

Female Temporality in a Rereading of the Myth of the Sibyl

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In this paper, I shall discuss *Sibil·la* (Sibyl), the first of the works in a trilogy, along with *Domus Aurea* and *Antikeres*, created over the course of the years through collaborative effort between Nora Ancarola and Marga Ximenez. The trilogy deals with personal experiences and private space.

As it is the first of the series, *Sibil·la* is the one that insinuates the most intimate space, that which at times remains submerged in our subconscious, emerging in the form of statements or gestures that we generally find difficult to interpret. Just as the oracular words pronounced by those prophetesses called, precisely, the Sibyls.

Sibil·la can be read as the beginning of a path from what is subjectively private to what is private on the common or community level. Or what can be considered sharable of an experience often believed to be completely subjective and untransferable.

This task of exegesis, of shedding light, began with the installation entitled *Sibil·la*, which was prepared especially for the inauguration of the exhibit space *La interior bodega* (The Interior Cellar). As the exhibit space is in a cellar, it is entered by descending. A descent or delving into the inner self that began in the very name of the space chosen for the installation, a name that evokes a stanza of Saint John of the Cross' *Cántico espiritual* (Spiritual Canticle).

**In the inner cellar
of my Beloved have I drunk;
and when I went forth
over all the plain,
I knew nothing,
and lost the flock
I followed before.¹**

*En la interior bodega
de mi Amado bebí y,
cuando salía
por toda aquesta vega,
ya cosa no sabía,
y el ganado perdí
que antes seguía.*

The work was designed to make use of the morphology and topography of the space where it was to be shown. This provided the opportunity to work on it to a great extent on site, and it was adapted to this small and mysterious space on Carrer de Ferlandina of Barcelona's Raval District. *La interior bodega's* architecture evokes the spaces where the prophesies of the Sibyls generally took place: a cave or the remotest corner in a temple. The installation alluded, precisely, to the myth of one of the Sibyls, as it is a generic name.

¹ Saint John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridegroom Christ*, translation by David Lewis, with corrections and introduction by Benedict Zimmerman, 1909, electronic edition with modernization of English by Harry Plantinga. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1995.

It is believed that the name Sibyl comes from the first oracle, Pythia, who was a prophetess (*sibylla*) at Delphos. She was in charge of interpreting and replying to the questions asked of her, questions of all types asked by anyone, from royalty to ordinary people. The replies were always made in hexameter verse.

One of the most famous Sibyls, the one to which the installation refers, was the Sibyl at the sanctuary of Cumae, on the Bay of Naples. The sanctuary was located within a deep cavern, which was accessed through spaces alternating light and dark in a succession of twelve short galleries, at the end of which sat the Sibyl, giving her verdict on the questions asked.

Legend has it that the god Apollo, attracted by the beauty and wisdom of the Cumaean Sibyl, fell in love with her and offered to grant her a wish. She asked to live as many years as the number of grains of sand her hand could hold, which turned out to be 900. Apollo granted her desire, on the condition that she never again look upon her native soil: the Greek city of Erythrae. Exiled at Cumae, she lived a long time, until the day a letter reached her hands bearing a ceramic seal made of earth from Erythrae, upon seeing which she died.

According to another legend –and this is the one Nora Ancarola and Marga Ximenez worked with–, in her request for a long life, Sibyl forgot to ask Apollo for eternal youth. Hence she kept growing older and shrinking until she became a tiny being that was kept in a cage at the entrance to the temple of god, and she became the object of mockery by passing children, whereupon she would invariably answer: "I only wish to die."

The books known as the Sibylline Books were supposedly a compendium of prophesies by the Cumaean Sibyl. According to tradition, these books were brought to Rome by the Sibyl of Cumae herself. Though several books were lost, the remainder were kept under custody at the Capitoline Temple of Jupiter. The temple caught fire in 82 AC and the original books burned. Over time, they were replaced with a collection of pagan, oriental, Jewish and later some Christian texts, which are today known as the Sibylline Oracles. It is in one of these books where the miracles of the Gospels are supposedly announced, as well as the Assumption of Christ, the destruction of pagan cities and the arrival of a Golden Age. *The Song of the Sibyl*, which has been sung and acted out in certain municipalities of the Catalan-speaking regions since medieval times, at Christmas Eve just before Midnight Mass, is based on these texts.

The installation discussed here included background music and lyrics by the 12th-century German mystic, philosopher and humanist, Hildegard von Bingen, known in her time as the Sibyl of the Rhine, a highly particular Sibyl and insubordinate to the religious authorities. The music was sung by Rosa Maria Aguadé in the manner of *The Song of the Sibyl*.

As nearly all the women loved by the gods, the Sibyl of Cumae –the one chosen by Nora Ancarola and Marga Ximenez as the basis for their installation– has a tragic fate. As if her wisdom, prophetic gift and beauty were deserving of

terrible punishment, a punishment amounting to the exhibition before everyone of her physical deterioration, permanent and ever-increasing, which motivates derision and therefore constitutes a nearly eternal penalty. It is as if the god took vengeance for his own weakness on the body he had loved.

The Sibyl of the installation, however, does not play the role of prophetess of future events –which are foreign to her own fate–, but rather speaks and reflects upon herself. Her gaze, which sees through time, turns towards her inner self, towards her evolution: her past as a child, her present as a beautiful, wise youth and her future as an old lady. And this work recreates these three stages:

The representation of the first stage, carried out by Nora Ancarola, refers to childhood through the voice of a girl reading a text, a hesitant voice of someone trying to understand, but who is clearly too young. A text that discusses, precisely, the demand of beauty and eternal youth to which she will be subjected by the society where she will spend her adulthood: *"Our body, in particular the female body, is the space where the ever-changing values of our culture are discussed and resolved. This is why it is difficult for us to understand the relationship we have with it, often one of discomfort. And like Saint Theresa, above all during adolescence, we even find our bodies a prison. But in contrast with the Saint, we do not try to forget it in order to gain a place in Heaven, but rather insist on modifying it to gain a place on Earth, that is, in the eyes of those who judge us."*¹²

The representation of the second stage, also done by Nora, consists of an image of a young woman with a perfect face devoid of blemishes, who incarnates, precisely, the character of the Sibyl who Apollo fell in love with. A prophetess valued as young, beautiful and useful for her gifts.

The third stage of this particular Sibyl's life is represented by another of the pieces, this one created by Marga Ximenez. In it, the female body is represented by a swing hanging from the ceiling of the exhibit hall, on the seat of which, using a knot in the wood, a vulva emerges, carried out in a spongy material: shoulder pads –so characteristic of previous works by Marga, and that she always sews in a specific manner–, which in this case are stuffed with the fabric of old cotton underwear, expressing without ambiguity this body's femininity. A swing/body that, in its characteristic movement, evokes the stages of life, like a Milky Way, whose mythological origin is precisely the milk emerging from the breast of a goddess: Juno or Hera.

As a reassertion of this milky origin of the path to be trodden, a porcelain plate (that belonged to Marga Ximenez' grandmother), filled with gold dust, expresses the primordial food of life: a mother's milk. A space of memory and

past experiences (represented by the broken wine glass that also forms part of the installation), and the future, which the back and forth movement of the swing also insinuates. A cumulative treasure of moments lived that comprise human being's memory: the Milky Way, a path of pilgrimage evoked through worn shoe soles. The Way of Saint James, in search of the "gold of time." A reflection on old age and the deterioration of the body accompanied by a text written by the artist's mother –which can be read in the mirror placed under the swing–; as well as the care and company that old age requires, as suggested in the video that serves as a complement to this part, in which an old lady is taking some steps with the help of a walker.

Beginning with this installation and continuing in *Domus Aurea*, an ascension towards the exterior of the grotto of the Sibyl begins. It could even be associated with a metaphor of birth, from the myth of a certain femininity contained in the story of the Sibyl to the phenomenon of being a woman in the real world. The installation therefore questions our learning of how to be feminine, which begins as a girl in a society that will demand beauty and eternal youth of her and, just as happens to the Sibyl, will punish her when she loses these attributes.

In our world, the punishment for this loss of beauty and youth does not consist of being locked in a canary cage at the entrance to Apollo's temple, but it does involve a dissembled mockery, job insecurity, personal insecurity and eternal dissatisfaction with one's body, which will always seem foreign to us. Unless the Sibyl, or the sibyls, prophesy and make effective their own destiny, that of turning their gifts into strength, and they decide to walk with the conviction that the gods, all of them, have died.