

## The Feminine Subject as Trace and Disturbance in the Work of Marga Ximenez and Nora Ancarola

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Dizma Lang once said: “*We know it is nearly impossible, and perhaps not even desirable, to ascertain the construct of the feminine subject in an objective manner, all the more so when it is horribly difficult to grasp a few sparks of ourselves containing some dose of absolutely genuine truth*”. An assertion that becomes even more humble when applied to the egocentric context of contemporary art. And for the same reason, highly appropriate for approaching Nora Ancarola and Marga Ximenez’ *Domus Aurea* exhibit.

Neither skimping on resources nor falling into the error of spectacular mise-en-scènes and discourses overburdened with politically correct ideas on gender, the artists created two independent pieces placed in differentiated spaces. Both pieces, however, share three premises: exploring the construction of the female subject, doing so using the idea of a house as a real space, and understanding this house as a place of events and experiences, in which highly diverse situations arise insofar as both relationships –which entail moments of tension, contradiction and disagreement– and situations where individuality, loneliness and intimacy surge and the subject appears in all transparency.

*Domus Aurea* can be described as making use of fiction in order to create a reflection going beyond the historicist title. *Domus Aurea*, which was an enormous mansion built for Nero but never inhabited by him (death claimed him before he could enjoy it), becomes a paradoxical and poetic motif that invites the viewer to delve into current, quite real problems.

Nora Ancarola’s work is comprised of three pieces: In one, she uses objects and visual representations of women’s hands as fragments of the body, and in another, a series of portraits of hysterical women in order to approach femininity and intimacy. In the third piece, she employs various media –video projections, paint, sound, etc– to represent both spaces and the subject in a fragmented manner in order to establish a relationship between the experience of female privacy and events.

One of the pieces consists of the projection of hands making unnatural movements over small paintings that simulate details of the frescos in Nero’s *Domus Aurea*. It is designed not as a background-figure, but rather to simulate a space that the female subject inhabits in a fragmented, or even fractured manner, as indicated by the stiff movements. The subject is in a neuroticized or traumatic state.

This traumatic aspect becomes enigmatic in the reproductions of portraits of hysterical women. The portraits, made in the 19th century, were reproduced by the artist using the same print technique of the period, including the defects, in order to lend them an aura of antiquity and age. The artist is not attempting to

make a demonstration of her technical skill but rather to recall the abuse suffered by hysterical women during psychiatric treatment in the not so distant past and to show the unfathomable enigma of those women's most personal experiences.

Strangeness and contradiction come to the fore in a third piece, placed between the other two, in which two videos are simultaneously projected on two screens. One shows a room and another a subject, once again fragmented. Diverse noises interfere with the music of the piece, like parasites disturbing the subjective experience.

The three pieces –which we could call the installation– confront the subject with contradictory, disturbing moments. The artist places the subject in the sphere of conflict, in a problematic time-space, and in the course of its construction, it appears fractured and alienated, displaying indecipherable behavior that also becomes paradoxical for others.

Marga Ximenez' work also consists of three related pieces by way of installation. On the same premises, she uses the idea of the kitchen, a space traditionally assigned to female activity. The use of textile techniques in creating gloves –which are also representations of fragments of the body– expresses the femininity that the artist also emphasizes by choosing the brassiere, an element protecting the body. She interlaces bras on glass objects serving as containers to create a new object suggesting the idea of transport or travel as well as transformation, just like the ingredients we use to cook with.

The edges of the glass objects are broken and covered in gold dust, reinforcing the idea of nearly alchemical alteration of foods, while contributing to enhance a sensation approaching the sacred, a recollection of the legend of the ritual meal and of the subject transfigured. In addition, the broken objects allude to accidents, so common in everyone's kitchen, in the sense of an ordinary event, reality and that which is mutable. The subject is construed in relation to its surroundings in a process of constant change, and its presence ends up becoming a trace. The work refers to this trace, real and at once mythical and poetic.

Both works suggest to me that what the artists intend is to propose reflection on the construct of what is feminine from a perspective of the gender difference that ties cultural weight to its very relativism, without dogmatisms. Let's say that construing and building what is feminine can no longer be based only on opposing conceptions, as was the case in the feminism of difference between Essentialism and Constructionism. The "I" who becomes "female, woman" in a body, as well as its subjectivity, expressivity, visibility or incommunicability, is construed as well via other, more ambiguous, or less clear and obvious aspects that do not tolerate definitions, dictionaries or encyclopedias that explain, mythify or mystify the words and attitudes of this female subject. If the feminine cannot be fully explained by one's own body and the voice containing it, it can hardly be explained by an "Other".

Perhaps for this reason, the artists allow us to approach their works, which deal with this subject indirectly, through allusions. Certainly the aim is to motivate the potential imaginary in us, the “male and female viewers.” By the same token, they are also inviting us to what Dizma Lang expressed very clearly –and I take the liberty of once again using one of her statements–: *“whosoever allows themselves to dedicate their time to speaking of others, may they also allow themselves the courage to speak of themselves, if they can.”*