

Clara Carvajal

A conversation with Zara Fernández de Moya

ZARA FERNÁNDEZ DE MOYA Clara, for some time now, I have shared with you the idea for the need to seek spaces of exchange in which to redefine contemporary art through an experience of immersion in countries such as the Lebanon, Morocco or Iran, horizons that have united us over these years. Since then, I have never ceased to admire your career as a creator and researcher, both facets about which we shall go on to speak. But let's start by talking about the biology of the image, a concept you use to highlight a different way of looking. Also, to stress the legitimacy of images as opposed to their temporality. Are images contingent?

CLARA CARVAJAL Thanks for starting off by talking about biology. Ever since I read Foucault, that way of unmasking processes of knowledge which take on their own life and of which very often we are unaware has unsettled me. To my way of thinking, the 'biological expression of the image' is a way of alluding to something that we are so used to that we do not see it; I am referring to the fact that multiple expressions of a single image hark back to one foundational origin. As an artist, I cannot be oblivious to the idea that seeing different shapes does not necessarily involve contemplating different images. The famous image of Marilyn dancing in the street, her skirt being blown up by the Metro air vent, has been reproduced in a thousand different ways; nevertheless, it is always the same image. This would not be of particular importance if it was not because the image can refer to an element that is socially laden with meanings that would otherwise go unnoticed by us. That is why I have thrown myself into the pursuit of capturing those different forms of the same image. And more than capturing, I would rather speak of liberation; with my presentation of various manifestations of the same image I seek, more than anything, to free it from its specific actuality in one instance or another.

ZFM This approach you take seems very interesting, and highly personal. And what form does this biology take in your different works? Let's start with *Dioses de la frontera* (Gods of the Frontier), chronologically earlier than *Argucia* (Sophistry). How do you pursue the biology of image in that initial stage of research in which you delved into the Lebanese collections of the Arab Image Foundation, the archives of the newspaper An-Nahar in Beirut, and of the photographer, Émile Boulos Divers, from the town of Batroun? How do you reach those images? They all share the fact that they were photographed in everyday life. What readings did you wish to make?

CC When I arrived in Beirut, I had direct access to the whole of the Arab Image Foundation's enormous archive. I spent weeks in their offices, rummaging through images in the Lebanese collections, picking out those which caught my eye. That is where I learnt to look into the interior of the world of the Lebanon that I was looking for. The Lebanon is a young country, always interpreted from without. I wanted to make a reading from within. To see how the Lebanese projected their image, or how they wanted to project their personal images. That is why I selected photographs of individuals posing, as they would have done years ago in the professional photographer's studio. Now we have devalued the magic of the pose; anyone can look good and change their appearance countless times in front of the camera. They can even play around with disguises or deformations using programs on their mobile phones. But years ago, if you were going to spend money on a professional photographer, the pose was more transcendent because you would not have had unlimited access to photographs such as those. That provided an element of psychoanalytic session to the action of standing before a lens to obtain an image of yourself which you could show to your friends, your family, your loved one—in short, to people with whom you had close ties.

ZFM And how do the texts arise in that process?

CC As I was selecting images, I noted down their origin, year, identity of the individual and the photographer, all the categories that I found in the archives (also why I had selected them and what interested me about them). When I got back to Madrid, I suggested to friend that he should write about the theme. It was his idea to come up with a comment on each image. He had come back from Beirut to spend a few days with me, so he knew first-hand about the project from the outset. They are texts that scrutinize the images with that, almost detectivish, idea in your head: What clues do the photos give us about that aspirational I that is offered?

ZFM Stuck to the image, they function as a referential account with enormous evocative power. Tell us about them.

CC I really liked the idea of a text. They are a philosophy in the form of specific examples which helps to transport us back to the original moment. For example, the text which accompanies a photograph entitled *Niños guerreros* (Child Warriors), in which two boys, apparently brothers, immaculately dressed and clearly members of a comfortable bourgeoisie, play with real weapons, says the following: 'The Lebanon shows a society concerned with fashion and fashion

familiarised with war.' I feel that this type of observation demands greater attention than that which the photograph apparently shows. Or in the one entitled *A Souvenir*, a portrait of a young girl who could easily be taken for a Parisian or Spanish beauty, the text for which explains it for us. To the same extent that we lack references in the image, we do not have the vocabulary to name it with a minimal degree of precision. And perhaps that absence leaves only one loophole through which to capture it, through which we retain that image from the memory: it seems to be saying, I am a souvenir. So then, what is the mystery of the Lebanon? The Lebanon reduced to souvenir is one of the most common ways it is looked at from afar; even more so owing the lack of other references and through the impetus of geopolitics, which has reduced it, as if it were a Jivaroan shrunken head, in order to be able to exhibit it innocuously on an international level.

ZFM And after that? How do you continue to explore the plastic and sculptural dimensions of those images?

CC The carvings and their prints came later, because I felt it was a way of examining the images. If the texts dig into them, metaphorically speaking, the carvings do so physically. Carving an image is about delving deeper into the forms. There is a highly physical, artisanal, sensual element in running your fingers over each crack, in using your hands to clear out wood. It is taken out, extracted. It is a process that is almost biological.

ZFM An initial approach to the biology of the image, as it were?

CC The project shows how each image, in the Platonic sense, as a conceptual abstraction, appears in the four physical supports with which the exhibition is made: printed photography, written text, carving on wood and the prints. One image in four different materialisations. That is the life of the image. The pure, original, image was that which came about when taking the photograph, but that no longer exists as such in the physical world. What there is are evolutions of that image in different forms. And that evolution is the biology of the image: its life.

ZFM While remaining true to itself, the image is updated on each new medium, and a journey which you conceptualise in those four physical supports. What relationship is there between these such similar images?

CC I see it around me all the time. I close my eyes and I remember the forms in this room, of you in this interview. But what I see in my head is not the original

image. It is already distorted by the flickering of my neurons. What I see is the evolved image. If I had taken a photograph before closing my eyes, now there would be two images of the same thing, except one would be the photographic image which I took before closing my eyes, and the other would be this room in front of me, when opening my eyes. There may be a difference that is imperceptible to the naked eye, or perhaps an enormous one because the lights have gone out or another person has appeared. For me, they are evolutions of the same image; it is not a frozen image, a petrified object. The one I saw at the beginning, the one I saw with my eyes closed, that of the photograph I took and that which appeared when I open my eyes again, are part of the life of the same image. The same thing occurs when we walk around a sculpture, something which I do thousands of times in my work. With the wood carvings, too. I never have the sensation that I have something dead and immovable in my hands. On the contrary; I see it change, evolve, move...

ZFM Carving the wood and printing the result. Tell us about this process.

CC Finishing off a wooden carving and then printing it is a process that takes a few days. By the time I had the original photographs alongside the carvings and next to the prints, I had dedicated many days of work and effort. There was no possibility of going back. I had chosen a pathway which could flow into a waterfall or into a giant peaceful lake, like those in Switzerland. Western Switzerland...

ZFM And, going back over your own career, how is this project related with the rest of your previous and later work?

CC In my project *Amazonomaquia* (Amazonomachy), I photographed the metopes on the western side of the Parthenon in Athens, and I intervened those images by superimposing texts. Along with those intervened photographs, I made another series printed on wood, images of the metopes and superimposed drawings taken from models of other Amazonomachies less dilapidated than those of the Parthenon, which were highly eroded by their exposure to the elements over so many centuries as well as a number of violent episodes.

ZFM Then a number of the same elements appear again: images in photographs, wood and superimposed images.

CC That project was one that I really enjoyed. I adore Greece, the Greece of today. I decided to do a project on how we interpret the Amazons. I found that, with

the most recent archaeological discoveries, they have confirmed the existence of female warriors on the steppes of Asia who are, undoubtedly, the basis of the myth of the Amazons. Women who confronted the Athenian heroes and whose narrative was converted into a closed history, which they called Amazonomachy. An interpretation which became the dominant one and which, for centuries, has treated the Amazons as fictional beings. I decided that there was a need to restore the epic sense and to raise awareness of the correct interpretation; that these women actually fought against the Greeks and undoubtedly succumbed to their power. And with that such defeat, all traces of that civilisation, which the civilized Greeks understood as savagery, were erased.

ZFM So, everything forms part of one single line of work?

CC That is right, one single line in which I address different aspects as I come across them. I am interested in the element of cultural communication and what it can transmit in non evident way. I started producing works which used the encryption of languages in different cultures. I compared the geometric Kufic script which covers the interior of large domes in Iran and much of Muslim architecture and the QR codes that we use nowadays to synthesise all manner of communications. I saw a correspondence between both cultural elements, despite the centuries and technology that separate them. The geometric Kufic script addresses underlying celestial themes; QR codes operate by directing you to the famous cloud on the Internet; our modern cosmology. In both cases, we look towards the sky, and in both we need to go beyond the symbology in order to be able to read it.

ZFM And the Amazons?

CC Well, in *Amazonomaquia*, I once again used the compositive structure of QR codes to incorporate them into images, and I introduced a fictitious pixelated calligraphy to superimpose texts in classical Greek on the images. I wanted to endow them with an oriental appearance so I orientalised Greek calligraphy, as the theme referred to the Asiatic Amazons.

ZFM So what is the connection between *Amazonomaquia* and *Dioses de la frontera*?

CC *Dioses de la frontera* aims to unravel the cultural forms shown in the poses of individuals and photographs. It attempts to scour those images in search of a

cosmivision of the Libyan people at that precise stage in their history, that related with the initial period of the country constituted as a nation after the end of the French protectorate in 1943. *Amazonomaquia* seeks to shed light on the false mythology of beings which, ultimately, have turned out to be real. In both cases, I play with collective visions which are consolidated and inherited in the form of images.

ZFM It is very interesting that you exhibited this project in the National Archaeological Museum.

CC That's right. I believe they were enticed by the idea of being able to exhibit a contemporary art project dealing with a historical, archaeological theme.

For me, it was very important to take my project to the National Archaeological Museum; they gave me the opportunity to show my work to a sizeable public unfamiliar with contemporary art. Additionally, the museum contextualized my work alongside two magnificent Greek vases from the collection on which the mythological Amazons appear fighting with their warlike characteristics. It was amazing to see them there.

ZFM And *Argucia*?

CC That was a step further along the same line of research. In the first place, these are three-dimensional works. They are open boxes missing various sides. I take advantage of the visible sides to show images. Once again, these are images on photographic support, wooden carvings and prints, except that, in this new stage, I seek to imbue the biology of the image with greater freedom. And I manage to do so on the basis of working in three dimensions, of the boxes being open outlines, and of the images being different, even though they refer to the same concept. This was a resolute step forward; I was no longer simply seeking to repeat the same image, but to illustrate the same concept with different images: as if the biology of the image now took shape in a reincarnation of images in different forms.

ZFM And the social sense of these concepts that you present? You speak of prosthesis, something which can be interpreted in different forms.

CC Just as in the Lebanon, the immediate motif was the images projected by the Lebanese by having a portrait taken by photographer; in *Argucia* this motif has

been transformed into those games that we humans play in society to coin new concepts, which we then supplement with realities which attempt to cover the same sense, but which are far from their original essence. For example, in modern societies, we have developed highly complicated systems for applying justice. They all have laws, jurisprudence, professionals as judges, prosecutors, lawyers... And underlying this, generally, is something which is hardly satisfactory and where there is always a good deal of room for improvement. But what is actually exercised through this complex system is violence. We are all subjected to that violence, and words cannot describe that. In that sense, I am speaking of violence as a prosthesis of justice. We exercise justice through the application of violence. Simply because it would be impossible to apply justice without that contrived resource.

ZFM So, for you, there are a series of elements that can be referenced with different images, but all of them point towards same origin. And, what is more, that origin attempts to reveal an ideal sense of social forms which is helped by the forms which we could call corrupt.

CC That is a good way of putting it. You and I can speak and understand each other with regard to justice, love, religion. I am sure that a translator who came from Mars would end up discovering that the terms we are actually referring to are violence, sex and death. But, socially speaking, we human beings are very coy. You could say that we are highly poetic, and that would be precisely playing that game of using 'poetics' through prudence. I see art as lifting the veil over those practices. A gaze with an incisive attention. The most important question I ask myself every day is, I believe, what do I see, and then the second part, and how can I express what I see so that others can see it too.

ZFM And then there is emotion: On occasion you have commented that the Lebanon is a country which you fell in love with without realising it...

CC For a European, the Lebanon brings together many well-known cultural elements, with just the right amount of exoticism that you would wish to have if, for example, you could walk into the Algiers of Charles Boyer and Hedy Lamarr (film from 1938). We have that idea rooted in our historical unconsciousness that the Middle East is the refuge of Europeans who are adventurous and unabashed, but romantic, capable of sacrificing themselves for an ideal: for love. I wanted to look for the other reading, the internal one, that which is better reflected in *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) than in *Casablanca* (1942). To give a voice to the local individual,

the one who looks back at us from the other side of the mirror, where the natural is the local and the folkloric is that imported from Western Europe. Look how curious it is that in *Casablanca*, Rick Blaine (Humphrey Bogart) sacrifices himself for his love, while Victor Laszlo (Paul Henreid) is willing to put his life on the line for his ideology. The assimilated local is romantic and shameless. The European is an honourable idealist. Whereas in *The Battle of Algiers*, it is precisely the opposite: the idealists are the revolutionaries. That vision is the one that interested me.

ZFM You tapped into the Lebanese soul very well...

CC Indeed, if on top of being European you are Mediterranean, you understand the Lebanese soul with no need for transcription of any type. I lived in Beirut for two and a half months. I spent time in two houses shared with local people, and a sort of holiday in a hotel in the mountains which still retains all the charm bygone days. The people I met surprised me greatly. The Lebanese are cosmopolitan, educated, art lovers, gourmets, and they are used to constant suffering which prevents them from taking the definitive step forward. It is not that they are resigned; they are simply in a state of permanent transit. The same as applies to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees pouring into their territory, whom they have in a legal limbo. It is strange to see that the mixture of refugees, Lebanese and tourists, which adds a very spicy seasoning to the everyday life in the city. There is a hint of an Oriental New York in this nearby melting pot.

ZFM And is there also feeling in *Argucia*?

CC An excellent observation. I fell in love with the Lebanon, but not with my universe of prosthesis. Even though it interested me enormously. But I can tell you how that work got under way. I had a strange dream.

I was arriving at a place where a tribe of friendly happy people lived. I devoted myself to study their customs. It was a sort of anthropology. I discovered that they believed in a deity called Uru which they represented with a circle and a hook, like a bird's beak. It appeared in all sorts of things: paintings, tattoos, figurines. I would go to bed highly satisfied with my discovery, but on the following day I would find that Uru no longer responded to that symbol. Now there were, however, very different images and all of them represented it. That for me was a new revelation.

ZFM Was the dream that rounded off?

CC Well, let's just say it came to me almost like that. Then I ended up shaping it by thinking about it. In the end, I do not remember exactly what was in the original dream and what corresponded to my subsequent rationalisation, But I believe that it serves perfectly well to explain how I arrived at my boxes.

ZFM And why boxes?

CC The boxes are a testimony to Duchamp's portable museum. The real title is *Boîte en Valise*, the literal translation is 'box in case.' 'Itinerant museum in a suitcase,' which I feel responds more precisely to the sense of that name. I could have done it in other ways, but those small sculptures have a highly appropriate property, if you will forgive the repetition: the different sides of the box can be contemplated, which is just like materialising the fact that the images I select are diverse and disparate, but they serve to represent the same deep meaning.

ZFM I find this whole way of bringing images into play and talking about them, at the same time as you speak about what they represent, very interesting.

CC The title, *Argucia*, aims to draw attention to how culture has been capable of giving everything a treatment that goes unnoticed at first sight. My work focuses on using that problem artistically. What do we see when we contemplate certain images? Are they the same in their meaning? Pieces that we treat in very different ways with very different techniques, do they converge in any way?

ZFM So, you are trying out different techniques to work with properties that you observe in the images.

CC We artists see very strange things when we look. Looking is like eating. We are predators in the universe of the image. I like the idea of doing the same thing on another level, seeking an aesthetics in the images that has to do with the sociological use, as representatives of meanings. For me, techniques and how they are related are important. That is why, in this case, I keep images of masterpieces of European art reproduced photographically along with their carvings and their prints. This brings us to another chapter of the biology of images, in which the interaction of the images between themselves appears. I hope that soon we will be able to speak of sociology of images within the world of images.