

Esther Regueira
MARIAJOSÉ GALLARDO
NON SINE SOLE IRIS

Mariajosé Gallardo (Villafranca de los Barros, Badajoz, 1978) has devised a project that is halfway between the possible interpretation of a Baroque altarpiece from a modern perspective and a contemporary "cabinet of curiosities": *Non Sine Sole Iris (No Rainbow without Sun)*, a suggestive title for a show with equally suggestive contents produced specifically for the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo (CAAC).

Knowing that visual order affects the perception and reading (and, of course, the cognitive and pleasurable experience) of the work, the artist appropriates the format used in *Kunstkammer* or *Wunderkammer* to display collections of odd objects and paintings in the age of great explorations (16th and 17th centuries) to showcase her own collection. In a meticulously calculated arrangement, structure and theme conceived specifically for the physical space it occupies (while taking into account the full historical and symbolic significance of the iconic monastic/industrial building that now houses the CAAC), Gallardo presents us with over 50 canvases that weave a narrative around the portrait of a lady from which the show takes its title, *Non Sine Sole Iris*. In this full-length portrait, the woman is staring directly at the viewer, making one wonder if her gaze is a question or a challenge. Her pale, thin face is reminiscent of the type of woman popular with Pre-Raphaelite painters. The long blond hair, whose locks are symbolically restrained, prevented from flowing freely and gathered to one side, somehow seems to tie in with familiar representations of the *femme fatale*. The game of contrasts begins.

Her profusely decorated pseudo-military attire, chock-full of symbolic elements with a hint of punk, conjures up memories of the iconography of 17th-century royal portraits, but also of the outlandish look Nicola Formichetti has created for Lady Gaga.

Let us examine the canvas closely and review the complex iconographic array it offers: the serpent, symbol of wisdom but also a Satanic icon associated with the first act of female disobedience and the punishment that ensued, is coiled around the right hand which firmly grasps a rainbow, symbolizing prosperity as well as the ethereal union of the divine and the human. We see the Tudor rose, a symbol of love and desire but also an emblem of secrecy, ever since Eros presented this

bloom to Harpocrates, god of silence, to ensure he would not gossip about the indiscretions of his mother Aphrodite; the strategically placed spider's web; the fan hinting at flirtation; the acorns, a nod to the artist's native land of Extremadura; the more or less camouflaged male genitalia adorning the picture; and the tiger at the woman's feet, giving us a sense of her power.

The hunting scene in the background, the hearts, the punk studs, the Batman bat painted in the manner of a medieval symbol, the beautiful swan, the black fist pointing downwards... there are so many details that it would be impossible to list them all.

The picture that forms the narrative backbone of *Non Sine Sole Iris*—which, oddly enough, is positioned on the far left rather than in the centre of the wall—is a version that Gallardo painted of the extraordinary portrait of Queen Elizabeth I, attributed to the portraitist and miniaturist Isaac Oliver. The illegitimate daughter of Anne Boleyn and Henry VIII, Elizabeth's reign was a golden age for England: the economy boomed and literature and theatre flourished, producing figures like William Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe, as did architecture and music. Elizabeth I was portrayed in the year 1600 with a rainbow in her hand, clearly alluding to the fact that the nation owed its prosperity to her wise leadership. She might have gone down in history as the Erudite Queen or the Prosperous Queen, but... as she never married or had children, by one of those odd "twists" of fate, she is remembered as the Virgin Queen. Coincidence? And so, in the picture from 1600, Elizabeth I is portrayed as Astraea, a mythological figure who symbolizes justice and divinity—and, if we believe the tales, kept her virginity intact! Of course, the complex iconography in this painting was devised with one goal in mind: to convey an image of power.

In Gallardo's version, the lady is wearing trousers (another coincidence?). However, one does not get the impression that this is because the artist wants to convey a rejection of femininity; on the contrary, it seems that she is trying to portray an empowered woman. This is the artist's way of asserting her right to use painting to redefine the representation of women, a right afforded by her status as a woman painter.

As numerous female art historians like Erika de Bornay and Silvia Eiblmayr have pointed out, in the Western world's male-defined symbolic system of visual representation, "the image of the 'WOMAN' had been assigned a special function: to represent the object of the gaze, in the role of ideal beauty (the goddess Venus) and—within the logic of this imaginary role—to also undertake the opposite: the destruction of this ideal. The destruction of this ideal, the transformation of classical forms and formats of representation was the artistic goal of the avant-garde movements from the 20th century. Women artists dealing with the conventions of visual representation found themselves in a twofold

position, namely 'being the picture' and simultaneously destroying this status, undermining it."¹ In the 1960s, some women artists turned to video as an artistic tool for expressing their opposition to the symbolically powerful media of visual representation. Others, like Gallardo, chose to confront that historical representation of women with the same language that has been used for centuries—painting—knowing it to be a valuable tool.

There are other portraits in the room besides this one; most are of female figures, and through them we begin to see that Gallardo's women possess a kind of aloof, defiant, almost lethal beauty. It almost seems as though the sweet representation of the perfect 1950s housewife, who cooked and cleaned all day long with a smile on her face, the doting mother and submissive spouse, has been pushed through a curtain and brought face-to-face with her own reality, forcing her to react. These women have the kind of perverse allure which so many men have found irresistible, the appeal of a rebellious spirit lurking beneath the appearance of docile submission (is this coincidence as well?).

As we continue to explore the exhibition, we find that *Non Sine Sole Iris* contains specimens representing each of the four essential categories in a cabinet of curiosities: *Naturalia* (natural creatures and objects, such as stuffed birds or flower bouquets), *Exotica* (like fellow artist Maruja Mallo, Gallardo is fascinated by the veneration of "the non-real" and symbolic objects of power, like the Spear of Destiny, purportedly owned by Alexander the Great and Hitler at one point, or the crystal skulls with their supposed magical properties), *Scientifica* (skeletons resembling sketches drawn in an anatomy class) and *Artificialia* (travel souvenirs, pictures within pictures, ordinary objects, teapots from friends, etc.). A framed case occupies the centre of the composition, holding a mini-collection of oddities: a *vanitas* surmounted by two candles, two-headed eagles, gilded votive objects (gold and sequins are two things our artist is powerless to resist), reliquaries and display cases holding venerated objects (note the reliquary with a Cruzcampo beer bottle!), gentle still lifes (that "lesser" genre women were always able to fall back on when unable to paint nude models), martyrs, Adam and Eve, and a large number of paintings supported by and hanging from a black wall that sets off the occasional glints of gold.

Non Sine Sole Iris inevitably brings to mind the famous picture by Flemish painter Van Haecht (Rubens' master) depicting the gallery of Cornelis van der Geest in Antwerp. Like the collection portrayed in that work, this showcase is excessive but not overwhelming. The artist knows when and where to stop and how to use her language, the language of painting, most effectively: the relatively subdued palette against a black ground helps to strike a balance. Emotionally, a tour of *Non Sine*

¹ Eibelmayr, Silvia. "Women Artists Subverting Conventional Images of Femininity", in *The Gaze and the Apparatus of New Media*, doc.12 Montehermoso, Vitoria-Gasteiz.

Sole Iris inspires a feeling similar to what Coco Chanel sensed on her first visit to the French capital: cosmopolitan society is like taking a journey without moving.

Mariajosé Gallardo's paintings derive a large part of their aesthetic significance from symbolic interaction with the viewer. Over the years, the artist has built up a personal vocabulary that is the product of hard work, but also of reading, study and observation: emblems, symbols, religious and esoteric motifs, heraldry, votive objects and reliquaries reveal themselves in works that invite us to think about painting from a broader perspective, beyond strictly plastic or aesthetic parameters—to consider it in terms of history, literature or the latest theories about the gender binary construct. Her portraits impel us to explore the connections between bodies and garments: it is no coincidence that the majority are women, and young, white, permanently clothed women to boot. Whether they are housewives, queens or female warriors, their bodies are always swathed in clothing, forcing us to reconsider the historical role that attire (and its artistic representation) has played in the naturalization of binary identities (male or female) as a process of social organization that shapes our notions of gender.

Film, fashion, music, comics and, above all, the history of art and of painting in particular, are the sources that have spawned and delimited the aesthetic territory of this artist from Extremadura. Her private universe is watered by many and diverse fonts: Valdés Leal's *vanitas* and McQueen's skulls, Zurbarán's female saints and the ladies portrayed by Gustave Moreau, Titian's glazing techniques and Riccardo Tisci's sinister tailoring, the Baroque exuberance of La Roldana and the excess of Lacroix, the Disney factory and Murillo's *Immaculate Conceptions*, Jane Austen's novels and the pages of *Vogue*, Leyendecker's illustrations and Gareth Pugh's couture, Balmain's punk aesthetic and the spikes on the carved image of the "Cristo de los Gitanos" (Christ of the Gypsies), portraits of court ladies and Holy Week processions.

Gallardo is one of the most prolific artists I have ever had the privilege of knowing, and the quality of her output is astounding. She works incessantly, anarchically, out of hours, by day but primarily by night. She steps herself in her work; she lives to study and inhabits her studio. When I first met her she was a member of the creative group that founded the *Sala de eStar* (SdS, 2001-2007), a place of gathering and exhibition that was able to create something atypical on the Seville art scene of recent decades: a dynamic, interesting, unique space. It became the centre of gravity for a generation of artists who came to the fore in the 1990s, a generation which fortunately, unlike previous ones, included a healthy number of respected women artists.

From the beginning, Gallardo took over one of the rooms in the flat that housed *Sala de eStar*, in the heart of Seville's historic quarter; she made it her studio and her home, and she still lives there today.

She declares herself to be a painter, not an artist—openly and honestly, without a trace of self-deprecation or doubt. In fact, she would have liked to dedicate her life solely and exclusively to painting, to be a contemporary Louise Élisabeth Vigée Lebrun: that fortunate woman who was able to do what she loved and even make an honest living at it by becoming Marie Antoinette's favourite court painter. And she is certain that she would be capable of doing so, because for Gallardo painting is how she inhabits the world. As the artist has said, "Painting is the best thing I can do". For this painter, content is just as important as technique because she believes it has discursive value; in her view, "when a painting becomes something magical, it is because it is well painted".²

In a poetically fresh way, and without any qualms about venturing into the realm of affect, Gallardo has openly spoken of how her relationship with painting inspires the same feelings as a love affair: the overriding passion, the thrill of the early days, the uncertainty that creeps in as the relationship progresses, the richness of the learning experience, and the anticipation of the outcome. Perhaps that way of living the creative process explains why her pictures have such an attractive emotional texture.

In the era of new communications, when some insist that the artist's studio is no longer necessary and that using the tools supplied by new technology is inevitable, there are still artists—surprising as it may seem to some—who not only defend the use of brushes, stretchers and other traditional paraphernalia, but have proven that they can be used to draw us into the most original, critical, radical narratives. And while it is true that today art is dissolving pre-established formats and categories and can now inhabit any medium, what enhances its presence and, in a certain sense, its fragility, situating art in a place of constant negotiation, is the existence of artists who adopt and celebrate other positions. This is the case of Mariajosé Gallardo who—fortunately for those of us who have the opportunity to enjoy and delight in her work—is doggedly determined to remain a timeless artist, eager and willing to spend her time thinking and creating, using painting as her primary medium.

Gallardo is a dissonant voice. If "the task of the artist now" is, as Xavier Antich wrote, quoting Beckett, "to find a form that accommodates the mess",³ then I believe she performs that task admirably. Irony, rage, enjoyment, mockery, curiosity, remixing, study, perseverance and countless other elements stock the toolbox she uses to craft an oeuvre that reflects on art's role as a medium for transmitting forms and ideas. She is well aware that the "image" transcends the realm of form, the canvas and even the physical plane, venturing into the terrain of emotions associated with the act of contemplating the work.

² These and many other thoughts and phrases quoted here were spoken by Mariajosé Gallardo in the course of several conversations we had at her studio while working on this exhibition.

³ Antich, Xavier. "Estrategias de apertura: el absurdo" in *Index* no. 2, Investigación artística, pensamiento y educación, MACBA, Autumn 2011.

The piece under discussion might be considered anachronistic and fittingly out of synch with certain current plastic/artistic trends, but it could not be more coherent or more in keeping with Gallardo's identity as a woman in this particular place and time.

Quico Rivas, whose meditations and comments on painting in this country rank among the best and most insightful contributions of any art critic, once wrote, "We cannot ignore painting or write as if it does not exist, but we can look through the paint as if it were a translucent screen instead of a material, opaque reality. What sustains painting is not the paint; what holds a pictorial work of art to the wall and anchors it to the world is not its material but its meaning."⁴

Esther Regueira, November 2013

Text about exhibition *Mariajosé Gallardo. Non sine sole iris* (Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo, December 20 2013 – April 20 2014)

⁴ Rivas, Quico. *Como escribir de pintura sin que se note*, Madrid, Ed. Ardora, 2011.