

# **Re-covering the Body: Women Artists in Latin America**

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## **Introduction**

In this paper I want to examine the contradiction between women's physical biological, body and the body as imagined, manipulated and defined by dominant patriarchal and neo-colonialist aesthetics as a means of understanding the relationship between art, gender and politics in work by women working in the geo-political area of Mexico and Central America and by Latinas in the US.

By looking at the way art history is being deconstructed by contemporary theory it is possible to look at the conspicuous absence of women in the visual arts in general and specify the particular circumstances of Latin American women's artistic activity. I will look at the way social and political situations continue to repress women's creativity and the subsequent ways in which women are responding to this through images. I will aim to show that the act of creation can be a resistance strategy that becomes a revolutionary action when the hierarchies of power are challenged. Lastly I wish to show that alternative political strategies and artistic politics can regain and re-cover the power of the gaze and reverse the vigilance/surveillance of patriarchal regimes by stretching the limits of the body with alternative corporeal strategies which convert the body into the ultimate text.

According to conventional artistic criteria in the West the nude has been the true test of artistic genius, the capturing of the power or the beauty of a naked body on canvas or in marble has been the cornerstone of great art from the Greeks to the Renaissance through to the twentieth century. With few notable exceptions this art has been perpetrated by male artists and depicts a heroic male or a passive female, sublime, sanitised, in short perfect but immobile and above all unreal.

Images of women have been used to represent divine perfection, controlled desire or an exotic magical and untouchable creature. All of these images of femininity have been created and controlled by male fantasy. Imprisoned inside the frame or immobilised in stone women have been unable to exert their ideas, independence or creativity.

This division between producer of culture and product has meant that women's creativity has been denied. They have been allocated one of two roles, the craft producer or the biological producer. Throughout history women have been forced down the scale of hierarchies and placed on the passive side of culturally imposed binary oppositions; nature/culture, active/passive, artist/model. It is essential to question these divisions and the categories of so-called "high" or fine art and popular or folk art and the way in which these previously unmoveable borders are being crossed in contemporary art practice in order to open up dialogue and explode the existing canons.

Weavers, potters and embroiders have always played a vital part in art history but their work has been relegated to craft production involving the making of beautiful, "popular" but anonymous artefacts available for consumption. Art produced by women and non-western artists has been suppressed, ignored and belittled due to the structure of critical studies in art history and the politics of museums and galleries. The limits of traditional art history cry out for a re-covering of women's voices, eyes and vision in order to establish an alternative and complementary canon. By creating art and claiming the right to do so women are not just rejecting these roles but subverting them and channelling them into their own creativity, working to change their situation with the tools available to them.

In non-western terms the situation is further complicated as issues of class and gender become part of a neo-colonial landscape characterised by a history of violence and resistance

which incur flexible non-linear boundaries between ethnic and cultural identities and challenge existing categories based on western criteria.

In times of war and revolution the body bursts its boundaries and steps out of its confines to become both actor and acted upon. Physical and psychological torture are used to control and manipulate women's bodies in particularly specific and horrific ways in order to debilitate and strip them of their humanity and individuality, exaggerating the social and sexual roles that are ascribed to women and their bodies all over the world.

Women's responses to war and violence are many and vary greatly from the passive role that has been awarded to them. When in a situation wholly defined by powerlessness and lack there has been a rediscovery of the real and imagined body through words, actions and images. Women have learnt to write with their body thereby converting the body into a political text, freeing the "other", in this case the body, to speak and be heard and to become a weapon against violence and gender oppression. In this paper I wish to document the particular role of women activist-artists in oppressed societies in the geo-political areas in question, and examine how, by using the body and in particular the gendered body, women are re-covering their bodies, which have been abused, tortured, appropriated and "disappeared" by violent patriarchal politics.

### **Neo-Colonialist Politics and Cultural Exploitation**

Latin American art is often considered to be marginal and is viewed as exotic or hybrid because it is judged by the criteria of white western art history. It is neither an inferior aspect of this tradition nor a self-contained opposite of it but instead has its own theoretical and visual history. This has developed alongside and in spite of the western canon and embraces specific aspects of the region's aesthetic and cultural landscapes which manifest themselves in various themes, techniques and approaches.

The western tradition tends to separate the history of the visual arts from political and social history and in this paper I wish to emphasise the importance of bridging this gap by looking at the social and cultural events which have led to developments in the arts in Latin America, thereby moving towards a theory of visual politics which does not distinguish between artistic and political practices but rather sees the arts in general as being part of the political process both in cause and effect. In Latin America the divisions between art and politics are nowhere near as defined as in western countries. Culture includes both of these and leads towards a national identity, a politics of identity which includes aspects of life as art that are disregarded in other cultures. Latin American culture is not as renewable and disposable as North American culture and there is more of a tradition of history and myth. It is this history and myth which is both sought by outsiders and rejected when it fails to conform to their standards.

Latin American cultural history is traditionally divided into two broad disciplines; one is anthropological or archaeological in nature and treats the visual arts as a way of understanding collective communities and cultures in the past without reference to the present, whilst the other relies on judging all art by the pre-established criteria set down by the western European tradition of art as ownership and authorship. Neither of these approaches reflects Latin American art's specificity and importance but relegates it to the marginal.

When the conquistadors first arrived in the Americas they took with them very rigid and fixed ideas on art and society which were at odds with the socio-cultural ways of life which they found there. Our only resources regarding these artistic and cultural practices come to us through the pre-conceived ideas of the colonisers who first made records based on their own criteria. Due

to the oral nature of the indigenous peoples of Latin America the most pertinent records come from visual material: the textiles, architectural details, ceramics and tribal art which were designed as integral parts of specific ways of life not as objects to be collected and dis-regarded as they were by the Europeans who collected them in order to display them as symbols of other “less-civilised” and pagan peoples in Europe.

The collection and display of artefacts encouraged the idea of ownership through spectacle and the white, male, bourgeois, colonialist viewpoint which has enabled them to be acquired, curated and displayed allowed them to become part of the detached but powerful gaze of the colonialist consumer. This idea of art for spectacle and consumption is in direct opposition to the original idea behind the objects displayed which had been designed to be worn, used in the household or in religious practices in communities. When judged by western visual and philosophical criteria they were found to be lacking either in quality or in topic matter and their lack of authorship or signature meant they were collectively relegated to the category of craft or ethnic art which was deemed unimportant in aesthetic and monetary terms.

### **The Introduction of the “Other”**

At the turn of the century interest began to grow among the artistic communities in objects of art from other countries. This awakening interest in “primitive” cultures formed part of the recognition by western artists that artefacts from colonised lands were there for the taking, and could therefore belong to, be appropriated by and subsequently be changed in the same way that any other material resource could be. This utilisation of non-western art became known as Primitivism and became homogenised into a series of generalised types and characteristics which enabled artists to produce an art practice which offered a radical alternative to conventional established European art. Their view of non-western societies was characterised by a depiction of the notion of a pure and unspoilt idealised “other”.

By labelling non-western art as primitive this not only places it below western art in a visual hierarchy but also sites it in a less-developed past which is considered to be lagging in the “civilisation” process. What makes this process more damaging is the failure to accept that many non-western societies are in continual states of flux and creative development. Calling their artistic output “primitive” refuses to recognise that this “primitivism” also forms part of their contemporary society and is simultaneously traditional and modern. It is more convenient to site “different” forms of expression in the archaeological past or as oddities rather than accept that they are challenges to established western aesthetic and cultural criteria.

Any society or group which bases itself on a hierarchical model and see its self worth in terms of power needs to position itself against an “other” in order to define itself and establish an identity by defining what it is not. The “other” can be any group defined by nationality, ethnicity, race, colour, sexuality, ideology or physical and mental characteristics with the only prerequisite being a notable difference from what are perceived to be the boundaries of the dominant society’s social limits. The “other” can be real or imagined, it can be mythological or a mythologization of real people but always symbolises an enemy to be beaten, conquered or controlled in order to preserve the social status quo. Primitivism can be understood therefore as cultural colonialism tied to the western need to control and exploit. There is no exchange or barter taking place rather an assimilation of what is deemed to be useful and a rejection and negation of what is viewed as negative in non-industrialised societies. In artistic terms the “other” has been maintained by stripping cultural artefacts of their origins and original uses and placing them in collections which

do not take into account their diversity. Once collected they are then labelled as monstrous, primitive or exotic according to what is convenient or popular and often involves manipulation of a double standard to maintain the categories.

### **High Art and Popular Art**

If art is understood to be part of society and of a market then each artist and/or artistic object is assigned a value accordingly. One of the most important distinctions western culture makes is the division between “high” art and “popular” art. As with all binary oppositions the two are mutually dependent upon each other in western value terms and are both symptoms of cultural colonialism.

The arts of painting and sculpture succeeded in the market place because they produced objects which could become property in a way which the written word could not. With the interest in primitivism came an interest in the market value of “tribal” art. This was not accepted on its own terms but was moulded to suit western economic needs with agents trying to insist that artists sign their work to enable it to be sold at a higher price as “art” rather than as craft. This westernisation of artistic practice is at odds with the original ideas behind functionally designed arts and crafts but has far-reaching social and economic consequences.

In oral cultures which base their shared knowledge on the spoken word and songs art does not just have a visual function but also takes on a narrative and historical role. The images and patterns preserve the memory of a community or people in the way the written word does in the west. There is a sacred process in the creation of the object not in the finished product. The artistic and the functional are two interrelated components of an artefact and the religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art are intertwined. The production and consumption of popular art is a typical manifestation of the way cultural colonialism works.

Mass production of arts and crafts means a high turnover for the tourist trade but at the same time the original context of the artefact is lost when judged purely by western aesthetic and economic criteria. This has developed into a rejection of art which does not conform to a supposedly universal set of “Indian” artistic elements.

Recently art from Indian cultures has been called “popular” art, which covers many different areas and again aims to mono-categorise artefacts from non-western countries as colourful and charming. This is a swing away from the Spanish meaning of arte popular - art of the people - and instead it is understood as cheap, replaceable and kitsch. Above all it does not possess the artistic or monetary value which is placed on non-popular or “high” art. Culture therefore has been split into two in the region; undervalued but sellable “amateur” popular art by which the region has been characterised and art in the western tradition which relies on a western style market for distribution, for aesthetic appreciation and financial gain.

### **Political Art History**

The visual arts in Latin America are more closely linked to their social and political context than European and North American art because the arts play the role that politics do in the west. The people have little faith in party politics and have looked to the arts to create a sense of national identity, middle class Latin American audiences have consistently turned to literature and the visual arts for leaders which affords writers and artists a privileged position and it is they rather than political leaders who provide national pride and symbols of national consciousness.

Latin American art is often conveniently characterised from the outside as being primitive and fantastical painted by colourful personalities bound by their emotions rather than their intellects. This construction of the Other paints a storybook picture of magical landscapes and primitive iconography which allows western viewers to ignore social issues which are integral elements of art and society. This not only constructs a false Latin American identity which does not take into account differences between countries and regions but also excludes any style of art form which does not conform to this construct, especially art which includes any overt or implicit political agenda. The term “art of the fantastic” corresponds to what is termed magical realism in literature, an umbrella title which has been used to cover all kinds of styles of texts without considering differing backgrounds, aims and techniques.

Developing in tandem with political changes and academic movements has been the construction of a post-colonial criticism which involves scholars from formerly colonised and oppressed countries and cultures producing their own accounts of colonial history and critiques of the dominant western discourses. In the arts this includes an increasing trend towards interdisciplinary analysis and the breakdown of the borders between art, society and politics in order to create a new field of cultural practices with political agendas.

Subverting the master narratives of culture enables a polyphony of voices to confront the formerly monolithically powerful white western voice. The divisions between classical, folk and modern traditions are now being mixed in order for artists to bring about true innovation in theory and practice. As racial mixing occurs so too does a mixing of cultural heritage which is problematic in a world which is more comfortable with simple labelling. One function of the visual arts is to draw attention to the non-heterogeneity of society in the US and Latin America in order to stimulate a post-colonial critique and allow the Other to begin to move from the margins to the centre.

### **Women in the Arts**

One of these “others” is the multiple voice of feminism which is dealing with exclusion and marginalisation on all levels. It is important to remember when dealing with non-western contexts that what is considered “post” in a linear and western historical narrative of cultural history can be the scene of contemporary debate and battle in a third-World context. Therefore, to talk of postfeminism in a Latin American context implies a false idea of a shared history, common goals and equal footing with feminism in the West. When looking at the development of art history as a critical tool that has developed in tandem with classical art training it would seem plain that feminism and women’s history cannot be simply integrated into these structures because they leave unquestioned and inviolate the very system which has insured women’s exclusion:

Artistic production by white men has been privileged by the art establishment and this situation has been maintained by subsequently financially devaluing women and non-white artists and their work. It is clear that those who are in favour of the absence of women are also those who negate their presence/entrance and give the argument of the so-called “nature of women to maintain their position. In order for women to gain access to art it is important to recognise that it is colonialist patriarchy that defines art; what it is, what it represents and its economic value, and its subsequent placement in the public sector over which it has control. As Chadwick says in *Women Art and Society*:

*The production of meaning is inseparable from the production of power (p.9)*

There is a need to take different approaches in looking at the actual artworks themselves, rereadings can question the gender, class and racial hierarchies which usually form part of their placement in artistic and academic canons. This also carves a path for new forms of expression which can be addressed and built on by contemporary artists. Together these approaches can forge a new discipline of aesthetic politics which is concurrent with other academic and practical developments which consider issues of visual representations:

*The place from which the woman artist works is always fragile, because empowerment of the self can only be achieved by emptying; reversing and displacing power relations. (When the Moon Waxes Red p.114)*  
It is this, which makes the creation of art and the artistic product political.

For women and other marginalised groups it is essential to offer alternatives to the figure of the solitary white male genius and the egotistical nature of authentic artist who offers a true meaning of a subject to the viewer. In order to position the individual artist as a heroic figure it then becomes necessary to set him up against a set of negative characteristics which are synonymous with femininity and passivity and therefore devalue women's art production. Some artists have used other women artists and their achievements as their source of inspiration. Yreina Cervantez's self-portraits are akin to Kahlo's in their detail and style and her Homage to Frida Kahlo includes a portrait of the Mexican painter surrounded by familiar objects and icons. Photography is a particularly useful tool in recording women's history. The Mexican photographer Lola Alvarez Bravo's portrait of Maria Izquierdo reconstructs a woman's history through images of achievers and at the same time inscribes herself in it. Angeles Torrejon's photo of an International women's day march demanding to know where the disappeared are performs the same function and allows the viewer to participate in history.

Art must be understood as an expression of many different and often conflicting but always subjective ideas which offer a "view" of the world around us. One important step in this is destroying the barriers put up between art and politics as if they are mutually exclusive. Culture is an expression of society and politics, whether party or personal, and cannot be separated from society.

Until fairly recently fine art training was the privilege of the upper classes and women who wished to be artists were subject to the restrictions of that society. Whilst they had the leisure time they did not have the freedom of their male counterparts as the notion of femininity was class-determined. Women were confined to the less "physical", more "gentile" art of watercolour painting especially the genres of landscape and still life, whilst men took on the more highly regarded larger-scale oil painting. The classical and religious knowledge needed to take on the subject matter in oils were generally denied to women as was access to the study of anatomy and the male nude that was necessary for figurative work. Class differences have also been critical in the representations of women with most of the models coming from the working classes. The images of women's bodies (rather than portraits of upper-class women) were part of the expression of the power of the artist and his genius and were treated as material which could be moulded and displayed according to the wishes of the artist and the public. The binary opposition between male artist and female model made it very difficult for women to succeed as artists. Women from the upper classes were curtailed in one way and working class women in another.

A few women who were originally artists' models actually became artists themselves but found it difficult to break into the art world due to being continually associated with their male lovers and having their work dismissed as poor imitation. Sometimes the work of women artists would resemble that of their male partners in which case it was often absorbed into the canon without due recognition or it was rejected in terms of quality if it varied from the work of her

associates. This emphasises the importance of searching for women's individual achievements in art and not just seeing her represented through the eyes and brushes of others. Being part of an art movement meant that even if women achieved a degree of independence the way in which they regarded other women in representation was marked by class differences. Simone de Beauvoir in the *Second Sex* wrote that men often confuse their descriptive perspective with the absolute truth and that this with reference to art means that as women we are forced to observe, examine and portray things from a male point of view. This false education has affected women in the arts, how we see and how we are seen, leaving us in an inferior and marginalized position, outside of the discourse, with few options open other than accepting and using the existing system.

The division between "male" and "female" art and between "high" and "low" art forms part of the same set of binary oppositions which links men with the fine arts of painting and sculpture (the viewing arts) and women with craft or folk art (the doing arts). Although this takes different forms in different cultures women are more often than not the anonymous producers of cultural artefacts whilst men are perceived as the producers of meaning in culture.

Women in many societies have turned to crafts as they lend themselves to smaller-scale production and are easier to carry out in conjunction with domestic responsibilities, however these bodies of work have often been lost due to their anonymous nature and domestic usage. In western cultures craft is seen as a hobby, something superfluous to the real job of women, that of child rearing and running the household. These artistic expressions have been considered as suitable for women as they more often deal with nature or so-called intimate themes such as embroidery and samplers. As the gap between men's art and women's art grew so too did the economic value placed on large-scale sculpture or painting. The division between the fine arts and the applied or decorative arts has therefore acted against the artistic practice of women.

In some non-western cultures, crafts are seen as essential parts of the spirituality of the community. In Navajo mythology women are taught to weave by Spiderwoman and weaving is an essential creative and narrative element of society. In Guatemala much weaving and embroidery uses symbols and colours to tell stories which are unable to be deciphered by outsiders.

Women's suffrage brought about changes in all areas of western women's lives, artistic creation being one of them, and opened up the way for women to voice their own concerns. Feminism in the arts grew out of the women's movement and initially relied on sociological and political methodology before developing into a separate discipline. Over the past few decades advances in theory and crossing of the boundaries between disciplines have meant that artists with socio-political agendas have challenged existing traditions and values in art history with re-readings of women's work and subject matter especially in terms of representations of the body. Women began to take the stage as producers of meaning in culture by subverting the binary oppositions by which they had been defined. As active artists they became the observer rather than the observed and the creator rather than the created.

There has been criticism of the fact that feminist re-visions of art theory and history are one-dimensional in character and focus on the European bourgeois traditions, neglecting contributions from women working outside the accepted margins. Race and ethnicity require specificity of approach which does not marginalize and includes other priorities in the arts. The woman artist is not a universal subject but an active agent who must be placed and place herself in a social, political and historical context.

If art by women has been devalued and ignored over the years then work by women of colour is ascribed certain traits which allow it to be pigeonholed. If executed in "primitive" style is

often dismissed as child-like or simplistic or praised for its colourful approach without taking into account the issues behind the work. Work which does not conform to these expectations are sometimes criticised on one hand as being “too white” or sometimes ignored for not being typical enough.

As in the feminist movement in general there are some artists who recognise the shared marginalised position of women as a gender and of women of colour and others who feel their position of multiple marginalisation only serves to distance them from western women. Lippard sees the link between the two groups:

*Both women and artists of color are struggling to be perceived as subject rather than object, independent participants rather than socially constructed pawns. I think that any person conscious of being dominated is capable of recognising this position in others therefore people marginalized to any degree should be able to develop a multiple vision of themselves and others. (Mixed Blessings p.11)*

She states that there is an identification based on marginalization (indigenous and black people) which can be turned into a political tool and makes the centre shift away from a monolithic truth.

### **Women Artists in Latin America**

In the past two decades there has been a more general interest in Latin American art following on from the literature of the boom of the 1960s. Exhibitions and publications have stimulated interest about women artists previously unknown in the West. The popularity of the testimonio has encouraged women’s active role in politics and the success of authors such as Isabel Allende and Laura Esquivel have brought about a more general interest in artistic production by women from Latin America. However, in general women have been significant by their absence in traditional accounts of the region’s literature and art and exceptions only serve to prove the rule. There is comparatively little scholarship on Latin American women’s literature and even less on their contributions to the arts. One obvious exception to this is the cult of Kahlomania which has produced a large amount of literature and paraphernalia in Spanish and English, most of which is biographical in nature. Art and literature by Latin American women is often disregarded if it does not conform to what is expected of if they step outside of their cultural boundaries. It is acceptable for a westerner to use non-western source material but not the other way round and there is little tolerance for work which addresses cultural mixing

Women’s participation has been more prominent in the arts in Latin America than in Europe or North America but the successful women have come almost exclusively from the wealthy middle-classes thereby only making half the story evident. The other half of the story is tied up with lack of opportunity for women from the working classes and the anonymous role ascribed to indigenous women, however both types of women’s history are due to the male/female values typical of the area in question. Art in Latin America was considered as a professional, economically viable occupation only for men until the 20th century, with women being relegated to crafts as a domestic pastime with corresponding images. In Mexico Maria Izquierdo was one of the earliest women to enter the professional art world alongside Frida Kahlo, and in Cuba Amalia Pelaez was accepted as part of the vanguardia. However, women did not make their presence felt in numbers until after World War II when changes of industrialisation allowed the area to develop a middle class, which provided a private art market and the conditions for women to become involved in the arts. One of the reasons that women’s participation was held up was the domination of muralism until well into the 1950s. The public presence of murals and the physical skills necessary meant that they were deemed unsuitable for women artists and only a handful were executed by women. Women’s contributions to the Mexican art world took

off in the 60s and 70s with women being most active in the areas of easel painting, printmaking, photography and sculpture.

Mexican and Chicana women continue to be confronted by a set of stereotypes, traditions and restriction, some of which are common to women in general and some of which are specific to cultural background and communities. Women who grow up in communities based on Latin family and cultural values are restricted by expectations to conform to icons of women which correspond to traditional roles. The family unit is based on two clear-cut opposing models; the macho as displayed by the dominant father and the self-sacrificing mother as carer of the family. When these traditions come into conflict with rapidly changing western society which, although also limiting women, allows them more freedom, especially outside the domestic area in terms of work and sexuality, there are conflicting signals which challenge both sets of rules. When women are heavily pressured into maintaining traditions and culture the acts of writing and creating can be active in breaking stereotypes within the patriarchal family. If women use their time, not to serve the males of the family but to create something which demonstrates their ideas and independence then this is in itself a political act which reverberates through the family and ultimately the structure of the community. One response of the repressed to the repressor may be in the form of a strong woman who plays with the myths of the dominant society and secretly reverses them. This can be played out by the women themselves or by characters which are created in words or images.

Some artists celebrate their culture through their work or aspects of Latino culture that are deeply embedded into their way of life, others reclaim their culture through the act of remembering details or events from their childhood and others question, challenge or criticise inherited aspects of cultural traditions. By using specific cultural references or materials the artist can turn the tables and make art by the “other” unreadable to those from outside the culture thereby turning them into the “other” and restoring the strength of the artist and their community. Images and symbols from popular culture are part of the collective cultural memory of a community and their inclusion in art blurs the lines, easing their inclusion in the canon and giving them dual identity.

Kathy Vargas uses elements of the cultural mixture of the Southwest in her work. *Varga's photographic models are “little dead things” – flowers, birds and frog skeletons- ghosts that she has found are offensive to a mainstream culture which likes to have death distanced or on TV, while Third World cultures are far more comfortable with death. (Mixed Blessings p.85)*

At the 1996 Fotoseptiembre Colloquium in Mexico City Vargas talked of her work centring on the split second of crossing the border and exploring what happens when there is a conscious choice to exist in the midst of this. In common with many of her contemporaries she is preoccupied with the multiplicity of the word and identity of Chicano and the “otherness” that this brings. She sees three ways to deal with this; by iconography, by text and by humour, all of which have their own languages and codes which are difficult for outsiders to read, thereby both intensifying and breaking down feelings of otherness, depending on the position of the spectator.

Amalia Mesa-Bains makes installations based on the art of the altar which is so important in Mexican culture. She has retained its original meaning as a spiritual symbol but has used other non-religious aspects of Mexican life as source material. She has assembled altars to alternative heroines like Sor Juana and Frida Kahlo, and to women who have broken social barriers like Rita Hayworth and Dolores del Rio, emphasising elements of ritual and memory through artefacts and photos. The altar forms an essential part of Mexican and Latino cultural heritage and is used by male and female artists to piece together the tiny elements which together make up a cultural

whole. She is tracing a secret history of women, by making them the subject of her work with such outward homage she honours all women by bringing the private nature of vanities and altars into a public viewing space. Patricia Rodriguez's self-portrait is a reliquary, a box or nicho which is decorated like a small altar with tiny milagros and secrets inside drawers. On the other side of the mirror bureau is a mask of herself. She is using popular art as a form of identity and a way of expressing herself but with the drawers keeps some of herself hidden. The box is the portable form of the altar and performs the same function.

One of the main aspects of crossing identity boundaries in terms of language and cultural heritage is the constant presence of a fragmented self which is split between various cultures and identities, each of which is also split, leading to a splintering of realities with unlimited possibilities.

### **Re-viewing Women's Art**

An important way of reaffirming identity is by narrating through visuals which reinscribe women in history in the same way as a testimonio. These stories do not have to take the form of linear narratives in the style of a novel but can be multi-layered encouraging a non-monolithic view of history and of women. These multiple viewings are continually in flux and are negotiated between artist, work and viewer:

*Culturally conscious self-portraits often double as communal self-portraits....Sometimes such conscious self-portraits are double images, turning the mirror around, mocking physical and political reality, making believe, making the mirror the mediator between being seen and seeing oneself. (Mixed Blessings p.43)*

Cristina Fernandez's series of photos are an attempt to show the importance of one woman's ordinary life. They represent a reworking of the life of a woman called Maria in Michoacan, Mexico from 1910 onwards, with herself, the artist placed in the costumes and scenery of her subject's life. This work is a way of reaffirming memory and transposing one life and reality on top of another, pulling together the threads of women's lives across historical and geographical borders.

Seeing is power and by regaining the power of the gaze, the artist can be the instigator of social change by subverting the generally accepted binary oppositions which form patriarchal power structures. S/he can offer alternative visions of women's lives and histories.

Graciela Iturbide, a Mexican photographer, focuses on marginalised sections of society. One of her projects portrays a gang of cholos – Mexican Americans living in L.A.- whom she lived amongst before photographing. The young women are further marginalised within their societal confines due to being deaf and dumb. Her photos show their responses, through tattoos and elaborate hand signals and gestures, to the way society treats and dis-regards them. Her series on the women of Juchitan takes the form of black and white portraits, sometimes formal sometimes informal, but always with the consent of her subjects. Their strong sense of identity manifests itself in their traditions and clothes and their physical and spiritual strength is shown by the way they hold the gaze of the photographer, looking back without fear, secure in their environment. Her portraits include: a man, dressed as a woman, looking away from the camera and into a mirror, a woman holding a large crab which partly obscures her face and expression, and La Reina de las Iguanas, a regal woman carrying iguanas which appear as if they are her crown. She has photographed women at the market or dancing and talking, a young girl lying on a bed surrounded by flowers after she has been deflowered and a faithhealer healing a child. Another picture shows a woman breastfeeding her baby in a hammock, looking straight back into

the camera lens at the photographer. She has captured a community at their business and they regard her without any self-consciousness.

Iturbide's portraits do indeed say as much about her as her subjects. She says:

*I have come to believe that there are differences between the work of male and female photographers...I recognise that we take pictures according to our outlook, a "female" one. That doesn't make it impossible for a woman to photograph "like a man" or visa versa, or that a male photographer doesn't use sensitivity and delicacy. But our own relationship to the world, our position in society and as mothers, often conditions us differently from men...And I think the result shows in an implicit femaleness in our work, a consequence of our status as women. (Desires and Disguises p.68)*

Sandra Eleta from Panama talks of the self-discipline of entering into a connection or relationship with the subject when she takes a portrait:

*a camera is an extension of yourself, of your consciousness,...there's no distinction between you and your images...a photograph is a combination of both subject and object: at the instant of taking a photograph, the two become fused. It no longer matters which of you is the subject or the object, the difference dissolves into a single image. (Desires and Disguises p.18)*

She has made a series of portraits of a black community living on the coast of Panama. By documenting a marginalised group she is giving them a space to be seen as they want to be seen. They posed for her in their own choice of location and wardrobe, offering an alternative to so-called anthropological portraits of native peoples which were moulded to suit an exotic ideal. This freedom liberates the photographed subject, the photographer and the viewer from preconceived ideas of identity, ethnicity and reality. Photographing communities and individuals who are considered unimportant by those in power is an act of defiance as it captures and contains what is disappearing and what has been disappeared.

Women of colour have been marginalised on all sides and one of the strong features in their artistic production is the reinscription of their communities and families into history through the use of continuation through generations in words and images. Maria Madalena Campos-Pons's montage of images takes the form of a pictorial genealogical tree of the female members of her family, linked to each other and to Africa by an umbilical cord which delineates the blood and violence of their history and re-maps her history.

The language used to describe the act of photographing; shooting, taking a photo, capturing an image, lend themselves towards ideas of violence and ownership usually associated with men. Women have appropriated the power of the photographic image in order to provide a tool of memory and a weapon against violence.

Photography has been a significant art form for women. As it did not have the same restrictions that were imposed on classical art training, they were able to participate in greater numbers from the outset and figure in the initial stages of its history. Women have been active in photography all over the American continent providing inspiration for others. Although the issues of time and space which have been restricting elements in other forms of art such as easel painting do not apply to photography to such a great extent there are still practical problems. Materials are controlled by international manufacturers and economics which leads to high prices, limited access and insufficient supply of film-related products outside of urban areas. The new revolution in image technology and digital photography has had further implications for those who do not have access to the relevant equipment. Artists are dependent upon support or patronage from business and this is only available to a select few, leaving women outside of the technological revolution. However, this lack of materials can be turned around to women's advantage, as rather than using traditional methods other forms can be used involving craft materials, photo montage and fragmentation of images.

Lourdes Almeida has translated her personal iconography into images by means of Polaroids. She uses images from the Mexican visual tradition especially the heart, the altar and the portrait. Her work is not just photography, her photos are juxtaposed together, she re-constructs the images after having fragmented them and works with artisans to make frames from mixed media including tin plate and laton which turn her pictures into altars. She manipulates familiar Mexican religious and mythological images such as the Sacred Heart and the Virgin and transforms them. The heart which appears in her work is the bleeding heart of milagros rather than the St. Valentine sentimental heart of love. She manipulates technology without changing the subject matter to achieve a new slant. The images are taken in fragments and then printed on papel amate, a traditional Mexican work surface for popular art. In *Aparicion del Corazon Sangrante*, multiple fragments make up an image of a bleeding and pulsating heart in vivid colour, the flowering around it roots it to the arteries of the body and the flaming is built into the frame made of laton. (In an interview with Jose Antonio Rodriguez in the catalogue for *Corazon de mi Corazon*) She says that photography is a creative language for her and she began to use this type of iconography to confront people's religious neurosis by using the images which she had seen all her life and had previously wanted to deny. She wanted to extract something from the images without making them into religious or sacred paraphernalia. Her iconography metamorphoses and multiplies itself in collages without losing its original form and meaning as representation of something sacred. Her work contains a mixture of baroque and kitsch and, by using an eclectic mix of objects and paraphernalia, she transgresses the boundaries of high art and popular culture, technology and artesanía, art and photography.

Photographs are often seen as conveyers of the absolute truth, especially in official contexts. The expression "the camera never lies" means that the pictures that it produces are not questioned, despite the technological advances that make the manipulation of images commonplace:

*In a world where seeing is believing and where the real is equated with the visible (the all-too-visible, the more visible than visible) the human eye and its perfected substitute, the mechanical eye, are at the center of the system of representation. (When the Moon Waxes Red p.192)*

A photographer freezes a look but the creation of the image is in fact highly subjective. The framed image has been chosen and manipulated according to what the photographer's eye sees, therefore producing a three-way dialogue between the image, the photographer and the viewer. The moment the photographer chooses an event to be photographed s/he makes a cultural construction. An image such as a photo passes through a series of technological processes and cultural codifications and is therefore always a fragmented image even when it appears whole. The gaze of the viewer can agree with that of the photographer or not and its possibilities as a communication tool depend on this tacit agreement. What is regarded as a symbol of freedom or revolution can be synonymous with oppression or dissidence according to the preconceived ideas of the receiver of the image.

Photography in oppressive regimes serves to offer other versions of history and as a way to reconstruct alternative memories. In Cuba there is an official reality which exists through words and images, but Cuban photography has not always complied with this. However, the possibilities for real alternatives have been curtailed due to the presence of self-censorship. Being watched creates increased self-censorship, in particular whilst working under oppressive political or social conditions, or in exile. One response to this has been the use of metaphors as an ambiguous tool to suggest resistance but to avoid the consequences of a direct comment. Fragmentation can be a way of looking at the marginalized and maintaining power, obscuring the fuller picture by denying

communication between the image and the viewer. It is a way of asserting political power from a different perspective. Many images are only given meaning by words, without words they are abstract, linked only to the cultural codes the viewer identifies with the image. The Cuban artist Adela Herrera makes body portraits by extracting recognisable elements from her subject and juxtaposing them together using unexpected combinations of materials. She says that by abstracting the body she can give a clearer picture. (conversation with the author) In this context every image has political significance, it shows compliance or resistance and affects the viewer who is allowed access to it.

The camera can represent or misrepresent women depending on the photographer's objective. One area in which women can take control is that of portraits. By imaging themselves and other women they can re-establish their own viewpoints. The self-portraits of Lourdes Almeida are an important part of her work. *Autorretrato* is reminiscent of Kahlo in the truncated view of the body and in Almeida's dress and hair but she is unique in the way she has her eyes closed in the picture. We, the viewers, are the outsiders, she, the artist, has taken a picture of her interior self which is closed behind her eyes and behind the protection of the camera's lens. We are not allowed to enter only to gaze from the outside. Self-portraits for women involve a mixing of the private and the public which is conflicting for the viewer. Frida Kahlo's multiple portraits show her need to manifest the various aspects of her personality and there is a constant dialogue between her real and imagined selves in her work. In much of her photographic work, Ambra Polidori fragments herself and gives herself the artist and the subject a multiple gaze. By splitting the head from the body she simultaneously inhabits a male and a female viewing vantagepoint. The woman artist does not simply observe her own body but becomes an active link in the seeing chain. If she were simply to detach herself it would be the equivalent of denying her own body and becoming a pseudo male viewer.

The image of woman is seen to be more real than woman herself, although it is nothing but a reflection distorted by the male gaze. The mirror has long been an important tool for women in the politics of seeing. It was originally a way for women to contemplate their reflections and prepare themselves to be seen. It can be used to both fragment the self and emphasise its duality and to simultaneously adopt the role of the viewer and the viewed. In painting or photography the self-portrait or self-image plays the part of the seer and the seen, part of the artist yet separate from them. Simone de Beauvoir cited the mirror as the key to the feminine condition:

*Women concern themselves with their own images (while) men with the enlarged self-images provided by their reflection in a woman (Women Art and Society quoting the Second Sex p.294/5)*

In *Speculum of the Other Woman* written in 1985 Lucy Irigaray says that privileging the idealised images of the flat mirror gives us a false two-dimensional body. She rejects the metaphor of the mirror in which women merely re-duplicate the male gaze and replaces it with the speculum whose curved surface reflects the female interior. She argues that the look has been over privileged over other senses and as a result there has been an impoverishment of bodily relations in western thought. We understand the world through all our senses not just sight and yet sight is privileged above other modes of communication such as touch.

Humans see before they speak therefore the way in which they view the world is highly developed before speech becomes important. At the 1996 *Fotoseptiembre* colloquium Pedro Meyer spoke about a *cultura pictografica*, or a means of communication based on images which he sees as a result of a growing loss of confidence in words. An image can go much further than spoken or written language and is not held in check by barriers of literacy and education. This has

particular resonance in communities in the Americas where literacy skills cannot be taken for granted.

What is needed is a corporeality of the gaze, undertaken by artists who recognise that a female artist cannot simply inhabit masculine artistic space because as a woman she is differently positioned within language. Codes of representation and communication must be disrupted in order to open up a space for the feminine in both women and men and create a gender-informed aesthetic.

### **Re-imaging Myths**

One strategy to rupture falsely constructed images of women involves rejecting Latina and North American models of body or beauty ideals and adopting elements from the historical and mythological past to break conventional images of women and subsequently create in-depth and autonomous alternatives.

The cult of the mother is very strong in Latin societies. They place great emphasis on the ideological mother role and revel in its self-sacrificing aspects yet refuse to accept women's biological realities and needs. Despite the importance of the role of the mother, real mothers and women have not been granted the corresponding health and reproductive rights that this should ensue.

Motherhood has been explored in the arts, albeit in its idealised forms, but the realities of birth have not. Neither have issues of unsuccessful pregnancies or infertility. It is as if it can only be considered in its "purest" most perfect forms, as in the Catholic tradition of the Virgin. Pain and death are somehow obliterated from the picture as they represent a threat to the clean sanitised image of women as maternal figures but not as sexual, real human beings with the capacity for failure and even for choice. Women artists are confronting the impossible task set by patriarchy of the duality of the Virgin Mother. The maternal body which is, by the way it has been sealed by the wishes of the male gaze, physically unable to give birth. Pura Cruz has executed a series of paintings titled Adam-1999 on the theme of men giving birth, a linked scientific creative venture, bringing attention back to the biological reality of pregnancy and birth rather than an ideological abstract idea of motherhood

Liz Lerma used her own body as a mould for her art:

*I was pregnant with my first child. I was impressed (as a ceramist) with my body's ability to change so easily. My belly was large and round. My skin was shiny and elastic. I just had to do something with my beautiful body. (Dimensions of the Americas p.205)*

At six-week intervals her husband made casts of her changing belly, making the last two weeks before her daughter was born. The body masks have lacings on the sides to allow people to tie them on and experience the changing shape and volume of her pregnant body. Her body has become her mould, her inspiration and her text. Her art attempts to make a very private experience a public one and also tries to demystify the enigma of pregnancy

When the body becomes problematic, it is fragmented. The figure of the Virgin offers the perfect example of this, by disguising the problem of human reproduction behind a miracle, she is both woman and child. She is the unwilling victim of a cruel joke; a virgin birth is a physical impossibility. Neither the holy birth nor any other birth is portrayed in western art. This would involve showing an acceptance of blood which is taboo unless accompanied by violence. The media deems it acceptable to show doctored images of shooting and knifing as entertainment yet natural images of childbirth, pregnancy and breast feeding are strangely absent.

Frida Kahlo stands out as one of the few artists to tackle these issues in her work. Her personal anguish and pain at being unable to sustain a pregnancy become public in her paintings. The pain that is present in all her work stemmed not just from her cracked and split body but from her barrenness as a woman. This sense of emptiness at her infertility is evident not just in her more bloody images but also in the landscapes of many of her paintings which depict dry, dusty and cracked lands where nothing grows, in her paintings relating to miscarriage the image is of a woman's open body relating to herself, gazing and watching over herself. In *Mi Nacimiento* she is giving birth to herself as a dead infant and her image of simultaneous life and death within her own body is shocking. She painted her dead baby in her own image, as if she could give birth to a new, undamaged version of herself.

The virgin in all her manifestations represents the perfect untouched female form, neither possessed nor physically changed in any way, she is pure, subservient and made to suit man's collective idea of perfect femininity. In Mexico she takes the shape of the Virgin of Guadalupe. She allegedly appeared around the time of the Conquest in the shape of an indigenous virgin to the christianised Indian, Juan Diego. She spoke to him in Nahuatl and ordered a church built on a hill in Tepeyac in the north of Mexico City. This was originally an ancient religious site dedicated to Tonantzin, the collective goddess of the earth and is therefore more a pagan celebration site than a Christian one.

She has become an icon and symbol which bypasses her religious significance. Amongst the photos taken by Iturbide, are a series of images of migrant workers on the US-Mexico border, one of which depicts a man facing away from the camera showing a tattoo of the Virgin which covers all the skin on his back. As he moves so too will the image of the Virgin, who he cannot see but who is behind him. She has become part of his body, they are fused together, uniting their images.

The figure of Guadalupe as an instrument of social control and oppression has been challenged and more recently she has become a Chicana heroine, representing a female force which offers an alternative to Latin heroes like Zapata and Che. Yolanda Lopez's *Guadalupe Triptych* is a series of portraits of herself, her mother and her grandmother as the Virgin as Guadalupe. Each figure is accompanied by a snake which stands for knowledge, wisdom, respect and sex but in western iconography can be seen as evil or the phallus. Her grandmother is shown skinning the snake, her mother is shown as a seamstress using the snake as a pincushion and the artist appears like Superwoman holding the snake as a staff. Here her image is being made more up to date and accessible, however this secularisation has not well received by more traditional sectors of society. When Lopez's picture of a working class version Virgin of Guadalupe was used on the cover of the Mexican magazine *Fem* in June-July 1984 it caused a bomb threat to be made to the magazine's office.

As well as emulating the Virgin of Guadalupe the Mexican woman is expected to fulfil another role, that of the sensuous and alluring woman ready to please her man. The story of *La Malinche* introduces another dimension to the concept of woman as sex object. The intellectual discourse surrounding her legend has most often been interpreted by male academics and has been mixed with folklore to perpetuate the idea of her betrayal. *La Malinche* was a native Mexican who was given by her chief to assist Hernan Cortes in what resulted in his conquest of Mexico. The literal and metaphorical rape of a continent can be seen in the symbol of the *Malinche/Marina* figure. She was, according to differing points of view, the traitor of her people or the mother of a new race. She bore Cortes a son with Indian features and green eyes called Martin who became

known as the first mestizo. Together with La Llorona she has been interpreted as emblematic of the vanquished condition and reputed fatalism of Mexico and its people. When La Malinche converted to Catholicism and was renamed Dona Marina by the Spaniards, her betrayal was triple: physical, political, and spiritual. She represents a model of motherhood as biologically life-giving but spiritually betraying. This attitude lives on today in the idea of malinchismo, which categorises all those who have sold out or have been corrupted by foreign, usually North American influences. The myth translates into a hatred of women and self-hatred by women for what they, as women, have caused:

*The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias y mestizas, police the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. (Borderlands p.22/3)*

Her role as abused woman and sexual slave is not considered she was a commodity who was traded and then blamed for the failures of her people. Although she comes from recent history she is as untraceable as a mythological or biblical figure. Her reality as a flesh and blood woman has been disregarded, instead she has been converted into a scapegoat for Mexicans, a Mexican Eve who betrayed her people:

*The male myth of Malintzin is made to see betrayal first of all in her very sexuality, which makes it nearly impossible at any given moment to go beyond the vagina as the supreme site of evil until proven innocent by way of virginity or virtue. (This Bridge Called My Back p.183)*

The figure of La Llorona can be considered as the mythical form of la Malinche. The myth goes that, as punishment for her misconduct, a young, usually beautiful woman is condemned to wander at night, often by water, forever crying, unloved and homeless, in grief-stricken search for her lost or murdered children. Her offences include adultery, infanticide, child neglect and excessive self-indulgence. She represents an extreme of what would happen to a woman who betrays her family, and she is punished and condemned for being a less than perfect mother. Her behaviour and its sad consequences are used as a control mechanism against misbehaviour and excessive shows of independence by women. Recently Chicana and Latina women have rejected damaging readings of this “mythical” creation of femininity and examined their own feelings about a figure which has been used against them since childhood. Cordelia Candelaria says that it is necessary to reconsider la Llorona and other figures of constructed woman from a female rather than a patriarchal perspective:

*I think it's past time for her to cut her hair, put on her Nikes and tie-dyed T-shirt and get a life. One very important reason to rescue her is that the same brush that painted the Weeping Woman portrait in history continues to apply its demeaning brushstrokes of single-minded misogyny to contemporary society. It's past time that brush got a thorough cleaning and a fresh set of primary paints to colour women authentically en route to the 21st century. (Heresies)*

The story is an extreme way of condemning both sexual freedom and unfit mothers for grown women and instilling obedience into unruly children.

La Llorona is the sister of the complex female duality represented by the Virgin and by La Malinche all of whom have their origins in pre-Hispanic deities. Cihuacoatl is the predecessor of La Llorona. She is depicted with her lower face made only of bone, and her jaws wide open waiting for victims and she carries a knife like a child in a sling on her back. She was known as the snake woman and enjoyed a reputation for being warloving and bloodthirsty. She had more sacrifices dedicated to her than any other deity and her image was related to evil omens. She represents the dark side of the female psyche and supposedly brought misery to men by stalking the streets at night weeping and wailing.

Before the Spanish arrived in the area and introduced patriarchal hierarchical values there was a system of complementary opposition between men and women. People worshipped the

Lord and Lady of dualities Ometecuhtli and Omecihuatl which encompassed the balanced poles of male and female – light and dark, life and death. Many goddess of creation are also goddesses of destruction, a recognition that life cannot exist without death. Western religion however, encourages a split between body and spirit. Many powerful deities which originally contained male and female elements were divided by the colonizers for their own use, appropriated and renamed to serve their needs. The powerful Coatlicue was split and Tonantzin became the good earth mother who then became the Virgin of Guadalupe without her elements of death and sexuality.

The Aztec/Mexica story of Coatlicue has obvious parallels to the virgin birth, but she was not just a mother but also the creator and destroyer of all matter and form. Coatlicue was impregnated by a ball of feathers falling through space and from this came her most powerful offspring, the male sun god Huitzilopochtli. Her sons were so indignant at their mother's apparent sexual transgression that they committed matricide. Coatlicue was represented by the Aztecs as part human and part zoomorphic. She is sometimes headless and sometimes her head is two coiled snakes growing from spurts of blood. Her hands are also replaced by serpents and her feet are clawed. However, her breasts are clearly visible under a necklace of human hands and hearts, which symbolise pain and the sacrifice of hearts to the gods and a pendant made of a human skull with living eyes which represent the dualities of life and death

Coatlicue has been adopted by many artists as a kind of anti-heroine and her reworked images often appear as source matter in their work. Amalia Mesa-Bains's installation, Coatlicue in the Vanity, shows a reflection of the deity in the mirror of a dressing table. Her appearance is shocking as she points out that she is present in all women, we all have a destructive, violent but very powerful side which sits uneasily with the clean, preened image women are supposed to achieve in front of a dressing table mirror. She represents the duality in all women, the contained power she has under the surface. Coatlicue is not contained in the mirror and there are signs of disorder and earth on the floor around the table, as if around a grave. This gives the idea that women should not be contained or controlled by their image in the mirror they too can break free and use their hidden female power.

The body plays an important theme in Latin American visual texts. One reason for this lies with pre-Hispanic traditions which colonisers tried to obliterate but only succeeded in driving underground. These are in evidence on the glyphs and walls at ancient Mesoamerican sites and in the artefacts used in ceremonies of bloodletting and sacrifice. Latin American and Latina artists feature a mixture of ancient source materials such as deities and contemporary reworkings of these rituals. The male gaze and the female subject/object are in conflict with certain concepts of gender, life, death and anthropomorphism derived from pre-Hispanic societies and mythological sources so essential to the tradition of creative expression in the area:

*For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body – flesh and bone – and from the Earth's body – stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needles, are my offerings, are my Aztec blood sacrifices. (Borderlands p.75)*

One reason for the differences between western and Latin American art is the lack of categorisation by binary opposition which is the mainstay of the western art canon.

In Latin cultures, religion fuses Catholicism with pre-Hispanic beliefs, there is no strict division between life and death as in the western tradition. The afterlife forms part of life now and is exemplified by the popular Day of the Dead celebrations on November 1st and 2nd which are part of the Mexican psyche. Many of the ancient deities were bloodthirsty, violent and warloving

and yet were definitely and defiantly female. Their myths are interlocking stories of mystical childbirth, motherhood and violent death. This intertwining of fecundity and death has been a recurring feature in art by women who emphasise that death is a part of life not an end to it.

### **Re-covering the Body**

In representations of the female body there has been a fetichization of the angelic body. The body has been sanitised and endowed with an unnatural passivity. The image of the female body has been stripped of any threatening aspects. She has no body hair because it is deemed to be unfeminine and her body is often placed in poses which are anatomically impossible. She is eroticised by her passivity, playing up to a fantasy. Her body has been moulded as if from clay to fit a mould shaped by patriarchy.

Because we have become accustomed to viewing images of passive women as readily available there have been major repercussions in terms of our social definitions of sexual difference. The passive model of women defined by the female nude is modified to suit an active male viewer who, as the producer of meaning within culture, is in a position of control and dominance. This setting down of prescribed versions of femininity and masculinity reinforces a dominant heterosexual viewpoint and allows no freedom for alternative gender models. Making a woman an erotic spectacle means that she has little room to express her own ideas of eroticism or sexuality, in fact it is assumed that she is a sexual vessel not a sexual subject. There are almost no depictions of non-voyeuristic non-pornographic sex in western art.

Pornographic images taken for men, reduce women's bodies to sexual objects and focus on penetration as the definitive expression of sexuality. Women artists who are concentrating on the body need to find new ways of imaging in order to avoid duplicating the pornographic gaze. Women who are beginning to take possession of the female body without simply reversing the binary oppositions must consider it a political move otherwise they run the risk of simply replicating male "viewing" patterns. In pornography there is a fragmenting and severing of the female body which makes the genitals of the woman stand for the woman herself. The exposure of something usually hidden and private stands for a violation by the male gaze, an unnatural relationship between female exposure and male voyeuristic enjoyment, removed from the senses and showing no enjoyment for the woman. Consuelo Castaneda's series of photos *How One Creates Art Today* comments on what is considered "successful" art and also portrays nudity in a different way by the addition of a text. Each photo is accompanied by an instruction in Spanish – *Desvela tu sexualidad. Cuenta tu propia historia. Cambia el color de tu piel.* – these words make what could be peep pictures appear more like negations of their very nudity.

Ambra Polidori uses what Osvaldo Sanchez (in the introductory essay to the catalogue to *Asi en la Tierra Como en el Cielo*) calls a *mirada como un acto mutilador* to destroy expectations of the body and nudity. She uses corporeal textures in her work based on mythological fragments and the veiling of the gaze and death are part of her personal iconography. Her works are untitled and are often black and white or tinted photomontages. In one a naked pregnant woman lies on the floor. We can see all her body but cannot see her eyes which have been scratched out of the photo. Because she can't see us we feel we can gaze upon her without the risk of being caught but the sensation is broken by the separate image of a large framed eye looking back at us. It does not seem to be the woman's eye and we do not know if it belongs to a woman or a man or if it is a reflection of our own eye but it dominates and surveys us, the viewers. She also utilises religious images in her work. In one a series of disconnected boxes showing fragmented images of bodies

in the shape of a cross or a crucifixion. Although we don't know if the hands and feet, pelvis and head come from the same man's body we only question it when confronted by the shocking device of placing a woman's breasts in the area of the torso. One image out of place can affect our complacency as viewers, posing questions we cannot easily answer. This draws attention to the fact that the body passes through a process of cultural codification and is not a universal metaphor. A photomontage of a series of boxed images create a fragmented commentary of dismemberment which don't allow for a singular easy reading. A young girl, cloaked in the manner of Mary holds what appears to be a decapitated head in front of her. She is looking at it but her face is expressionless. Underneath her is the image of an open pair of scissors and above her is a separate box which contains the image of a pubis. The multi-layered readings we as viewers can make to connect these images are many, perhaps they are not connected or maybe they are comments on sex, death, religion and violence being interrelated. However the juxtaposition of such images is shocking, not least because of the inclusion of a pubis in a reference to the Virgin Mary. Her work challenges us by placing the eyes outside of the subject but not giving control to the viewer. Gazing at a figure with their eyes scratched out is unnerving but gives a licence to contemplate the body in a different way.

Women are exploring the issues of desire and sexual pleasure by visualising and depicting a female pleasure which doesn't rest exclusively on spectatorship. The difficulty lies in distinguishing between overtly sexualised viewing such as voyeurism, fetishism and scopophilia and other forms of looking. A gaze which challenges leaves no room for voyeurism and leaves space for the subject to leap up and take control of her sexuality. Destruction of the male gaze is therefore a creative act, a powerful weapon.

The intersection between women as producers of art and women in representation shows us what is not being represented or spoken, the omissions and silences. Women have included eroticism in their work, but have more often than not mirrored male desire in their work rather than searching for ways to explore women's sexuality and desire. Performance, dance and video art have become ways for women to celebrate the body's rhythms and pains and explore the relationships between the body as the performing agent and the subject of the activity and the body as site of the spectacle of women. The Mexican dramatist Jesusa Rodriguez uses words, songs and humour as well as distinctive visuals to subvert traditional images of women. She upturns religious figures and stereotypes and by making them human strips them of their mythologised power. She sees the naked body as a celebration, not just of women because she doesn't believe in being gender specific, but of sexuality as a whole. By appearing nude she strips away any pretence at becoming the unseen or passive object and becomes both exhibitor and exhibit at the same time. She is aware of being seen by the spectator and wants to reject the shame women have been made to feel throughout history for their bodies and their sexuality. Her choice to be naked as well as her choice to proclaim her homosexuality puts her in a position of power as a woman and as an artist. This is not nudity as sexual provocation but as unmasked protest and a communications tool.

The female body is simultaneously represented as erotic and sexually available and as reproductive and private. Images by women which combine self-portraits and the nude confront this. Control and depiction of the female body from the point of view of the subject resists the body as the primary communicator with the world and the body as site of pleasure and pain.

Kaminsky has said:

*For the psychoanalytical feminist criticism that returns women's bodies to them for their own pleasure, Latin American feminist criticism offers the reinsertion of that body into the political sphere. (Reading the Body Politic p.20)*

It is important to recognise the specificity of the body and corporeal language in the Americas:

*The emphasis on being embodied, and even "writing the body," can be liberating for women as writers and readers, but what can happen to women's bodies in politically repressive regimes is hardly the jouissance Helene Cixous had in mind. (Talking Back p.23)*

In societies in the Americas where military oppression and torture are employed women's bodies become the site where patriarchy can brand its gaze upon flesh. The power plays of politics and misogyny are physically played out on women's skin and spelled out in their blood. When the body is a victim of violence and rape it is converted into a tool of war and a political object:

*In some cultures, men have confused sexuality with torture, so that they only really enjoy sex with a woman if she is literally screaming in pain (Warrior Marks p.278)*

The disappeared body in war and history mirrors the disappeared body of work of women artists. Women artists are investigating the specifics of women's corporeal role by documenting their responses to oppression. The body can be a testament to the power of memory. It is a historical document in itself which breaks, scars and records pain. It can be used to remember the disappeared or to remember forgotten events or to reinstate people in the facts and figures of history.

*Politics are played out on the field of the body in the form of physical and psychological torture. In prison power is stripped from the victim and invested in the interrogators. (Talking Back)*

The victim is dependent on her torturers for food, clothing, and shelter and loses her own sense of value as an individual. The torturers exercise power over the victim's body in the functions of sleep, elimination, movement, sight, speech; they have literal power of life and death over their prisoners. By putting the experience of torture into language the victim can, to an extent, regain some control. The illustrations to the prison testimonio *I Was Never Alone* by Nidia Diaz are illustrations of her fight for sanity and strength when her resolve and very self were being destroyed. Her simple drawings show how her body was debilitated and maimed by her experiences. They depict her naked and blindfold and, as if to remind herself of her own presence, her drawings include self-portraits. Despite the pain and torture she underwent in prison her drawings mirror her hope of being rescued even in the depths of her despair when she is tormented by evil demons outside of her prison bars. The reader or viewer is thrust into a simulated experience of torture, with no bearable place to stand – not in the place of victim, or torturer or of observer – the victim cannot, as in familiar representations, be merely a passive object of suffering – she must be the subject of her story – the torturers are reduced to the level of crude, unthinking, subhuman creatures who, despite their power, can be outmanoeuvred by their victims who are anything but passive.

Women have claimed their right to speech through their bodily presence in public and political spaces. The female body can be a symbol of resistance with the meaning inscribed by women not by patriarchy. The use of physical violence and self-mutilation is a way of diverting the male gaze, it creates an unpleasant image which is opposed to traditional patriarchal expectations. Stripping naked in front of the all seeing, surveying eye of patriarchal oppression and dictatorial regimes suggests a stripping to the bone and the removal of flesh as a search for the true body not one constructed by outside observers. Shocking self-mutilation is a way for the woman artist to view herself in the way society sees her, therefore bringing attention to the issue of the power and fragility of the human body. The body can be a weapon to trap, tame and overcome the presence of oppression and become a political agent. Women artists are

undertaking a search to develop an alternative aesthetic as a means to represent that which is repressed or marginalized within patriarchal culture by means of the morphology of the female body.

Lives are lived in women's bodies whether they are young and healthy or ill, disabled and ageing. As well as the natural changes of the body, culture also inscribes its history upon it. On the US-Mexico border there are well-documented cases of the effects of toxins on the workers working in the maquiladoras. Not just they, but also their unborn children are bearing the brunt of political decisions on environmental issues, and malnutrition and working conditions are affecting menstrual cycles and causing premature ageing as well as causing serious illnesses. How we inhabit our bodies physically is culturally and socially constructed, it is not a biological truth.

There is a fear and loathing of the female body which is not closed and pure. Any reference to bodily cycles produce a squeamishness which has become a part of our culture. Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* defines the abject as that which collapses the border between the inside and outside self and other. She argues that anything which is expelled from the body is defined as unclean and subject to cultural taboo. The disgust we feel towards bodily wastes is not the product of their intrinsic uncleanness but of the unsettling of boundaries and the threat to identity and loss of an integrated self which the contained body represents. Food, bodily wastes and sex all transcend borders and the boundaries of the body. This links to the desire to represent the unrepresentable, the marginalized body which breaks down borders between desire and disgust, perfect and deformed, the inside from the outside, us from the Other. The appropriation of the abject by women artists can include body mutilation, earth art and use of bodily fluids. In the use of the abject the viewer's reaction depends on her/his own boundaries, the violence of the image can defamiliarize the gazer.

Lourdes Grobet's installations and photos work against the ideas of permanence and beauty. In 1970 she showed an installation with Silva Gomez Tagle titled *Serendipiti*. No names were included on the invitations or catalogues, breaking with the tradition of glorifying the artist. Words were therefore eliminated leaving the installation to speak for itself. The entrance to the gallery was through a large image of a male nude split down the middle. Other elements included a box in which the silhouette of a man was filled with photographs of slaughtered animal guts, which moved kinetically to produce a feeling of nausea. Other disturbing images of dislocated dolls' limbs, rooms full of mirrors for the spectators to "see" themselves and visual and kinetic abnormalities produced a defamiliarizing effect on the visitors forcing them to re-view their ideas on art and the body.

Lucia Maya's paintings include subject matter not traditionally associated with art by women. Her figures are women, fragmented, tragic, violent and expressionless women. Wounding and piercing, knives and harpoons appear in many of her works. There is often dismemberment of the figures and disembodied heads and bodies float across the paintings. One of her pencil drawings of a decapitated head which floats above a knife is the antithesis of a portrait, it revolts the viewer and diverts the gaze. Her photorealist technique owes a lot to surrealism but her dislocated scenes are based on images found in Mexican popular art and the iconography of Kahlo.

Any suggestion of bodily fluids in society and art is regarded as unseemly, the perfect female body must act as a vessel to absorb whatever the male wishes to place in it, without question. Sex is shown in a seductively voyeuristic and unrealistic light yet bodily functions such as urination and menstruation are erased from everyday life. Artists have begun to reclaim this

territory, by breaking the taboos surrounding the body in a variety of ways. They are pushing the limit to resist gender roles/restraints. Women are using elements such as menstrual blood and female body language in order to emphasise aspects of female sexuality which are absent or repressed in art by men. This points towards using the body as an instrument to break the ideological assumptions which do not give a true picture of the body. A painting by Gloria Claudia Ortiz breaks with social norms and artistic tradition and shows two men urinating. Not only is she depicting the male organ but she is openly showing what is usually hidden and is certainly not the subject of a painting. The men are shown in grotesque and exaggerated but correct fashion. Lillian Mulero's addresses the same subject and makes fun of the mystery of women's bodies. Her painting *Bodily Function* depicts a woman urinating in a light-hearted almost illustrative style.

The body is only celebrated when it conforms to society's standards of what is whole or beautiful. This is a western concept which differs from thinking in pre-Hispanic cultures:

*There is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures' magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift. (Borderlands p.19)*

In modern thought any abnormality is considered deviant, something to be hidden and ashamed of. Women who refuse to conform to models laid down for them as more often than not labelled deviant. They are deemed to be mad or hysterical due to their excessive femininity or biological changes or as abnormal sexually.

Frida Kahlo broke through all those barriers and made her suffering body and her deformities her primary subject matter, even painting her inner organs onto the plaster of the surgical corsets she was forced to wear, transforming them into works of art. Her work breaks expectations of femininity. She both exaggerates the physicality of all bodies and celebrates the woman's body by being at one with it and not just portraying it as a beautiful object of desire.

Her Diary shows her obsession with her own body and its breakdowns. The idea of a mutilated body recurs in the texts and images drawn in blood red, poison purple and the yellow and green of decay. She shows her internal organs as if in dissection. Another picture shows her body crumbling to pieces including her eye and her hand which are indispensable to an artist. Hands and feet and eyes recur again and again looking like milagros. At one point she refers to her amputated leg as "dead" while the rest of her is free and "flying". She makes references to wings and birds because she has no freedom of movement and is grounded by her broken column which splits her in two. One disturbing sketch shows a pair of disembodied red legs which are mutilated with a mouth-lips. There is a startling image of her amputated foot. It is placed on a pedestal like marble but with a yellow flesh tone. Thorns instead of blood flow from the stump and the red wash behind make the scene appear to be bleeding. The whole diary seems to chart the course of her body as it ceases to function and her private words and images turn her body inside out for us to view.

Oweena Fogarty's photos stand in-between the short stories in Josefina Estrada's book *Malagato*. The photos can be seen as autonomous to the text, as commentary or as an essential ingredient and the author herself says they neither complement nor contradict each other but form part of a different language. They are taken in a poor run-down area of Mexico City and feature a model and two women of the area; a prostitute and a bolero singer and propose an alternative reading of the book. Many of the photos are dominated by the subject's nudity which shocks and defamiliarizes. One photo is a portrait of a semi-naked dead man, challenging us not to turn our

gaze away from what is considered a distasteful subject. Other photos contain an element of eroticism but as the subjects are neither young nor conventionally beautiful and they are in dingy unromantic settings they and their bodies upset and destabilise the viewers. Nudity is only seen as acceptable when it fits a social norm but is regarded as dirty or unseemly when the body does not come within a preconceived framework. The photographer is breaking with these conventions of normality and beauty by showing that there is no such thing as a universal unchanging body. The body is an instrument of time which changes, is changed by its environment, becomes old, decays and ultimately ceases to function. She refuses to romanticise the body and unveils the truth of the imperfect and broken body, with depictions of failed reproduction, the ageing process, physical pain and desire in varying forms.

Kathy Vargas addresses the taboo subjects of death and infectious diseases. Death is ignored in western culture and art but is an accepted part of Mexican society and popular culture. She incorporates this but also questions it by her subject matter of a disease which is socially scorned, especially in conservative Catholic societies. Her Valentine's Day/Day of the Dead series began as a remembrance of two friends who had died of AIDS. They are shadowy photomontages using milagros, cut outs and X-rays linking dying and praying and the difficulty of expressing feelings when faced with debilitating and fatal diseases.

Kahlo painted herself but some artists use their bodily selves as their subject matter and their materials. Eugenia Vargas is a Mexican artist whose work focuses on the relationship of her body with the earth. Her work remains in the earth after she has left it and is subject to the forces of nature which affect the image. It is therefore involved in a process of continual flux and change, destroying the idea of art as permanent. In *Autorretrato en barro y palma* she lies encased in straw with her legs and arms outstretched. She is immobile and becomes a living sculpture, a self-portrait which includes her but obscures her from view. Marilyn Cortes also takes her body as her primary subject matter. Her photos are of the body bound, disguised, and wrapped. Her face is completely obscured and although the body is contained there, it is hidden behind layers of mud, bandages and rope as if it is re-generating, like a living mummy. The image focuses on the ambiguity of the artist and of her body.

Ana Mendieta dedicated herself to leaving her mark by inscribing her body into the earth which she saw as an extension of her being. She was born in Cuba but was sent to the US when she was 12 and her work is full of references to her state of exile and her longing to return to a spiritual home. Her work is free from limitations of material and space and permanence which have plagued artists, yet the temporality of her work is linked to her feelings of abandonment and exile. She left her body signature on nature and culture so that she would not disappear.

In her *Silueta* series Mendieta showed her obsession with the earth as her spiritual mother. The earth took the place of the mother she had lost as a child and symbolised the Cuba she had been forced to leave. The series began in the early 70s and consisted of making ritualistic sacrifices of herself to the earth. Using clay, gunpowder, fire mud and other natural materials she left impressions of her body in the earth which have the shape of female genitalia or wounds. She wanted to absorb and be absorbed by the earth. She revealed the image of a female figure on the trunk of a tree in Miami where there was a Santeria shrine. In the series *Rupestrian Sculptures* she carved female deities into the walls of caves at the *escaleras de Jaruca* in Cuba which were reminiscent of ancient petroglyphs. Another *Fetish* series in the late 70s dealt with the cruelty of detaching herself from mother earth and involved marking moundlike figures with red paint or sticks. Her art was in tune with the feminist issues of the 70s including the focus on the body as a

work of art in itself. Her references to rape and women's biological cycles are violent and hard-hitting. In one performance piece she smeared blood on her bound half-naked body to express her response to the rape and murder of a female student at the University of Iowa. Mendieta's early performance works evoked Santeria rituals, using elements such as chicken's blood and feathers and she gave emphasis to the importance of recognizing the rituals of death in life by lying down naked in an Aztec grave and being photographed covered in flowers. Her body and the space it inhabited became sites of reintegration and purification. A reconstruction of an installation at the Museo del Barrio in 1995 was made with black santeria candles and wax spilling over onto the floor to delineate the absent space of her body. It seemed both like a grave and a celebration. In a strange and terrible echo of her art, she died after falling from a high window.

Artists such as Kahlo and Mendieta have re-claimed and re-covered their bodies and instead of rejecting or sanitising them, they have glorified in them, showing images of themselves wounded, bleeding, fragmented, hurt and decaying. They have used various materials, but have always looked at and within themselves and expressed themselves in the most immediate way with and by their bodies. Our primary communicator is the body, it is our subject, our expresser of pain, violence and feeling and the way in which we perceive the world, in short it is our one true text. Women are all different, we speak different languages belong to different cultures and express ourselves in various ways but our biological realities are essential to us as people and as women. However, in order to avoid a bio-essentialism it is imperative that each woman's specific cultural makeup be a part of her body too. The women artists discussed in this paper create art which breaks with the pleasures of viewing and disturb with its violent imagery. By taking their bodies as primary subject matter they offer themselves up physically and psychologically naked, as active participants in their own work, making themselves into artistic statements and creations.

Just as the political is not always expressed in overt terms nor does the body have to be. Sometimes its absence is more poignant and telling than its presence. The silence surrounding the body can be filled by woman artists and their bodies. These women are helping to heal the wounds opened up by the dissecting gaze of patriarchy. Accepting the status quo means giving the wound permission to fester and turn bad. Challenging images of women's bodies enables the wound to heal and facilitates a "re-recovery" of the active, creative, gendered body.

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