

Mónica Giron Post-Continental A Sailor's Fragments

For three years, Mónica Giron's studio has been crowded with maquettes and models, drawings, bronzes, watercolors, scanned images, and writings on the theory of the six continents and the study of the vector fields pursued in physics and applied to geology.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, one of the versions of the organization of the Earth's rocky masses posits six formations: North and South America as separate entities, Europe and Asia joined as Eurasia, Africa including Madagascar, Oceania with New Guinea and New Zealand, and Antarctica.

In applying the principles of magnitude and of orientation and respecting the sizes of the continents and their shapes—not their shorelines, but their depths under the sea—the vector projections of the continents are rendered in a maquette to later be placed in an outdoor public space on a large scale so that people can interact with these earthly masses. Heedful of the idea of geological plates and their movements, the vectorial space brings the covariance of time and speed together in a memory that, in some 250 million years, will make the planet a single formation of granite and porphyry.

How did Giron come to this transcontinental project? As is always the case with her work, there are explanations and arguments that the artist puts forth skillfully and vigorously in mental explorations at times uncertain and at times revealing. The sinuous course of her production and of the bundles of relations between her signs are internal and corporal journeys that, from the triggers of *Ajuar para un conquistador* [Trousseau for a Conqueror] with empty and pearl torsos, and of *Obrador* [Worker] and *Corner Pieces*, have deepened inner visions that appear, watchful, as enigmatic as they are precise, with the temporalities and necessities of forces both individual and social.

The continents in *Mundus* are almost a “natural” outgrowth of her “SX,” possible habitat for this series of “otherworldly” watercolors that today surround the artist; these works cannot be named by words but, rather, by fleeting and whimsical contact with poetry.

Ya la insana Canícula, ladrando
llamas, cuece las mieses, y, en hervores
de frenética luz, los labradores
ven a Proción los campos abrasando.

El piélagos encendido está exhalando
al sol humos en traje de vapores;
y, en el cuerpo, la sangre y los humores
discurren sediciosos fulminando.

Bébese sin piedad la sed del día
en las fuentes y arroyos, y en los ríos
la risa y el cristal y la armonía.

Sólo el llanto de los ojos míos
no tiene el Can Mayor hidropesía,
respetando el tributo a tus desvíos.

Francisco de Quevedo, *Poemas amorosos*

For some time now, Giron has eschewed signs, those symbols that join signifiers and signifieds in an almost obligatory and univocal fashion, as well as paradigmatic signs that move only between bundles of relations. Hers is the universe of syntagmatic signs, as Roland Barthes put it in *The Pleasure of the Text*, signs that circulate freely between precedence and consequence and interlink artistic forms in the proliferation of meanings. These gleams are what lead to the artist's illuminations amidst plasters, ceramics, blankets, bee's wax, bronze, graphite, colored pencil, watercolor, stone and soil from Patagonian woods, weaves, casts, models, paintings and drawings, kilns, and molds. Materiality is

a determining factor; the choice of support is a piece of semantic data that leads directly to one of a work's levels of meaning.

The artist's system of works seems complicated, but with honed vision it can be understood. Insisting on everyday opacity is pointless. Her figurations are at once real and imaginary, internal and external, recognizable and obscure. There are beings taken from everyday life, unanswered questions, appealing presences and others that, because somewhat uncanny, sway the ominous vision of the gods.

Figuration is the first station in her three-dimensional artistic structure that, intertwined from plane to plane, is porous and dynamic, malleable and suggestive. It finds order only on paper; intense, in reality it acts in a quick and transversal manner. Figuration provides the viewer with a starting point and with the literality of material. Ways further in are revealed with patience. Casting aside meanings and working in the sheer sequence of the bundles of relations sheds light on her figuration and visions. The swirls and extended continuous lines with gleaming transparent color in "SX" follow paths pursued by only two other painters in the history of Argentine art: Xul Solar, with his inner revelations in the search for higher knowledge, and Raquel Forner, in the spatial series she began in 1959 with its mutants born of encounters between man and astro-beings.

One might imagine the continental masses in Giron's different maquettes and studies to be dry constructions of static forms and plateaus. That is not the case, though, as each piece vibrates with mountain chains and river beds, the uneven cuts of its shores and the curvatures of its topology. Furthermore, the works bear the undeniable markings of fingers that have worked the material and shaped each accident on each geological massif.

Giron's works have a second figuration, an inner figuration that, invisible, runs through the first. It is what the Greeks called "form" and form is the second language of the senses. It sees to stringing together and presenting syntagmatic signs. It is the plane of contents, of meaning, of bundles of relations that open the piece, its existence, to the world. All the secrets of the work lie in its behavior. Form is the center equidistant from all syntactic forces and tensions, semantics and practices. It is where the greatest height of energy localized

during the creative process is condensed, whether intentionally or not.

The system in operation between the conversations of figuration and of form entails a third element, a sort of supra-structure that shrouds the work with its worldly contents, something from the field of mentalities, but also from the artist's biography, a mane of qualities of the era that creates the contexture that always stays with the work of art. It forms part of the work's temporal structure as micro-historic events and cultural models associated with its origin and with its duration in reality or in the imaginary. Its appearance depends on the "positive unconscious" of which Michel Foucault speaks in relation to the problem of vision. We always see much less than we think we see. We can only see that which has already been thought in the operative horizon. To see is to think and to think is to see, an intersection of theory and practice that provides Giron's production with a perfect context.

As interweave of artistic practice and of research and study, Giron's activity places her in a special situation. It not only partakes of a characteristic that can be traced to post-historical art close to post-conceptualism, but also opens the terrain of the "theoretical practices" and of the "practical ideologies" put forth by Louis Althusser in 1974 in his *Philosophy Course for Scientists*. By challenging the division of knowledge into hard sciences and humanist sciences, and of theoretical practices into science and ideology, Althusser created a new frame of reference for philosophy. His formulations prove provocative in thinking about Giron's art.

In sum, Althusser envisions practice in relation to two specific situations: first, a practice that signals practically and articulates theoretically a position or thesis, which is a "field of intervention" in the ideological, historical, and theoretical course of events; second, practice geared to drawing demarcation lines between theoretical practices and ideologies.

The first point assigns to practice, in this case artistic practice, movements that combine the exercise of a task, its toil, with the presence of behaviors tied to the theoretical, to the articulation of discourses that also establish positions. In this reasoning lie the theoretical practices that are the natural terrain for Giron and for her work, the terrain through which she marks her dif-

ferent positions within the artistic field and its relations to the field of power. Giron intervenes in the struggle between the dominated and the dominators that defines the artistic field with a Thesis that may not undermine the world's order but does, by virtue of simply entering into the battleground, formulate a new origin for the next movement of reality. In a society riddled with disjuncture and anesthetized memory, for example, the public apparitions of Giron's *MED Miedo Existencial Democrático* [Democratic Existential Memory] and the experience it entailed at the political juncture of 2004 proved steeped in valence.

But Althusser takes it further. He sees theoretical practices as fields of intervention in an era's different sets of circumstance. Their interventions act specifically on the ideological, the historical, and the theoretical. Once again, Giron benefits from an angle of action when she circulates her work on operative platforms that go beyond the specific space of art, terrains unaware of the *artisticness* of art.

The ideological position entails the values of social struggles, of grassroots movements tied to political confrontation that take place against a background of class struggle. It reflects the movements and actions of forces of domination. The work of art and the field of power are in a state of tension. Bourdieu explains that it is not enough to ask who determines the hierarchical qualities on the ground; it is necessary to understand as well that the artistic field is a space of constant confrontation and conflict whose activity and dynamic is defined by the battles themselves.

At the same time, if Louis Althusser's notion is transferred onto the world of art, it could be posited that artistic practices draw a demarcation line between the *artisticness* of art and ideology. Foregoing the self-referentiality and self-questioning of Modernism creates the fissure necessary for the action in the real that contemporary art is capable of effecting. This can be seen in the positions that, within the territory of art and beyond it, Giron adopts and in how vitally her works act on the aesthetically colonized world art scene. The idea that artists today are edgy must not mean disregard for the lack of critical distance that postmodernism brought to the relationship between society and its historic reality, which often annuls the ability of artistic productions to effect transformation and, indeed, renders them still greater allies of the status quo.

The celebration, on the part of certain critics, of the hypothetical battle forces of the contemporary that, in most cases, seem like endogamic mentions due to the simulations of the 21st century; one should be wary of the intensions of these dimensions and of the soundness of their chains of relations. The gap between the public and contemporary art, which dates back to the historical avant-gardes, is still relevant regardless of the mass audiences that current art exhibitions draw. What is often behind this striking, at least at the level of statistics, response to art is often show business, the cultural industry, the tourist industry, and the entertainment industry.

Giron is not at the forefront of political disputes; the ideological meaning of her work moves in other directions and is anchored in other grounds. Her works speak of possible internal modifications in the contemporary subject and of his or her bundles of relations to communities—consider, for instance, series like “Ósmosis” [Osmosis] (2004-2006) and “Reconciliación” [Reconciliation] (2006). Another social subject and another social body are at play in “Lazos familiares” [Family Ties] (2007) and in her monumental *Neocriollo* (2003-2006).

One of the tissues at the juncture where artistic practice acts is the historical. The formulation of this topic is complex as it can give rise to confusions regarding one of the points central to post-historical art, mainly the expulsion of all historicisms. Modernism and the abuses of the workings of history envisioned as progress, as series of significant and devised events, and as authoritarian and normative context have been eschewed with particular vigor during the last four decades. Regardless, history of the sort Althusser refers to must be understood as the historicity of any artistic event, as the act in which artistic occurrences are temporalized as they begin to take part in struggles on the ground. Historicity acknowledges intentionalities and commitments, even the strategic plan of artistic practice and production in their dialectical materialism. Once again, the Thesis that signals practically and utters practice theoretically (theoretical practices) appears.

Mention was made earlier of theory affected by the intervention of artistic practice at successive contemporary junctures as system to speak of theoretical practices. Works of art not only alter their configurations

but also contest on the level of form, contest the ideas underlying hierarchies and privileges within the artistic field and its social, political, and economic projections. Theoretical planes that, in this 21st century, must be considered constitutive of the dynamic of globalization and its socio-cultural circuits with their transnational expansions and planetary actions. There are theoretical concerns that, since the eighties, have played a role in decisive cultural terrains with the inevitable tension between the global and the local. In the “glocal” (global/local) battles and positions of resistance, artists and their works must spearhead commitments. In his book on the post-national, philosopher Jürgen Habermas speaks of “gaps of legitimation” that emerged through the totalizing extensions of globalization. Those gaps are the points where bundles of relations can be forged outside the “zoology of multiculturalism” and the “peaceful artistic coexistence” that the north has declared in relation to all the other cardinal points with a supposed respect for and motivation of differences that, for some actors, are “inexplicably” qualities specific to the current scene. Discursive policies are forces of collision that prove outdated before the control of narratives and the actions imposed by the models of global contemporary art through both dominant museums and those dominated by the import policies of exhibitions, by art fairs that set the agenda for each season, by private collecting with millionaire interventions on the planetary market. Dominated as well by the same-old biennials and by the new ones already imposed as mandatory points of reference for the art field and globalized curators and aspiring young “graduates”—the main stakeholders, who act as producers of “white collar” services, the category of professionals rethought by Saskia Sassen for these times.

Meanwhile, *Mundus*, with its six continents, is in the process of finding its figuration, its form, and its cultural representations. But some hints are already circulating around the gestures that, in the last three years, have accumulated within and around the work’s primary maquette.

A materiality—bronze—has been conceived. While the fact that the work will be placed in the outdoors was undoubtedly a factor in that decision, the relations between Giron’s work and molded wax have expanded since *Neocriollo* partly out of a craft that enables her to approach possible visual models in casting. Over the course of years of working with hot wax layer

by layer, the vision of her work drew closer to the fire of bronzes and to the traces of fingers on the plaster and terracotta works of Auguste Rodin, the first Modern sculptor. Her works share with his a sensibility, whether in relation to matter or to a figuration excessive and unbridled yet precise and measured in its flaws. There are frictions as well: her modes of the monumental, her unstable landscapes both thick and superficial, the coexistence of the recognizable and the ravished, with remains of an archeology that is part and parcel of the support, the inclination to intermingle figures and geological formations or organic edges, her works’ extension over time, the furies present in her almost abstract figurative resolutions, her fascination with the human body and her inclination to measure it in its widest and most complex postures and anatomical exaggerations, her inclination for allegory and the iconographic and cultural meaning of the titles she chooses.

Probably unbeknownst to her, Giron, in her fondness for continents and their vectorial renderings, forms part of a tradition among Buenos Aires collectors with longstanding interest in maps—globes, world maps, topographic surveys, and street maps. This tradition dates back to the late 18th century and its early leading figures, those from before the mid-1800s, include José María Cabrer, Saturnino Segurola, Juan José Larrañendi, Manuel Trelles, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, and Bartolomé Mitre—eclectic collectors of maps as well as books, art, coins, and archeological and historical objects.

Giron’s choice of the terrain model is not without ideological connotations or expansions in political history, even though it may seem a field that exists solely within the sphere of geography, of interest to those very few who debate the Earth’s origins and formation. Since it was first put forth in the early 20th century, the hypothesis of the six continents has not gained much of a following; it has been seriously questioned by the field of science.

Interestingly, one vision of geography and geology is also geopolitical instrument: North America and South America are represented as two separate continental masses. For the dominant idea of “the backyard,” the rupture between those two territories renders blurry an expression that should not be underestimated as domestic commentary insofar as it puts forth a vision of the world and a representation of how imperialism

works. It also draws an extended area of deep waters that elude the sense of belonging and of property common on the part of the north in relation to the south and the “obvious” availability by virtue of position of the latter to the former. Yet, and for diametrical reasons, Europe and Asia joined in Eurasia bring down the weak wall of the Ural mountains to create a vision of dominant nation beyond any scale while affirming the pressure of Russia to the west and to the east, that is, towards what were its occupied territories and satellite nations in Europe and are now its Asian borders and expansions to China. The menacing presence of the continent of Antarctica to the north reminds Russia of the vastness and enigmas of a territory marked for now by subdivisions resulting from projections of the countries to the south and to the north.

The fact Russia has been the country to support the six continent theory since it was first formulated speaks of a political position and of strategies of visual and symbolic occupation. Giron chooses a geological model that formed part of the Cold War and that is now deployed in the globalization of the world.

Invisible form as second language responsible for chains of relations and of signs still proves largely ineloquent. Hyperactive, it continues, however, to mutter and mutter as it advances into different supports, materials and versions, sizes and media, always as vectorial space that allows for layered views. Piece that shows the magnitudes of the world and that enables the viewer to see and to think, to think and to see, to interact and to play with orographical accidents and river beds, and to discover the distributions of natural reserves, to compare extensions and to imagine contacts—beginnings of multiple meanings that are revealed and concealed within the body of the project, in the artistic and in the theoretical.

Giron has added to the contemporariness and complexity of vectorial space the task of scanning one of her models. Systems for producing the contemporary world are, undoubtedly, another vector of research. It is a question of verifying Tony Bennett’s notion that for each capitalism and energy force there is a determined system of artistic representation. Realism for the industrial revolution and the steam engine, for instance, and post-World War II Abstraction for the last modernity, electronic energy, and nuclear power.

In the discursive system of Giron’s works, *Mundus* formulates as well a figuration that undertakes an intimate cartography drawn by the artist whose early life ensued in Patagonia. Her production combines Scandinavian, Swiss, and local emotional and visual landscapes that settle and expand in retroactive or future visions from the Buenos Aires enlightenments signaled not only in *Neocriollo*. In addition to the subjective paths with their geologies and geographies, some of the signs of the *Mundus* form entail as well an early stance on globalization and its planet-wide financial markets, its networks of global cities, its displacements whereby corporations concentrate all the wealth in the north of the planet and production is clustered in the poorest parts of the Earth.

The form and cultural representations of the piece contain in their very structures and promises notes on speech on globalization, the post-national, and late capitalism. And they do so without neglecting the privileged place that poetic worlds and worlds of inner and bodily strength have for the artist.

On the basis of a story by Jorge Luis Borges, Néstor Perlongher, in one of the essays he wrote in San Pablo (this one in 1981), proposed the idea of a “desiring cartography.” He uses the term to refer to the representation of spaces that cannot be observed from a fixed or central point of view but must, rather, be recognized through exploration and circulation, as they are wandered through in successive libidinal waves. True cartography creates territories as it explores them. Conceiving the six continents with their oceans as forces that bathe the terrestrial masses in distributions with no norths, masses that take shape in their drifting, is a way of placing *Mundus* in the future between practice and theory, between art and desire.

Marcelo E. Pacheco, 2016

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