, the encounter with the “other,” language and the crossing of other possibilities. These creatures have eyes, and so we are reflected in them. Impaled and separated from the body, they resemble hand mirrors where one looks at oneself, or puppets, or war trophies that, as a monstrous element of observation severed from the rest, have been placed at the gates of the city or on the shelves of these and other

times. Exhibited in display cases as if in an archeology museum, they generate an intersection of fields of knowledge (museography, anthropology, ethnology, psychoanalysis, the study of character on the basis of physical traits) and strain our ability to look inwards.

### Working Together

To be satisfying on sensory, spiritual, mental and material levels, the final image requires that many different tendencies and forces converge. Work processes can be very long or very quick, almost immediate. Thinking must be close to intuition –as paradoxical or impossible as that may seem– while materials and knowledge –as well as, for instance, enthusiasm, love, desire, impulse, friends, partners, peers, assistants, corporate sponsors willing to support research and experimentation, that is, co-workers of all kinds– must be readily available. Balancing wills and working through the tensions and difficulties that teamwork or interdisciplinary effort entails is complex. The aim is harmony and beauty. It is a question of balancing the physical form with a range of different contributing factors. In the end, in the best case scenario, form and representation do not seem to harbor doubts about themselves or about what they are staging. So their resounding, evocative and residual vitality as a contemporary work of art is essentially poetic and useful.

### This Book

The initial impulse behind this book was Adriana Hidalgo Sola. The first editorial decisions were made in conjunction with Hernán Zavaleta and María Gainza, though ultimately the project was carried out with Lucio Dorr and Adriana Manfredi. I learned a great deal from the process of returning to the initial project and transforming it. In January of this year, on the occasion of the placement of my work **Kol (Homo Sapiens)** in Bariloche, Juan Schulz, who has been a friend and critical interlocutor since the time I was a teenager, interviewed me. Our conversation on the piece and on culture in Bariloche was then published in the digital newspaper *Bariloche2000*. Through that experience, I came to imagine that a dialogue might be useful in helping me to organize my thoughts for this book. To that end, I engaged in a long-distance e-mail conversation with Margarita Sánchez-Prieto, who is in Ha-

vana, on the basis of a small group of initial images. While this was a rich source of reflection, it ultimately could not be adapted to the form of this project. This text is the result of an interview with my friend, the poet Jorge Fondebrider. That conversation proved a means to formulate an autobiographical timeline by which I was able to connect what was difficult for me to sum up in words. In resuming, revising and correcting the interview, I emphasized some of the avatars born from the intersection of creative work with visual materials and forms. I am aware that, like any other creation, an autobiography or a book is a fiction in itself. It contains true and essential components that depend as much on the real as on the imaginary and the symbolic and, as such, can be written and rewritten as often as one wants or is able to.

Mónica Giron  
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