

# TEHRAN SPLEEN. POETRY IN PROSE

23.10.2020–28.02.2021



NÚRIA  
MARQUÈS

## PRESENTATION

Imma Prieto

Since we started this new stage of Es Baluard Museu, we have consistently worked towards strengthening, maintaining and supporting a line of research focused on giving visibility to a series of local artists characterised by their attention to and questioning of our time. This is a reality that reveals itself as complex and changing. A contemporary reality which, and perhaps this is one of the unseen problems, is rooted in prejudice and fictions. Years ago, Jean Baudrillard had already pointed out in *The Perfect Crime* (1994) that the great difficulty in thinking about the present lies in the fact that everything around us is fiction, that is to say, it is prejudice, manipulation and conventionality repeatedly imposed. How can we pay attention and reflect together, when even our best objectives and demands are based on values and assumptions that have little to do with reality?

With the project “Tehran Spleen. Poetry in Prose” by Núria Marquès (Ciutadella, Menorca, 1975) we are addressing this and many other questions. On the one hand we keep on reinforcing the visibility of Balearic artistic creation, while on the other hand we stress our willingness to listen to those problems and realities that take place outside our geography. We are taking a stand from the place both within and we occupy, an archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean, while remaining aware that we are doing so, on a cultural level, from the other side.

“I will fight for women to be able to wear the veil even though I hate it”. This is one of the statements Marjane Satrapi has repeated in many of the interviews she has had, this one together with “For freedom”. The Iranian illustrator and filmmaker underscores the accumulation of prejudices and the lack of freedom. From the time she left Iran and published the comic book *Persepolis* (2000) to the making of

Núria Marquès, *Spleen de Teberán. Poesía en prosa*  
[Tehran Spleen. Poetry in prose], 2018 (detail of the work of art).  
Installation. Set of thirty prints on paper. Dimensions  
variable. Edition: 1/3. Courtesy of the artist

her latest film, *Radioactive* (2019), no end of events have taken place in the geographical arc spanning the Mediterranean and the Middle East. Following this line helps to understand the principles, impositions and desires of millions of women from the east to the west and from north to south. It is precisely along these lines oscillating between invisibility and ignorance where the research project presented by the artist Núria Marquès at Es Baluard Museu begins. By means of the poetics and simplicity of her illustrations, Marquès transport us to a personal diary told through her images and small stories written in the first person. And she does it without forgetting moments of humour, irony, loneliness and even exhaustion.

With this project, Es Baluard Museu takes a stand and invites us to take off the veil we all wear—not the physical one, not the cloth one, but the mental one—and to recognise that we know little and that, moreover, we are unaware of some cultures that should be closer to us. All of this, obviously, whilst at the same time acknowledging that there are issues that need advocacy and a voice, as they clearly go against human rights.

## TEHRAN SPLEEN. POETRY IN PROSE

Conversation between Núria Marquès and Catalina Joy

<sup>CJ</sup> Your journey to Iran followed an attraction stemming from the exercise of contemplating the distant horizon from the United Arab Emirates. The restlessness caused by the line of the horizon, the desire to go beyond it, leads you in the year 2018 to a thirty-day stay in Tehran. The journey as a resource... Out of the need to flee from the known or in search of the experience of knowing the “other” in a conscious exercise of humility?

<sup>NM</sup> The impulse to travel to Tehran comes from a combination of the seduction of the unknown that lies beyond the horizon, the need to find challenges that activate new associations of ideas, and my intention to write a book on gastronomy and theocracy, an idea that I had while comfortably seated in my studio in Barcelona. This idea vanished on the second day, as I began to find more interesting the contradictions generated by the context.

The getting to know the “other” as an exercise appears, in a totally unconscious way, once *sur place*.

<sup>CJ</sup> These contradictions, are they generated by your own inner drives? I mean, do they derive from your own position: firstly, from assuming that, although your starting point is the criticism of the concept of Orientalism, stereotypes appear at certain times? Or are these contradictions typical of a theocratic country, where public and private life run in parallel without the possibility of crossing each other?

<sup>NM</sup> They are definitely a mix of contradictions coming from any starting point. In this case it is my own, that of

a Western woman, with a Spanish passport, a blue-eyed blonde, middle-aged, an artist... and from the attempt to add another story to the single one we are usually told about the country and its people. Single stories create stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are false, but that they are incomplete, as the novelist Chimamanda Adichie<sup>1</sup> reminds us.

<sup>1</sup> So, once you are in Tehran, you change your initial idea and decide to tell a story, your story in Tehran, a city and people that puzzles you and that you often do not understand. A story that will contribute to reducing the risks of a “single story” of which Chimamanda Adichie speaks. Your story recounts seemingly everyday events, walks through non-places and tries to avoid clichés. However, as if out of the corner of your eye, you deal with transcendental issues such as the lack of freedom, the situation of women, the idiosyncrasies of the country and its westernisation, the economic sanctions...

<sup>NM</sup> A few days after arriving in Tehran I changed my mind about the project because of my conflicting approaches to Iran, the regime and the people. I was supposedly clear about what Iran was and what a theocracy was. But the reality I saw was totally different from what I had read, understood or preconceived. It had nothing to do with it, everything was new to me, I had no key to decipher it, so I entered a kind of fictional state. Moreover, I realised that the project I had in mind when I arrived added to the “single story” that we all construct together from a position of power.

1. *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED Global, 2009 <[https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story)>.

And so, I thought about embarking on a new research method that would be suited to my reality. The project is simply a very honest and humble approximation of what I felt when I was there, my emotions in the face of the clash of my preconceived reality and the reality I was perceiving. The result is the drawings, which respond to a subjective story with no pretension of becoming a dogma. It is probably not the real version of Iran, but rather my version, the outcome of the emotions caused by this dichotomy between what I knew, or supposedly knew, and what I saw.

The fictional state in which I lived allowed me to “navigate” through Tehran, through different neighbourhoods, with my *dérives*, my wanderings. And in these drifting wanderings, I came across events, images, sounds, which triggered an emotion that made me feel closer to what was happening, but always from a fictionalised state. From such a subjective approach, I have clearly hinted at facts and topics that I wanted to avoid, and also, of course, at transcendental issues, albeit from a different angle.

It is obvious that lack of freedom, as we know it, is something that greatly impresses me. The situation of women, who suffer all kinds of constraints and abuses, I cannot discuss beyond seeing it from my own standards, since I was not able to hear their point of view first hand. I have tried to explain it as transparently as possible, but obviously the fact that I am a white woman from the “first world” has an influence.

I have been seduced by Iran’s idiosyncrasies; it is a very deep, very interesting, very intelligent country with amazing nuances and sensitivity. Their westernisation is quite peculiar, because they lean towards our idea of success, even if in the West this idea is becoming more and more obsolete. And with respect to the economic sanctions, they are creating a kind of dystopia and confusion that causes everything to acquire a different nuance, to lose its meaning.

<sup>CJ</sup> There is a clear link between the project title and Charles Baudelaire's *Paris Spleen*<sup>2</sup>. In his case, the setting was the Paris of the second half of the 19th century, where he expresses his loneliness and tedium, irony and existential angst. In your case, it is 21st century Tehran. Two cities, two worlds separated in space and time, and also two gazes. What interests you about the concept of spleen? What parallels do you draw with the atmosphere created by Baudelaire? How do you transfer it to a totally different time and context?

<sup>NM</sup> Through the title I was looking for a place of narration from which to start. *Spleen* means melancholy, and the way I am and work is closely linked to the melancholic character; it's the only way I know to tell stories. My plan was to convey the fascination and oppression I felt, depending on the day, through a story that was close to my experience, that is, with the peculiarities, extravagances and charms of a melancholic vision, whose walls are higher and more solid than those of a prison. In totalitarian regimes people live, or try to live, a normal life, and in the case of Tehran the melancholic tone of the city and its inhabitants seems to allow them to somewhat relax about the more prosaic or daily subsistence issues.

Consequently, *Tehran Spleen* is a look from a melancholy space, but also a reading from the city itself, obviously from a very personal point of view. It is a constant wandering through the city and the general features of the city. This is something it shares not only with Baudelaire's work, but with all the publications that have to do with cities and with those that associate cities with one another. However, rather than as parallels, I understand it more as a play on words:

2. Baudelaire, Charles. *Paris Spleen*. Translated by Keith Waldrop. Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2009.

Iran, before the Ayatollahs' regime, was a very francophile country, with many links to the European country—Farah Diba studied in France, Ayatollah Khomeini went into exile there and later it also became home to the Sah. In its glory days, and depending on how you look at it, we could say that Tehran was the Paris of the Middle East.

<sup>CJ</sup> *Poetry in prose* is the project's subtitle, which fits in perfectly with Iran, where poetry—an inheritance from ancient Persia—does not belong to an elite. It is rather a form of expression used by the population to express feelings, yearnings and disappointments, but also to criticise reality. Which has been your perception of this?

<sup>NM</sup> Poetry's relationship with the individual and society is deeply rooted in a long tradition of production and appreciation of poetry by the Iranian people, as well as in the conviction of the expressive power of poetic language. Persian poetry is a factor of identity among the different ethnic groups of Iran (Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs, Turks, Armenians, etc.). The reason for this is that, through classical texts, the Iranian nation is able to come together, reliving and recreating poems that are fully understood after almost a thousand years of being written.

Poetry is present everywhere; it is used for many purposes, also as a concept on which to reflect. I think poetry, in their case, is almost philosophy. One of the features that I noticed when I was with Iranians, even when speaking in English, is that they use many metaphors—at least that's what the people I was with did. They often resort to metaphors when speaking, and decoding what they are saying is fascinating. You can perceive their idiosyncrasies by the way they construct the metaphors.

When they speak, many phrases are related to this kind of pseudo-poetry. You may be talking about simple objects and it seems that you are talking about much higher and sophisticated concepts, but the fact is that, deep down,

that is what you are doing. When it comes to concept and abstraction, Iranians are at a high level.

As for me, I have tried to use the most plain and everyday facts and elements to achieve poetic and abstract concepts in the prose of everyday life. As a person who likes the figurative sense of ideas very much, I like to use it, and trying to read how others use it allows you to learn a lot about where you are and what their scale of values is. Thus, it was a real pleasure for me to be able to enjoy this ability they have to make prose poetic.

<sup>CJ</sup> The project is a daily account, a story about your emotional state, impressions and reflections, as other travellers have done. Simone de Beauvoir, for example, tells in her book *America day by day*<sup>3</sup> that what she was looking for was “[...] to recount, day by day, how America revealed itself to one consciousness—mine”.<sup>4</sup> In your case, your experience is transcribed with images, each one linked to a narrative. Do the drawings arise mainly from experience rather than from consciousness?

<sup>NM</sup> Well, the collection of information that I stored in the envelopes (research methodology) is indeed completely experiential. Every day, at night, I put in a closed envelope my perceptions of the day, my drawings, newspaper cuttings, the wrapper of a chewing gum... But the translation into the thirty drawings and stories is the result of a totally conscious reflection.

<sup>CJ</sup> Although you develop your artistic practice through such diverse media as video, installation, sculpture and photography, it seems that

3. De Beauvoir, Simone. *America day by day*. University of California Press, 1999.

4. *Idem*, p. xvii.

you are particularly comfortable with drawing. A delicate and vibrant stroke, the use of different techniques... When one contemplates them, one would never link them to a melancholic state, which you claim is part of your creative process. It seems that for you, unlike Baudelaire, solitude is positive, the best state to find oneself again and not get lost in the other.

<sup>NM</sup> Mmm, I like solitude for work, and as a starting point for work.

Drama as a leitmotif exhausts me, as does manipulation, psychohorror... In general, dark intentions, whatever they are. *Poetry in prose* is very appropriate.

<sup>CJ</sup> Speaking of drawings, I think it is interesting to make room for one that is part of the project: the one with the curtain, a drawing with a lot of meaning. A curtain flying in the breeze. Is it meant as a metaphor?

<sup>NM</sup> Yes, the movement of a curtain in the wind... The wind blows where it wants and the curtain moves at its will, even though it seems to be free. The sedative effect of its movement, when you observe it, takes you to a meditative state. Through this melancholy I realised that this was exactly what I was experiencing. The image of a blowing curtain reflects my state of mind in Tehran. Everyone flies in their own way, but always attached to a point.

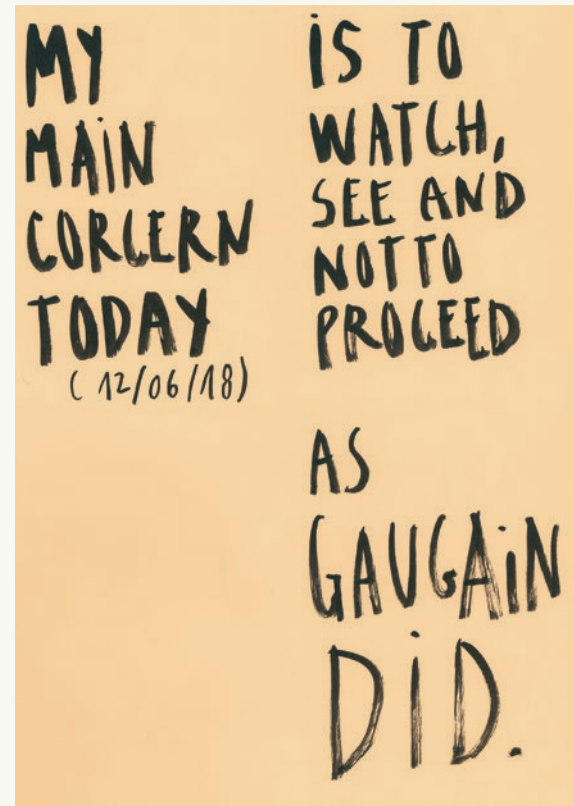
<sup>CJ</sup> The project consists of thirty drawings that are made into thirty posters, referring to the instrument of propaganda of the theocratic regime that rules Iran. And by extension, that of totalitarian regimes. In the 21st century and in democratic countries, the blatant domination of social media has caused that the poster is no longer the object of protest or propaganda that used to catch our attention in public spaces. It has now

become a medium that moves around Twitter, Instagram..., although its protest and propaganda function remains intact.

<sup>NM</sup> I have turned the drawings into posters. Each of the drawings has a different format. I wanted them all to have the same intensity, and by giving them the format 100×70 cm, they became a pseudo categorical assertion. I employed the device of standardising the measurements with the concepts. Thus, they became something similar to propaganda, so typical in theocratic regimes and so typical also in what could be a first stage of neoliberalism's announcements. It is an element that announces, that categorises, it is like selling a concept.

I also wanted everything to be very ordered and very standardised, trying to create a metaphor for what is supposed to be a strict, authoritarian regime, whether neoliberal or theocratic. Then, within this framework of measures, I wanted to let everything that is evocative fly. I want to evoke thoughts; I don't want to elaborate standard thoughts or create standard ideas. My intention is not to build up a new *single story*, but simply to evoke, to provoke questions in the audience. I want to at least try to make people take a different look, have a different feeling when they see the orderly and organised, fresh, colourful posters about what my stay in a country like Iran has been like—so far from what Iran is thought to be, a dark country, or far from what Iran is thought to be as an heir to Persia.

This project is the result of a conflict originating from the reality I perceived and the reality I conceived. Prejudice, loss of power, abuse of power. It seems simple, but for me it was very complicated. It was very complicated, therefore, to be able to arrive to a conclusion. Or rather, more than to a conclusion, to these works, which are reflections on approaches to many and diverse issues.



Núria Marquès, *Spleen de Teherán. Poesía en prosa* [Tehran Spleen. Poetry in prose], 2018 (detail of the work of art).  
Courtesy of the artist

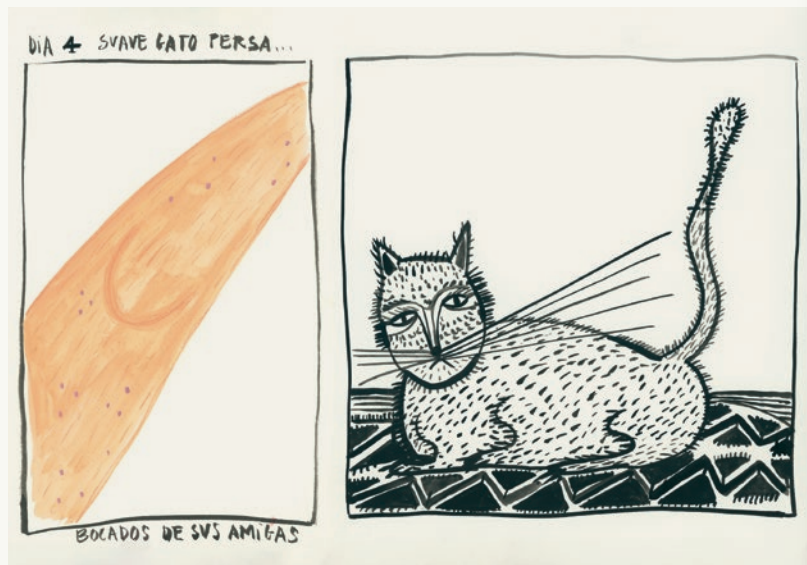


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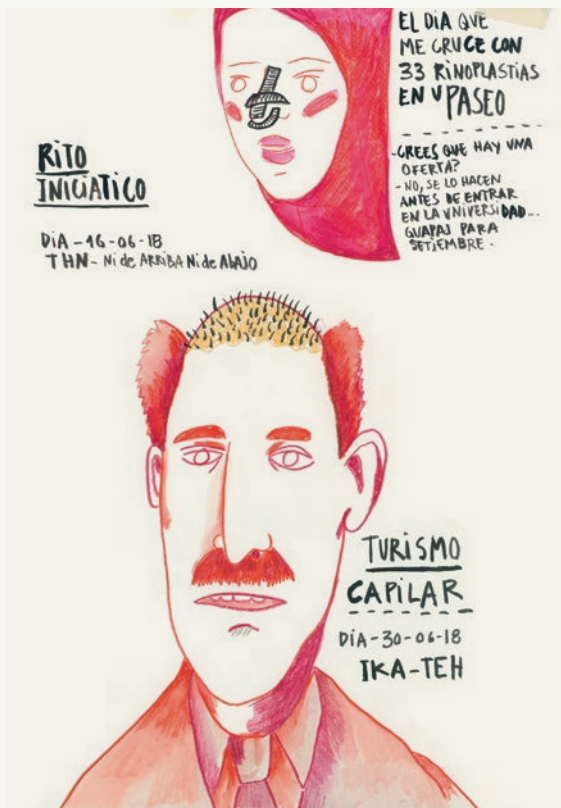




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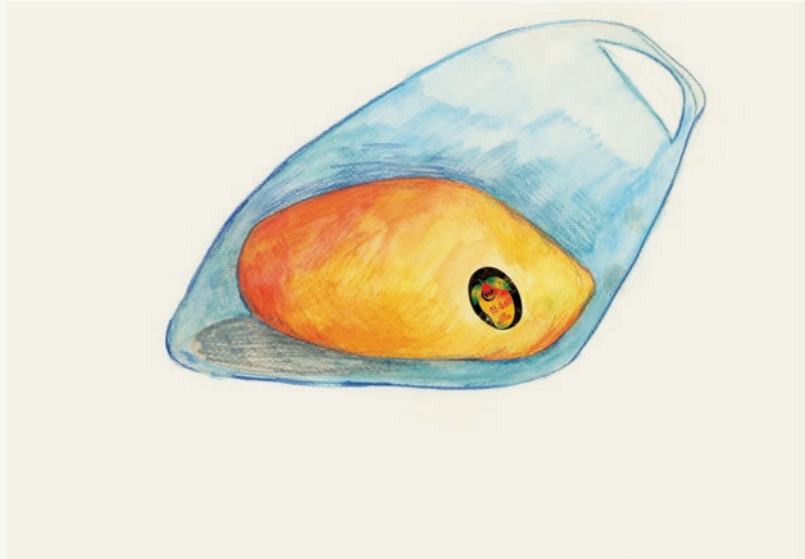
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[Tehran Spleen. Poetry in prose], 2018 (detail of the work of art).  
Courtesy of the artist

## NÚRIA BOUGHT A MANGO EVERY DAY

Cécile Bourne-Farrell

“The Orient and Orientals are considered as an ‘object’ of study, stamped with an otherness—as all that is different, whether it be ‘subject’ or ‘object’—but of a constitutive otherness, of an essentialist character [...] This ‘object’ of study will be, as is customary, passive, non-participative, endowed with ‘historical’ subjectivity, above all, non-active, non-autonomous, non-sovereign with regard to itself: the only Orient or Oriental or subject which could be admitted, at the extreme limit, is the alienated being, philosophically, that is, other than itself in relationship to itself, posed, understood, defined—and acted—by others”.

Edward Said<sup>1</sup>

Every day during the month of her residency in Tehran,<sup>2</sup> Núria Marquès bought a mango at a price that changed from one day to the next. She made note of where it came from, asking herself whether this might demonstrate that Iran was on good terms with its neighbours Afghanistan or Pakistan. If the price of a mango was higher the next day, would that inextricably mean that the relations were getting worse or improving? Núria Marquès deduced that relations with Qatar were surely of the friendliest, since the price of American cigarettes remained stable, and despite being anti-American they drank Coca-Cola which could be purchased at the same price always, since it was produced in Iran.

1. Said, Edward. “The Scope of Orientalism”. In: *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 1978, p.96.

2. From 1 to 31 July 2018.

The absurdity of the economic embargo Iran has suffered since 1995<sup>3</sup> leads to a situation whereby all logic is vain, drained of any sense. Everything is relative, the priorities are not the same; the system of economic value is thus different and everyday life becomes a subject for observation in Marquès' drawings, where she carries us over to another world, to the realm of the imagination. These drawings float, there is no gravity, no perspective. Everything is suspended on the white that remains on the page like a mental projection space.

The initial intention of the artist was to go to Iran to do a book on theocratic gastronomy. She quickly realized, however, that the project would not be conceivable and that Iran is quite different from the image channelled by the diaspora, where the work *Persepolis*, by writer Marjane Satrapi, plays with biting humour on stereotypes from here and there. If Núria Marquès felt like an "other" in Iran, the opportunity of this residency alerted her, making her attentive to "the Danger of a Single Story"<sup>4</sup> and to anything that in fact is not what it seems. Struggling with a reality that was quite beyond her, she let herself be carried along, resisting biases, even while as the days passed her reactions relaxed. She felt herself being split between poles: she could just as well feel like going topless, in representation of freedom, as she could strive to not view Tehran through a Western looking glass, emulating Gauguin [p. 13]. This dialectic became the object of a certain melancholy that then impregnated the entire narrative around the artist's work.

Núria Marquès comes from the politically correct generation that has sought to put all cultures at the same level,

3. See <<https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/affaires-etrangeres/liran-40-ans-de-theocratie>>.

4. Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *El peligro de la historia única / The Danger of a Single Story*. Barcelona: Literatura Random House, 2019.

without being necessarily worried about what sometimes also prevents you from confronting difference other than by conventions and courtesy. The artist has thus chosen to evoke the Iran of today—not the country filtered through its glorified or mythical past, but through its present. A country under a totalitarian regime, "where people go on with their everyday lives, or at least strive to. I was eager to show the melancholic tone of the city and its inhabitants, as if this state of weariness allowed its residents to relax a bit when it came to the most prosaic subjects of everyday life".

So how then might one anticipate and even stop thinking rationally about the situation she had chosen for herself during this one-month residency? Núria Marquès sets herself apart from the logic of things she knows, where reference points are obvious. How then might she share all this in her artistic work, testifying to a situation that is quite beyond her? It is not only a question of evoking mercantile or exchange agreements, but the other imaginable scales of value in play, as the notion of existence seems to take on an entirely different shape. Humour often provides a space of choice, allowing her the necessary distance to create the mental domain needed to think of the world in a different way. The curtain on the window acts like a filter, waving in the breeze, allowing dreams to slip away with the wind [p. 14].

On the street children can come up to you to read a poem by Rumi and tell you your future, while Persian cats also have the most ferocious fleas she could ever have imagined [p. 15-16].

Núria Marquès therefore chose to follow a methodology adapted to her needs. She gathered what made up her daily life in an envelope, to be opened once back in Catalonia. Everything imaginable is in these envelopes: a drawing researching her neighbourhood, transit stubs, labels, sketches, and so on. In the end she presents thirty posters for these thirty days, the drawings relating this or that thing to her

wanderings about the city, to chance meetings and limitless imagination. “I wanted to work on the least known aspects of Teheran, to undo these preconceived images, yet without offering up an overly serious thesis on the Iranian capital. It is for this reason that I focused on entirely ordinary details, those least of interest for a European audience”. The drawings express her fascination with the repression she felt during the day, her need for transgression by staying as close as possible to her own experience, with its own particularities, extravagances, charms and desires for a melancholic vision. “The walls are too high and more solid than a prison”, observes the artist, referring to her sense that the notion of surveillance was everywhere, as described here by Foucault, illustrative of her experience of living in the city: “There is in surveillance, and more precisely in the gaze of those watching, something that is not foreign to the pleasure of watching and the pleasure of watching pleasure. Power relationships can physically pass through the material thickness of bodies without having to be relayed by the representation of subjects. If power reaches the body, it is not because it was first interiorised in people’s consciousness”.<sup>5</sup> In effect, with female bodies being covered the very idea of having a foot peeking out from under the covering [p. 17], or of an ear going over the limit, becomes like a much-needed breath of fresh air for well-being and for life, in semi-conscious survival.

For the artist, the opportunity of these thirty days in residence in Teheran was a way of gauging of her reactions, as inscribed in the depths of her European education. Observing the everyday life of the city and the souls inhabiting it would challenge her physical and intimate relationship

5. “Les rapports de pouvoir passent à l’intérieur des corps”, interview with L. Finas published in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, no. 247, 1977, p. 4-6 and compiled in *Dits et écrits*, Volume III, text 197, <<http://ilibertaire.free.fr/MFoucault108.html>>.

to it, as for her it was a matter of taking note, with humour and without judgement. In Teheran it is impossible to come across a full-length mirror or to see oneself in full, unlike in Europe where we are constantly looking at and scanning ourselves from head to toe, whether in our own private domains or on the street. However, in line with Foucault, my body is connected to all the “elsewheres of the world. And to tell the truth, it is elsewhere than in the world, because it is around it that things are arranged. It is in relation to it, as if in relation to a sovereign, that there is a below, an above, a right, a left, a forward and a backward, a near and a far... The body is at the heart of the world, this small utopian kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine and perceive things in their place”.<sup>6</sup> The relationship to the body is here altered and thus modifies the way she looks upon herself and upon other people around her or who she meets as she moves about the city.

While she was wandering around the neighbourhood of plastic surgeons, she had to give in to the evidence that it was true what she had been told, that once female students have graduated from secondary school they get their noses done. This anecdote illustrates how Western canons of beauty continue to impose a certain perfection of the body that is also at work in Teheran, amongst the societal strata that can afford such operations. Quite suddenly this subtle evidence was revealed to her, just as for men it was equally common to do hair implant tourism [p. 18].

As the public body of women is frequently removed, given that it is veiled, here it takes on another dimension in public space. Every identifying sign thus becomes predominant, as the partially transformed face becomes what reveals this aesthetic appropriation.

6. Michel Foucault, “Le corps utopique”, radio lecture, 21 December 1966, available from CD France-Culture, collection INA - Mémoire Vive.

If Núria Marquès had the need to test her feminist tenets, which she believed to be unshakeable and immovable everywhere, this residency gave her the opportunity to realize that the European woman is also a prisoner to the gaze of others, in terms of her external appearance to others and how she looks upon herself as well. In effect, aren't these relative canons of beauty as prevalent in the West as well, and in even less inhibited ways than in Iran? Núria Marquès is not so sure any more, as her benevolent gaze allows her to convey this unbridled imagination.

During her residence in Iran, even while Núria sought to transgress what had been imposed on her, she continually affirmed within her spirit the fact that "the body is the most political and public thing there is",<sup>7</sup> for it is in itself the carrier of its own visibility and invisibility. With this fact in mind, even if needing to let herself be seen topless [p. 19], her desire arises in vain. She is compelled to hold herself back and cope with these emotional shifts, brought on by different approaches to the body and the vacillating mental space at work in private and public space.

Images have the need to be received and be restored to whomever is able to look beyond their strokes and colours, the empty spaces of paper that make it possible to resonate with the soul of the drawing. Here we find neither representation nor perspective, but rather complicities which run through spirits. Núria Marquès lets herself be carried along within a certain melancholy, which she claims for herself and fully assumes. She lets herself go as she gets the sense she is entering into an almost permanent state of fiction, with the drawings then becoming the representations of these meta-narratives of the everyday.

7. In the words of Paul B. Preciado on <<https://www.france-culture.fr/emissions/par-les-temps-qui-courent/paul-b-preciado-le-corps-est-la-chose-la-plus-politique-et-la-plus-publique-qui-soit>>.

## CHECK IN

Núria Marquès and Mamen Garcia i Audi

You enter the room and what do you find? 30 fold-out sheets. And what do you find?

It is not a puzzle; it is not a map; it is not a lesson in geography or geopolitics; it is not a historical compendium; it is not a lesson in Persian sociology; it is not a travel guide. Although it does invite you to travel\* and imag(e)ine...

\*Travel: A transfer that is made from one part (Barcelona) to another (Tehran) by air (Mahan Air), sea or land or... instinct, sense, identity, criterion, intelligence, emotion, sensation, perception, imagination

It is a story. The story of a journey.

It is a chronicle. An illustrated chronicle.

It is one of the possible representations of the reality that the artist saw, looked, felt and thought about for 30 days in Tehran, marinated with the distance and time necessary to mature the project. This.

It is a compilation of impressions.

"Impressions in images, illustrated with some comments", paraphrasing Jacques Ferrandez in his *Voyage en Syrie*.

It is a faithful chronicle of a personal experience. With the peculiarities, extravagances and charms of a melancholic vision.

It is an approach to the *other* and the *otherness*. From any point of departure, her own: a *Western* woman with a Spanish passport, blue-eyed blonde, middle-aged, travelling alone, an artist... who is constantly trying to shed the traces of orientalism and exoticism.

It is a sample of everyday and (not so)trivial aspects of Iran. Maybe unknown. And which maybe (re)compose a

preconceived and unpopular image of Iran for *Westerners*, whatever that means.

It is an attempt to add another story to the *single story* that is usually told about the country and its people. *Single stories* create stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are false, but that they are incomplete, as the novelist Chimamanda Adichie reminds us.

This chronicle begins to take shape in 2017, when Núria replies to an open call for a creative residency abroad, as she has done so many times in the past, and whose help has allowed her to *travel* around half the world and *create* whole worlds with her works. This was to be her second artistic project related to gastronomy after the publication of her *Tropical Apache* recipe book. Not bad for a person who declares herself reluctant to cook. Her first intention was to make a graphic study on gastronomy and theocracy. To develop this research project, Núria proposed a one-month residency in Tehran. The period of the residency was to coincide with Ramadan. The month of fasting was ideal to inspire a gastronomic book.

But the original idea was quickly put to rest. Núria experienced an internal conflict regarding her approach to Iran, the regime and the people. Neither what she had been told nor what she had read seemed to match up with what she was experiencing. She became a supporting actress in a science fiction film. Her conflict was not only internal, because, from the outside, the language, the alphabet and all the other socio-cultural codes hindered her approach to the place and its people. She found herself with no keys to decipher Iran and tormented herself.

\*Travel: The path along which a journey is made (transfer by air, sea or land... or *art*).

Chimamanda Adichie reminds us how vulnerable and impressionable we are when faced with a story that we read

over and over again but whose context and characters we do not know. So Núria, like the novelist, thought she could only create based on something she could identify with and, on the fly, without any specific pre-established objective, she devised a new working method. Every day at night she would put in an envelope her impressions of that day: sketches, loose phrases, and everyday objects that evoked something in her, such as newspaper clippings, underground tickets, shopping tickets, gum wrappers, or other urban relics. Every day at night she closed the envelope—she would figure out later what she would do with those *samples of life*, how she would play with her perceptions and how she would (re)compose them... A few months after returning to Barcelona, she opened one envelope. And it was there that *Tebran Spleen* was born.

Spleen means melancholy, and this is a nod to Baudelaire and his *Paris Spleen*. A melancholy in its popular and contemporary meaning, where melancholy appears devoid of motive. A melancholy that translates both Núria's feeling and that of the Iranian men and women she *discovers* and reflects in these pages. The illustrations convey the fascination and oppression experienced over the course of a month. She herself declares that her personality and way of working is closely linked to the melancholy nature of everything: "It is the only way I know to tell stories".

This, then, is *her* story...

Marriage of Núria Marquès' visual poetry with the circumstantial prose of Mamen Garcia i Audí.



Núria Marquès, *Spleen de Teberán. Poesía en prosa*  
 [Tehran Spleen. Poetry in prose], 2018 (detail of the work of art).  
 Courtesy of the artist

*Tehran Spleen. Poetry in prose*  
 Núria Marquès  
 From 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2020 to 28<sup>th</sup>  
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