

**To your protection we flee.<sup>1</sup> *Techo de ofrendas***

Pilar Albarracín proposed beginning this article in this way, with the first prayer conserved by the Church dedicated to the Virgin Mary. And for well-founded reasons which are justified in the artist's search for her origins with references to her closest environment, in the use of stereotypes and in the questioning of the role of gender in her works.

Albarracín invites us, in *Techo de ofrendas* (2004), to "flee" to the "protection" of these one thousand prayers transcribed by her as lace flounces, ribbons, bobbin laces and multicoloured embroidered strips which rise up and float before us like the waiting room of the celestial world promised to us. From the unique perspective of around one thousand flamenco dresses hanging in the air, the artist refers to some places of worship in her native Seville, to the baroque vaults and altarpieces replete with profuse decorations of plasterwork and carvings with geometrical and vegetal motifs.

In the origin of this work are the portraits of the Immaculate Conception who, in the words of the artist, "rises up floating above our heads in many Seville churches." These paintings, which were at their peak in the baroque, are representations of the Virgin, Mother and Moon, who illuminates the dark night of the world and intercedes for us with her child, the Sun. They were used by the Church to confront the imminent crisis provoked by the emergence of protestant doctrines, and, in fact, Marian devotion is deeply rooted in areas of Andalusia and in other places of the world where what we define as "popular Catholicism" still survives.

As in the Marian sanctuaries, in the installation that Pilar Albarracín presents in La Maison Rouge the offerings and ex-votos are exhibited in a visible place, so that the viewer bears in mind the favours received. The symbolic payment by the intercession of the Virgin, by the miraculous interventions attributed to her, is made in many cases with personal objects such as bracelets or necklaces, bridal gowns, communion dresses and, in the case of Andalusia, with the flamenco dress. This has its origins in the humble percale dresses trimmed with two or three flounces used by wives of cattle dealers, peasants or gypsies. They are colourful and bright dresses whose shape, the so-called "guitar body", enhances the physical qualities of the woman and dissimulates her defects. Long and short, with polka dots, plain or patterned, no Andalusian woman is afraid to wear it, to please herself and others. In this case, as the artist points out, "this dress is designed to drape on the floor when the wearer is standing, and here I have tried to raise it up, to give it another status. This change offers a new perspective, other potentials of occupying space." Indeed, we feel close to them, they have a story to share with the viewer. Something charming emanates from this ceiling of dresses that have also been used.

Moreover, Albarracín says of this installation: "Behind the undulating forms which remind us of Georgia O'Keefe's floral deliriums, it is like looking at the entrance to a large uterus where all children fit." This interpretation connects with the worship of the mother-goddess (Cybele, Astarte...) practised in many ancient religions that fulfils the need, instinctive in human beings, for protection and affection. Perhaps we can find the reason in the Freudian thesis which understands devotion to the Virgin as the result of a process of sublimation of femininity and of sexuality. In this case, Marian worship would have, for a large group of the faithful, a kind of therapeutic function.

**Self-immolation. *Lunares***

A trumpeter breaks the silence, while in the darkness a figure of a woman adorned with a brilliant white long flamenco dress is silhouetted. Sad, absent, resigned, she senses her imminent destiny with a dignity which makes her seem distant to the eyes of the viewer. In *Lunares* (2004) the artist, converted into a *folclórica* (popular female flamenco-style singer) and to the rhythm of a *paso doble*, repeatedly passes a needle through her white dress, perforates the cloth, crosses the flesh and wounds the spirit. Her sorrows emerge and are revealed to us as red polka dots which adorn her dress.

Sorrow, transformed into polka dots, takes us to the Moon. According to Julian Pitt-Rivers,<sup>2</sup> “linked to the feminine condition, the Moon takes us to feminine sex because of its periodicity and whiteness. The Moon is also a constant presence related to the Virgin in religious iconography. Apart from its spherical character, it is also a stain, a brightly-coloured stain on the skin, a stain of honour,” which the artist understands as both a symbol of purity and of heresy.

Albarracín uses the stereotype in order to show that, beyond their inoffensive appearance, the conventions are instruments of formation of national identity whose final objective is the elimination of cultural diversity. The work has, therefore, a political dimension given that the artist seeks to infiltrate these clichés and distort them. In this way, she infringes upon what is agreed. Indeed, for years the image of the *folclórica* was one of the most visible attempts at reworking the new Spanish identity, an accelerated reconstruction that began after the fall of colonial power in 1898. The Franco regime also conceived an apparently empty but uniform image of the “national essences”. As Albarracín says, “Francoism vampirised the figure of the torero and of the flamenco woman. This association was widely rejected by those who were most in agreement with the new times, while the dresses and the folklore seduced foreigners above all.”

In *Lunares* Albarracín reminds us that both flamenco dance and singing were small centres of resistance and are a fundamental part for the recovery of the new signs of post-Franco Spanish identity, less restrictive and more open to the outside world.

### **The strength of silence. *Prohibido el cante***

In the performance *Prohibido el cante* (2000) the artist, accompanied by a guitarist, has armed herself with ornamental combs, earrings and red lipstick. Pilar Albarracín, entrenched between images and memories of an outmoded Spain, appears wearing a peculiar dress with frills on which the polka dots are transformed into camouflage fabric. The artist proposes that we leave our head at home and receive with the stomach. Indeed, an important part of understanding Albarracín’s works is to let ourselves be trapped by the moment. As the flamenco expert Francisco Almazán advised a friend researching the African origins of blues, “in musical questions of this kind it is important to remain calm, except if you speak from the emotions, from what you feel at the level of the navel. Passion knows no reasons, laws, or histories.”

Francoism understood that the essence of a nation depended on the ideas and feelings of its members, and that this interior essence was best manifested in its artistic productions. This belief meant that flamenco was seen as a perfect instrument for constructing a national identity that was not conditioned by the historical moment. Indeed, Antonio and Manuel Machado’s father affirmed, under the pseudonym of Demófilo, that flamenco singing captures the “soul of the people”, and bars and inns, places where it was exteriorised, were restricted as they were a source of disagreement and subversion. The prohibition of singing, therefore, shows the existence of the ideological instrumentalisation of flamenco singing.

In *Prohibido el cante* Albarracín intuitively dispenses with the lyric and makes use of “Ya hacham” at the start, singing a long lament that she recreates in the course of the piece. The artist follows the teachings of Ziryab, known as the “Singing Black Bird” because of the dark colour of his skin and considered as the precursor of what today we know as flamenco singing, who in the Cordoba of Abd ar-Rahman XI advised that singing should start with the *anexir* (recitation) or with shouting the phrase “Ya hacham”. In fact, many flamenco singers today usually start by singing a lament. Albarracín vomits a sample of these fragments of life that sometimes move us and at others make us laugh, in an exercise of “entering oneself” or “leaving oneself”, lending us her heart as a token before going with her dignity intact. She is reduced, however, to the impossibility of going beyond appearances and shouts disproportionately, while respecting the codes of the singing. “The criteria of the singing serve to characterise a style which has to do with the melody, the adornments, the order of the ruptures, repetition, the manner of lengthening or shortening, enchaining or separating

the silences, instead of the pauses and, in particular, with the *eyes* and their special performance,” affirms Bernard Leblon.<sup>3</sup>

The intrinsic particularity of the singing is to give free reign to the interpretation and thus reach a moment in which we are capable of understanding what could be the ecstasy of the mystics or, in other terms, what could be an orgasm of all the faculties of the being. Abandoning yourself allows you to be absorbed, enveloped in what is happening. When the poet José Manuel Caballero Bonald asked Tía Anica la Piriñaca how she felt when she enjoyed herself singing, the old *seguriya* singer from Jerez, with a mixture of innocence and wisdom, unintentionally provided in her response the most famous and perhaps most precise phrase in the whole history of flamenco: “When I sing with pleasure my mouth tastes of blood.” With this phrase, Tía Anica reintroduced flamenco into its natural ecological environment: the space of tragedy.

### **Hand to hand fighting. *La cabra***

If, according to Demófilo’s thesis, singing is subject to interpretation, dance escapes this reductionist position and offers us, through its choreographies, the possibility of connecting with very diverse audiences that make the connection different for each one and do not feel it in the same way.

José Luis Paniagua<sup>4</sup> distinguishes between the Spanish words for dance: *danza* and *baile*. *Danza* expresses a ritual and has an objective, a finality that goes beyond the couple relationship. It is a connection with the world, with aspects related to the spiritual, survival, war, sensuality, power or the transmission of knowledge from one generation to another. However, *baile* is a form of expression or of seduction. There is no need for a ritual or a purpose, it satisfies itself.

In the performance *La cabra* (2001) Albarracín surrenders herself to an impossible dance. She melts and blends and, in her obsession with dancing, holds on to a wineskin clinging to her body. The goat with its throat cut spits blood, which soaks her, and both repeatedly wallow in this orgiastic dance. Once again this flamenco dress is completely stained by the wine transformed into blood, the elixir of life or of immortality par excellence, the symbol of knowledge and initiation. Wine, a Bacchic attribute, is in its turn the symbol of erring used in numerous religions, and its prohibition (above all to women) emphasises even more its symbolic strength and reach.

The music starts and the dance becomes a fight for domination, to control the rebelling couple, in this case the dead animal, the rival. The more Albarracín moves the more the inert body resists. She gets up, falls over drunk, wallows on the floor, with the wineskin between her legs, violently and sensually holding its legs. We do not know whether the artist has submerged herself in an atavistic rite and has remained enveloped in her choreography or whether reason has really left her. She keeps pressing until the wineskin is empty, bares her feet so as to feel the earth and moves away with her prey.

The situations staged by Pilar Albarracín are articulated around the notions of rite, sacrifice and symbol. Ethnology has devoted itself to delimiting a conceptual framework allowing us to deal with the rites of yesterday and today.<sup>5</sup> In this work, the visual nature of the rite allows the artist to transform it, incorporating new approaches, in order to speak also of the alienation of women, their closeness, their strength, their pleasure and their vulnerability.

### **Bon appétit. *Tortilla a la española***

In *Tortilla a la española* (1999), with the innocent formula of a cookery recipe, Pilar Albarracín questions aspects related with the spaces and the roles to which women have traditionally been relegated. Through the metaphorical deconstruction of the Spanish flag, she also approaches the issue of nationalist symbols, which she will resume in actions such as *Viva España* (2004), where a woman dressed in yellow is followed by a music band playing the *paso doble* with the same title.

Works such as Martha Rosler’s *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1977) or Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*

(1964) are fundamental in order to locate this piece in the line of works committed to gender issues. The framework is a professional kitchen, the opposite of the idea of home. The artist appears with her bright red dress and begins an anthropophagic ritual by violently tearing shreds of her clothes and mixing them with energetically beaten eggs. She next continues preparing an omelette with very precise gestures. The artist metaphorically offers us her body, in an attempt at liberation of the ideas inherited from the generation of women who preceded her, pupils of the “home school”, a subject that, during the Franco regime, included domestic science, economics, childcare and cookery, and which was complemented with the teaching of Training in the National Spirit, gymnastics and music.

*Tortilla a la española* is an act of generosity in which the artist offers herself to us and surprises us with a flag of blood and yolk. Albarracín manages, through the distortion of the cliché, to show the ambivalent position that women occupy in a society which links sacrifice with adoration, and domination with loss of self-control.

### **Submission without redemption. *Verónica***

The artist, in a three-quarter back portrait, caresses a bull’s head. This gesture shows, as Albarracín tells us, “a way of getting closer to the bull, as the torero does, but with less fear, with greater confidence.” Albarracín certainly understands her relationship with the bull quite differently to how the torero sees his. Pilar does not need to defeat the animal, to humiliate it; she opts for voluntary submission without the subjugation of the beast. Pilar Albarracín, in *Verónica*, adopts a posture that modifies the relationship with this admired and coveted animal. She also does so in *She-wolf* (2006), where she revisits Joseph Beuys’ *I Like America and America Likes Me* (1974). In this work she proposes a very special relationship between the wild, untamed, animal and its “greatest predator”, man. The approach to the she-wolf is staged by Albarracín as a picnic where the viewer acts as a witness. As Donna Haraway says,<sup>6</sup> when drinking wine and sharing the raw meat with the she-wolf, the taming that coexistence entails takes place.

The title of the work plays with the ambivalence of meanings. On the one hand, a “veronica” is a pass whereby the bullfighter dodges out of the bull’s way with the cape held out with both hands. On the other, the title takes us to a Biblical episode in which Veronica mopped Jesus’ brow with a cloth which retained the imprint of his face. This is why there is a desire to move the viewer to compassion through the figure of an animal associated with death, pride and courage. This approach also occurs in the figure of the wolf in *She-wolf* which, like “the animal dreamt by Kafka,”<sup>7</sup> with its behaviour makes us wonder whether it is the animal that wants to tame us. However, in *Verónica* there is also a particular body language, a gesture that takes us to Minoan rites.

Consciously or not, Albarracín extracts material from symbolic references to uniquely express the values and affiliations that identify her. In this dynamic we can recognise the relation of some of the artist’s works with bullfighting and flamenco, where, as in art, the discourse is produced in a very intimate space and only takes on a real meaning when shared with the audience. Pilar does not see the viewers of her works as extras, she believes in the devoted and impressionable audience, capable of loving and of changing things by fighting. When you get to know her, you realise that both in her art and in her most quotidian actions, day after day, she fights “to go as far as it is possible to go.” This is how she finds meaning for her life and, as George Bataille points out in these notes,<sup>8</sup> “there would be no bullfighting, or flamenco singing, or Spanish dances without a multitude that was not in some moment linked by the distress of the desire for the impossible. Sometimes, it is necessary, in the sense of what distresses us, to go as far as it is possible to go. This is the foundation of tragedy. This is how we reach beyond the possible, or at least to its limit, this is how we open up to those kingdoms of the impossible in which things are more beautiful, bigger and heartrending.”

Reflections by Pilar Albarracín with Cecile Bourne-Farrell.

105. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

106. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

107. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

108. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

109. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

110. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

111. TO GO AS FAR IT IS POSSIBLE TO GO

1. *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genetrix; nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus, sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper, Virgo gloriosa et benedicta.* (To your protection we flee, holy Mother of God; do not despise our prayers in our needs, but deliver us from all dangers, glorious and blessed Virgin.) Holy Rosary.
2. Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Traje de Luces, Traje de Lunares", *Revista de Estudios Taurinos*, n° 14, Sevilla, 2002, pp. 150-151.
3. B. Leblon, *Flamenco*, Cité de la Musique/Actes Sud, 1995, p. 60.
4. Director de la Fundación Civis, expert and researcher in human behaviour. Participation in the RTVE programme *Tiempo de tertulia*.
5. See Martine Segalen, *Rites et Rituels contemporains*, Paris, Nathan-Université, n° 209, 1998.
6. Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto, Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, p. 28, Prickly Paradigm Press, distributed by The University of Chicago Press, 2003.
7. Jorge Luis Borges, *Manual de zoología fantástica. Un animal soñado por Kafka*, p. 21. Fondo de Cultura Económica, México, 1999.
8. George Bataille in the context of the exhibition "La noche española. Flamenco, vanguardia y cultura popular", Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, December 2007.