

Claudia Bernal: Art and Life

Interview with André Seleanu, journalist and art critic

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Claudia, you work in the field of contemporary art, in Quebec and Canada, in a cultural environment that in recent years has demonstrated some acceptance of political content in art. Would you tell me how you conceive of the relationship between art in general and the problems raised by contemporary global society?

It is very important to me to link what I do with what I live, in time and space. What I mean is that there has to be a connection between the context I live in with my work, between art and daily life. To achieve my work, I take as my starting point certain social or political issues that I'm especially interested in, such as exile, migration and social inequality. In my view, activism and social resistance have to go beyond speeches or street demonstrations. Art and artists have an important role to play in transforming contemporary society and resolving its problems; they can create spaces that enable people to think through particular political and social situations and put them into question. It was in this spirit that I created the artwork on Ciudad Juarez, which hadn't been planned. I lived in Mexico for two years and it was in being there, living there that the idea came to me to do a work of art about the more than three hundred women murdered in Ciudad Juarez.

More than three hundred women have been murdered in Ciudad Juarez, and it hasn't stopped. All kinds of theories are being considered as efforts are being made to apprehend the murderers, even including ones about clandestine groups who carry out social cleansings and eliminate the poor. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Guatemala, where last year many hundreds of women were murdered. It's almost a Malthusian phenomenon of extermination. How do you see this, as an attempt to decrease population levels? Why are there attacks on the poor or on workers?

It is difficult for me to answer that question. But one thing is certain, that we live in societies where what counts is money and power. The people with the means decide for everyone else. In Ciudad Juarez, the big multinationals, the *maquiladora* owners, do whatever they want with the workers. In Colombia, for example, the military, paramilitary and guerrillas make the laws. But there is something that we, we can do. We can try and resist, don't you think?

So you create these works of art mostly from the perspective of emotional reactions?

When I arrived in Mexico, knowing what was going on in the country mattered to me because I was going to be living there for two years. I started watching TV news and reading newspapers. That's when I started hearing about the murders of more than three hundred women in Ciudad Juarez. Every day there would be an announcement that eight, ten bodies had just been discovered... Later, I heard that women had been murdered in Guatemala...and in discussing this matter with a Canadian woman here, I learned that something similar was going on in Vancouver. I do not understand why women are being killed. I can't explain it, but I'm interested in it because I'm a woman and it touches me deeply. I felt I needed to talk about it – actually, it was more that I told myself that I had to do something about it. That's when I started to do research, then began approaching the subject from different angles. What I finally ended up with was the *Monument to Ciudad Juarez...*

When you started your research, what criteria did you use?

I wanted to talk about the issue from an artistic point of view, since that's my work. I am an artist and I feel that art is the best way for me to express myself. I began the research by looking at the print media. I gradually started to grasp what was happening. It was really complicated though, because this has been going on for more than ten years. There are lots of theories explaining this mass murder of women. Some

say it has to do with the traffic of human organs, others link it to live snuff movies, or to Americans coming across the border looking for Mexican women to satisfy their sexual desire. Some investigations relate it to drug traffickers. Personally, I don't have a theory to explain it. What's important to me is that the facts were there, confronting me.

How can artists talk about facts without being interested in causes? Is that possible?

I'm interested in the causes, but in the case of Ciudad Juarez, they're really obscure. Apparently even FBI agents were called in.

I read a lot, and while the number of theories grew, total impunity prevailed. I realized that many people had no idea that this horrible situation had occurred, even in Mexico. I noticed this the first time I exhibited the work in public. The subject is difficult because the facts are so violent. The challenge facing me was to avoid sinking into the macabre in order to express what I was feeling.

As an artist with a somewhat conceptual approach, what keeps you interested is your own reaction to your surroundings. You are less interested in causes, or in doing a journalistic kind of research.

Research is very important to me. Through research, I can sort of clothe myself in the subject that at one point imposes its presence on me. This is what led me to work closely with non-governmental organizations in Ciudad Juarez like *Casa Amiga*, an organization working with women victims of violence, *Por nuestras hijas de regreso a casa*, an organization of relatives of disappeared women and that orients its actions mainly towards the government, and *CETLAC* that works with *maquiladora* labourers, among other things. During my stay in Ciudad Juarez, I even visited locations where bodies had been found.

What did you learn from the research?

That no one knows what's going on and meanwhile, women keep being murdered. The general feeling is that no one is doing anything. There's an overriding sense of powerlessness. I could see the distress of the survivors, their fear and despair. But I also witnessed a certain level of resistance. People are organizing and they do demonstrate to put pressure on the authorities.

The question I asked myself was how to talk about this from my own perspective. It's not easy to talk about violence like this; it's a sensitive topic. I did not want to show dead bodies, raped women, lacerated breasts. In the course of my research, I found out that women had been found in places like a river, in the sand, and that they had never been properly buried. Actually, many were never found. It came to me that I could take these women's bodies symbolically and offer them a proper burial.

This idea of a burial... Are you intending a religious component here?

I talked with mothers of some of the murdered women and they kept going back to the fact that they had never seen their daughter's body. For example, one of them told me that the police showed her an unrecognizable body, saying it was her daughter's, only to call her back later on to identify her daughter's clothes but on the body of another girl. For the mothers and relatives of these women, feeling this endless uncertainty, never having buried their daughter, their sister, their wife, not having mourned them properly, these are extremely difficult experiences. Unable to reach a feeling of closure... That's when the idea of a burial came to me.

So the starting point of your creation was what happened to the bodies after the murders.

Yes. Then I borrowed elements of popular culture that interested me. To start with, I used terracotta urns that refer to precolombian rituals, not only in Mexico but also in many other countries of the Americas. I installed the urns in a spiral form, making reference to infinity: life and death.

In other words, you aim to fit your aesthetic pursuits into the cycle of popular customs. How was this installation received?

When I presented my work at the *Zocalo*, Mexico City's main public square that's also called the *Plaza de la Constitución*, the first reaction people had was to interpret the installation as an "*ofrenda*." In Mexico, death makes up a big part of popular culture and offerings are made to celebrate the dead. It was fantastic to see the public appropriate the artwork, and make it their own: people took it upon themselves to leave objects at the installation, old shoes, votive candles. Many people made the walk along the spiral path, a ritual of some sort.

I was able to see this interest in your work when I read through Mexican newspapers. Upon your return to Montreal, you did some engravings that are something like Goya's, a bit dark and macabre. You seem to be interested in the issue of death. You drift towards topics linked to mourning, to violence...

Yes, death is a subject I'm quite interested in. Solitude, absence or oblivion also relate to death.

I very much liked the structure of your engravings, but I also noted their seriousness, something quite purified, a certain elegance. At the same time, their simplicity opens the mind to reflection, to the consequences of human violence...

I'm interested in death because it has always been close by in my life... Not that I was ever in danger myself... I come from Colombia, a country that some say is the most violent on earth. Some even say there's a culture of violence in Colombia. But it is also a country of incredible natural wealth, a country whose history consists of violence and injustice but where you can meet people whose generosity is unlimited and who love life above all. Death is not something foreign to me; it's not outside of me...

Does your work seek to exorcize death?

Yes, probably. I don't see death as something definitive. When I talk about death I also talk about life. Death makes us think about life, too. Only live people can perceive death. In Colombia, there is a popular saying that goes like this: *El muerto al hueco y el vivo al baile* (A hole for the dead, a party for the living).

In the end, with your work you're trying to raise people's awareness?

I wouldn't say raising people's awareness. I believe in art, and as an artist I have a role to play in the process of social transformation. It may sound idealistic, but this is the conviction that keeps me working on projects, trying to be useful, to make a difference.

Was it difficult to get permission to install your artwork in Mexico?

No, I just took the place over. And when I wanted to show the final version of the installation at the *Zocalo*, I knew that there was a whole movement of citizens, social organizations and artists for putting pressure on the Mexican government to stop the violence against women in general and in Ciudad Juarez in particular. This led me to associate myself with the "March of Women in Black," a women's collective that organizes demonstrations against violence towards women.

I have seen your large paintings and I find they have this colour, this light that I like, a very courageous composition on a large scale, very “gestual.” But aside from the light, which is certainly not what we see in Quebec or Canada, I see no reference to the issue of funerary vases in your paintings.

From a formal perspective, I could say that my work is diverse. I do paintings, video installations and engravings, but they do have a common thread in terms of their subject matter. The subjects I’m interested in include identity or loss of identity; migration; memory; urban, social and cultural fragmentation. The way it goes for me is that one work of art usually leads to another. The particular form it will take emerges during the creative process. I rarely know ahead of time what form it will take. I start with a general idea, a topic, and it’s only in developing the project that the artwork will take the form of a painting, an engraving or an installation. What happens sometimes is that I’m intrigued by an object and that becomes my creative starting point. For example, I was recently led by the sole photograph I had kept of my mother and grandmother to produce the installation-performance *Les voies silencieuses*¹ that speaks about memory in a manner that’s very simple, but effective I think.

What has influenced your development as an artist? Colombia has had its share of great writers like Alvaro Mutis, Garcia Marquez... And then there are the well-known artists, the painter Enrique Grau or Botero (although I’m not a great fan of Botero), the sculptor Villamizar. They were able to adapt the modern vernacular to Colombia’s culture and its imaginative atmosphere.

I have always been close to literature, that’s for sure. Before studying visual arts at UQAM,² I did a B.A. in Philology and Languages at the National University of Colombia, and I finished one year of a Master’s

¹ The title could be translated as “The Silent Paths.”

² Université de Québec à Montréal.

degree in Linguistics at Laval University. I was also in close contact with stories, with oral tradition. We did not have a television at home, so my mother would tell us stories. My father also played guitar and sang popular songs. Literature has always been very present in my imagination, in my work. I'm currently interested in the work of Laura Restrepo, a Colombian writer of some significance in contemporary Hispanic American literature.

Tell me about your current projects.

Right now I'm working on a project that I will carry out in Colombia. It has to do with women displaced by war, in the hard hit region of Barrancabermeja, an oil-rich port on the Magdalena River that crosses much of Colombia from North to South. This project arose out of *Monument to Ciudad Juarez...* My country is also torn apart, and I feel like seeing what's happening for myself.

Barrancabermeja has seen its share of bloodshed; there have been a lot of murders there. Isn't that the case? Aren't you scared to go there?

No, I'm not afraid. On the contrary, that reality is part of the work I have to do; it's one of the things that interest me.

You're interested in day-to-day realities that most of our fellow citizens avoid thinking about, that are barely discussed in the media. From time to time there will be a few lines of coverage in the newspapers, but we practically need a magnifying glass to find it.

It's true. For most people, these are news-in-brief stories that they come across in the media, and so the events seem quite distant. People don't feel very involved; the events are happening so far away.

Do you identify with these displaced women?

I could say so because even though I didn't come here as a political refugee, I decided to leave Colombia the day I realized I wouldn't be able to do what I wanted there, that it would be very difficult for personal reasons but also because of the country's situation in the 1980's. I am a voluntary exile in Canada.

In Mexico, I centred my work on women because the facts showed that women were the people being murdered. In Colombia, it is clear in my mind that it is women and children who are the most affected by violence and by the forced displacements that the violence provokes. But as I mentioned earlier, my works of art take shape during the process of creation. It could be that my experiences in the field will transform my creative approach and the way I'll tackle the issue of violence. Each project is an adventure for me.