

## L. Q. N. H.

In May 1871, Arthur Rimbaud wrote two letters. They are both feverish and visionary; indeed, they have come to be known as the *Lettres du Voyant* (The Letters of the Seer). In one, he imagines the 'strange, unfathomable, repulsive, delicious' things that will be revealed to woman when 'she too is a poet', that is, when her 'infinite servitude' is broken, when 'man, hitherto abominable, has given her back what belongs to her'.

*Rimbaud was writing in revolutionary times. The year of the Commune. However, this 'restitution' did not happen. It has not happened in the abbreviated way so beloved of History, with a bang, with an all-transforming explosion that changes everything utterly from one day to the next. The reinstatement of 'what belongs to women' is being faced with strong resistance and it is playing out slowly, in a process that is plagued with interruptions and setbacks.*

We can try to trace this process using this splendid collection as our vehicle. There are some very pertinent examples among these artworks of different inflections in the way women are shown (or not shown) and under what conditions —as the theme (the object) or as the subject (the artist).

*One might start by looking at the dates when the bank first started acquiring works by women, and the extent to which they differ from or challenge the hegemonic norms.*

This will involve talking about that which is absent, that which has not been present until very recently. It will mean addressing those gaps, holes and empty spaces, the intervals between the milestones, between the heroes and their feats.

*Heroes and feats... we might almost be talking about monuments.*

Official art and public monuments share the common purpose of sacralising and ennobling the themes or characters they depict. The aspiration is to transcend time, to be passed down to posterity. And that intent is very characteristic of the nineteenth century, the epoch to which much of the bank's portrait gallery belongs.

*Yet no matter how much they might seek imperishability, they can never help being conditioned by the aesthetic trends of the day; they must inescapably abide by contemporary norms and tastes.*

And we too are bound by the cultural context of our time. Indeed, that is precisely what enables us to essay an interpretation of these works against the nap —to employ Walter Benjamin's metaphor— to try to interpret their meaning from what is omitted, rather than what is explicitly mentioned; to explore what is depicted, what is seen, as a kind of (deliberate or involuntary) means of concealment or exclusion.

*The absent Other, the Others, the cultural Other; they are all defined by a crossover intersected by vectors of gender, but also of race and class. In the historical section of the collection, the only real women (please excuse the pun<sup>1</sup>), aside from the allegories and the mythological characters, are the queens.*

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<sup>1</sup> Translator's Note: In Spanish the words for royal and real are identical.

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As for the paucity of female artists in the historical collection, one need only read Linda Nochlin's seminal essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' to understand the reason. Women were kept firmly at bay, 'on the sidelines', by a dense network of obstacles that excluded them from the drastically homosocial spheres of academia and the circles in which official commissions were decided upon.

*And we need hardly mention the insurmountable difficulties they faced in reconciling their careers with the social mandates of marriage, motherhood and family care.*

A perfect illustration can be found in the oldest work in the collection signed by a woman. Acquired in 1981, the beautiful *Notebook of Birds for Prince Balthasar Charles* by Marie Eugenie de Beer, dates from around 1637. De Beer worked in the family studio under the tutelage of her father. After marrying, however, she appears to have abandoned her artistic career. Indeed, she produced very little work.

*Or, at least, she signed very little. To paraphrase Virginia Woolf, the oldest female artist in this collection was most likely Anon.*

It was not until the 1980s that the collection first began to incorporate works by women artists on a regular basis, and the numbers increased over the following decades.

*The first portrait in the 'governors gallery' to be painted by a woman was by Isabel Quintanilla in 1985; her sitter was José Ramón Álvarez-Rendueles. The portrait of the most recent governor is also by a woman: Carmen Laffón in 2020. Needless to say, the subjects of all these portraits—which also include directors and other leading figures linked to the bank—are all men. In all, there are around eighty portraits. Between the oldest, of the *Count of Floridablanca*, and the most recent, of Luis María Linde, 237 years have passed. Both men are depicted facing the viewer.*

Other pose with a self-absorbed air, staring out into space, as if preoccupied by their own affairs.

*Or our affairs, such as the welfare of the nation. Books abound in these portraits. Sometimes, they are piled on one another, hinting at the typical disorder of someone who has interrupted their business for a moment, almost out of courtesy, to return our gaze. Some hold their spectacles in their hands. Many rest an index finger between the pages of a book, ready to continue reading, studying or working as soon as we let them.*

**Alicia Martín's** work on the theme of books somehow subverts their usual depiction as an attribute denoting prestige, a symbolic pedestal that enlarges their owner. Instead, she shifts the axis towards the corporal sensuality of the volumes (again, pardon the pun) as in this photograph, which appears to dwell on an aspect that has been systematically overlooked in the official narrative: failure, shipwreck, vulnerability, fragility and ephemerality... all encapsulated in the precise instant at which the books

are about to come tumbling down, like an allegory of the collapse of the edifice of the pretentious certainties of Eurocentric modernity.

*This is a kind of Vanitas. Yet Martín also explores books as illegible objects, as a rejection of any 'easy', obedient' or commonplace way of reading.*

The same might be said of **Sara Ramo**, in whose *Contract* the pages of a newspaper (the *Financial Times*, to boot) become unreadable. The so-called 'bible of business' has been used to fashion a mask whose meaning we find impenetrable; something that cannot be understood using the usual parameters of superiority of Western culture.

*It has a tribal, African air to it, a sense of witchcraft, like some sorcerer's mask. Yet Ramo's strips of paper are almost reminiscent of what happens when you give a child an old —and thus useless— newspaper to play with. And from both perspectives it also operates as a metaphor for the obsolescence of the priorities and hierarchies of Western modernity.*

It blocks the condescension of the paternalistic gaze that has historically belittled the cultural expressions of colonised peoples.

*The colonialists derided all 'indigenous' magic rituals and healing ceremonies as superstition.*

And rationalism and utilitarianism ended up making us internalise that curse. Even the most cautious suggestion that the practise of art might belong to some other order, to some 'magical' logic, is greeted at best with discomfort, at worst with outright ridicule.

*However, the examples are not only 'exotic'. We need only think of artists such as **Eva Lootz**, whose background could hardly be more European. There is none of the exoticism of the wild or primitive in her work, and yet it does reflect a constant effort to breach the bounds of hegemonic rationality. Her entire oeuvre is a vindication of materiality, of the corporeal dimension of signs, of their resistance to interpretation, of a certain opacity that forces us to stray off the beaten track of mechanical decodings. **Cup**, Lootz's piece in the *Banco de España* collection, is an excellent example of this ability to activate the potential of common, everyday forms and materials as a metaphor and a symbol —in this case of the female body as a container, vessel or recipient.*

And the idea of the female figure as a container leads us conveniently back to the historical section of the collection and the portraits of women. Among all the portraits of queens, it is perhaps the one of **Maria Christina of Austria with the infant Alfonso XIII** that best illustrates the role of the female body within the social machinery of the patriarchy, as an intermediate font for reproducing legitimacy.

*Of course, this meek acceptance of sacrifice, the self-denial of the wife and mother for the sake of the true protagonists (usually male) of the story (whatever it may be) can be seen in any **Madonna with Child**. It is also to be found in the paintings *The Land* and *The Sea* by Joaquín Sunyer and Daniel Vázquez Díaz,*

*respectively - which offer a crystal-clear example of the idealisation of motherhood under the Franco regime.*

They are also a lesson in the sexual division of labour: one recognised and remunerated, the other devalued to the point of being made invisible, subsumed in the generic term '*labores propias de su sexo*' [tasks befitting her sex]. This notion of 'women's work' encapsulates and at the same time naturalises the work of reproduction and care.

*In her work, **Ana Prada** appears to be alluding to the same theme, through the use of common objects from daily life and the domestic sphere. Without ever removing them from that same lexical field, she subjects them to subtle twists of re-signification to reveal their full poetic potential.*

This mechanism of re-contextualising goods that are produced on an industrial scale and consumed in a banal and quotidian manner engenders a sense of alienation that 'reanimates' them (again we return to the notion of witchcraft and magic) and recharges them with a sort of intimate, homemade anti-heroic poetry.

*Even the title of the work, **A Feminine Touch**, takes an ironic sideswipe at the myths of the 'eternal feminine' or the 'angel of the home'.*

*The irony extends not only to the idea of this 'angel of the home's' submission and docility to the performance of 'her tasks', but also the extent to which she fulfils her duty to be pretty, to conform to the conventional canon of mandatory beauty.*

This precept does not apply to men. The 'beauty' of the great man, of the illustrious patrician is of another order; it is a superior, moral beauty. Their narcissism is more elaborate, less obvious. In their vain, authoritative poses and, above all, in their garments, we can see a progressive move away from all the previous ostentation and swagger (dress uniforms, sashes, decorations and the like), now viewed as being incompatible with the image of manliness defined by the distinctive traits of bourgeois morality. Moderation, respectability, good sense, discretion and severity... these were the values epitomised by the apparent neutrality of the black or grey suit.

*In 'Women & Power: A Manifesto', Mary Beard comments on a photograph of Hillary Clinton and Angela Merkel standing together, wearing almost identical trouser suits. The outfit, with its male connotations, is intended to emphasise that they are people with power, who should be taken seriously.*

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The image of the be-suited man has embodied the prototype of eminence since the nineteenth century. A perfect example is **José Echegaray**, depicted no fewer than three times in the collection. One of the portraits, dating from 1925, consists of a monument designed by one of the leading sculptors of the age, Lorenzo Coullaut Valera.

*It is one of the vagaries of Spanish history that here the nineteenth-century passion for erecting monuments to great men survived well into the twentieth.*

Apart from its location in a private, rather than a public space, this work does not depart one inch from the standard nineteenth-century academicist pattern. The ensemble is topped by a bust of the honoured individual, complemented by two smaller female figures, situated on a lower tier of the monument. The protagonist is immediately recognisable and dressed in contemporary clothing. The women, however, are not real historical figures, but allegories, in this case, personifications of Science and Thaleia, the muse of theatre.

*As such, they are garbed in tunics, in allusion to the mythological universe; they pertain not to the historical moment, to the real world, but to the world of the gods of Olympus.*

It is no accident that this sudden proliferation of compliant nymphs coincided with the mass acceptance of women into the public sphere, the world of employment and the labour movement; their admission to universities (where numbers rocketed in the 1920s) or even the radical transformations of women's fashion and the emergence of feminist organisations. All of these developments provoked a reaction which had its echo in the art of the day.

*Unlike the mutable, transitional identity of real women, these figures, dreamt up by men, are immobile. The artists —like their audience, like the spectator, the passer by and the flâneur— are all, by default, male. The tunics, rather than actually dressing these figures, actually serve to undress them. Their function is to emphasise what the writers of the time coyly called 'their charms'.*

Echegaray, in contrast, is little more than a head, reflecting the patriarchal distribution of attributions between male and female: his is the intellect; hers is the body.

*This characterisation of women as being somehow closer to nature and the animal state than to culture is replicated and reinforced when it overlaps with other vectors such as class and race.*

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It is very rare to see any black skin in this collection. Indeed, there is only one black woman. And if truth be told, one cannot even be entirely sure that she is not a cross-dressing man (which might make sense, given that all the indications are that the painting depicts a carnival scene). The work in question is a large oil painting, entitled *America or Cuba*, from the fantastical series painted by **José María Sert** for the Venetian *palazzo* of his playboy brother-in-law, Alexis Mdivani (Mdivani was the first husband of Barbara Hutton, the original 'Poor Little Rich Girl'). In the middle, atop a stage, are a group of black people with large drums, dressed in tails and top hats.

*The female figure is in the centre of the painting, surrounded by a group of men. She is shown sprawling comically on a mattress, legs akimbo, in a possible allusion to the racist notion associating African women with unbridled sexuality. Indeed, female black slaves were not even considered as women, but as a sort of reproductive machine for satisfying the desires of their masters.*

Note that although the performers are all black and the audience is white, they are dressed almost identically. We see a sea of frock coats and top hats. Given that apparel is one of the symbolic strategies used to denote social distinction, I see this as reflecting the aspiration of the dominated groups to resemble their dominators. This phenomenon was commonplace in Cuba throughout the abolition of slavery — a process which was implemented parsimoniously through a series of small, gradual measures between 1870 and 1886.

*The first of these was a law —hair-raisingly entitled the 'Free Wombs Act'— enacted by Segismundo Moret. The legislation did not grant freedom to existing slaves (apart from those who were already too old or sick to be of use for work) but instead to any children of slaves born in the future.*

Throughout this period, attempts at social advancement by the newly freed slaves were systematically met with taunts, in an attempt to ridicule their aspirations to emulate their former masters. The illustrated press of the time featured caricatures of sumptuously but gauchely dressed blacks looking entirely out of place in elegant salons. These images were intended to discredit the abolitionist movement.

*The so-called 'Slaver Party' ['partido negrero'] defended Cuba's slave system to the last. Years after its eventual abolition, Cánovas del Castillo, who had been reluctantly forced to make the proclamation, speaking in an interview, still insisted:*

*'For the Negroes (...) slavery was much better than this liberty, which they have used only to be idle and to join the crowds of unemployed. Anyone who knows Negroes will tell you that in Madagascar, in the Congo and in Cuba, they are indolent, savage and inclined to misbehave; they need to be led with authority and resolve if anything is to be gained from them. These savages have no other master than their own instincts, their primitive appetites'.*

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In an initially unexpected touch, blackness as otherness also features in *The Ngombo*, a work by Polish-born artist, *Maria Loboda*. Moreover, at first glance her photos display a kind of technical perfection reminiscent of commercial advertising. They might well come from some banal ethno-chic fashion feature in Vogue or Elle.

*The allusion to the black Other overlaps with, and is reinforced by, the fact that the handbag is, by default, a female accessory. It is almost a metonym of the feminine. The word 'purse' is sometimes employed as a euphemism for the female genitalia. And elderly women are offensively referred to as 'old bags'. Again, we see the woman's body represented as a container.*

Nonetheless, we might also see in the bag a kind of 'room of one's own', a conquered territory, a private space secured in a world in which women are constantly reminded that they are subordinate.

*So much so that in the handbag—in the fact that men do not need it and women do—we can also see an extension of the responsibilities of 'housework'. To some extent, you carry your house with you. The contents of your bag must ensure that you are always and entirely prepared for any contingency, twenty-four hours a day. Just like at home.*

The photographs in the series also recall a police search, or the opprobrious requirement that certain shops impose on their sales assistants to carry their belongings in transparent plastic bags to avoid being searched when they leave work.

*There is a poem by Alfonsina Storni (she calls it an 'antisonnet') that might almost be a description of The Ngombo. Starting with the typical chaotic list —'amidst handkerchiefs, letters / dry flowers, squeeze tubes, banknotes, lottery tickets and nougat'—she ends in an unexpected twist, with the line 'was my handbag with its bomb inside'.*

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Perhaps because of its potential explosiveness, like a bomb capable of destabilising our collective identity, the memory of *negritude* in Spain has been conscientiously extirpated and defused. In our imaginary, ethnic and cultural otherness is represented instead by the Roma, or *gitana*, community. The same clichés are attached to both groups: they are said to be idle, given to partying and fun, and to have a recognised talent for music and dance.

*It has only been in recent years that new research has cast light on the important African influence in the gestation of flamenco music, that specific and distinctive cultural expression.*

Flamenco appears in the *costumbrista* scene shown in **José Villegas y Cordero's *Andalusian Dance with Bower***. The painting dates from the end of the nineteenth century, the apotheosis of Andalusia's appeal among artists.

*The origins of this popularity can be traced back almost a century before, to the first romantic travellers who flocked to Andalusia. However, it attained the peak of its popularity later, when the most traditional 'Andalusianism' engendered what might be classed as the very first souvenirs: crude, mass-produced paintings, largely centring on bullfighting and flamenco themes. Both of these themes can be found in this 'Andalusian Dance'.*

One of the central threads in this weave is Romani or *gitana* culture. Andalusia and its culture cannot be understood without the *gitano*, just as the hegemonic imaginary of the Spanish cannot be conceived without reference to Andalusian culture. It is like some Russian doll, with inter-nested attempts by eighteenth-century Enlightenment travellers to appropriate and exploit the exoticism and differences they sought in Spain, viewed as a territory of the 'Other'. And those travellers would have found it difficult to distinguish among the lower classes between those who were 'gypsies' and those who were not.

*By then the most conspicuous distinguishing features of the Roma had been outlawed. After the marked failure of the General Imprisonment of Gypsies—a measure as cruel as it was useless—policies of expulsion and physical extermination were abandoned in favour of assimilation. The result of this shift was the obligatory dissolution of the Roma nation, ordered in 1749 by Charles III, which proscribed everything from their clothing and language to their way of life, and particularly their nomadic lifestyle. The 'Pragmatic Sanction' in which these measures are set out speaks of 'containing and punishing the vagrancy of those known heretofore by the name of Gypsies'.*

In other words, whereas by the mid-eighteenth century, Enlightenment society had determined that 'gypsies' no longer existed, just a few years later we can see their climactic reinstatement in movements such as *casticismo*, *majismo* and a zeal for folk traditions, such as bullfighting, along with Romani music and dances.

*And the same passion was unleashed throughout Europe for all aspects of popular folklore and regionalisms; the cause, simply put, was the very process of modernisation that was irredeemably dooming these traditional cultures to extinction.*

Spain had always been perceived as an exotic territory, a frontier land on the edge of the Muslim *Other*. What Spaniards viewed as *castizo* and unequivocal evidence of the country's patriotic essence, others in Europe saw as an enduring heritage of its Arab past. And for Orientalists, the Arab/Islamic represented an unalterable anchoring in an unchanging past, a fatalism that was indifferent to progress and modernity. In his *Tales of the Alhambra*, Washington Irving plays to his gallery, writing that:

'There are none who understand the art of doing nothing and living upon nothing better than the poor classes of Spain. (...) Give a Spaniard the shade in summer, and the sun in winter; a little bread, garlic, oil, and garbances, an old brown cloak and a guitar, and let the world roll on as it pleases'.

*What is truly admirable is the way in which this legend of the supposed gitano-Andalusian artistic naturalism has survived, when in truth the commercial dimension, the profit factor, has always played a significant role in the phenomenon. It can be seen from the first groups of Roma who arrived on the Iberian Peninsula and danced on the streets for a handful of coins, all the way through to the surprise of American musicologist Alan Lomax who, when recording in Spain in the 1950s, discovered that unlike other Spanish folk singers, the Andalusians expected to be paid for performing.*

In some contemporary pieces from the collection, such as the photographs by **Montserrat Soto**, one can see a muted trace of the process whereby the capital (and not only the symbolic capital) of these historically excluded groups has been extracted. These are scenarios purged of all human presence, of all explicit conflict. This exploration of the margin, the fringe, through elision, avoids the sort of sentimentally overcharged rhetoric that would most probably have neutralised its potency. Its distant neatness in itself evokes the invisibilisation of plunder, the systematic sacrifice on the altar of progress of the flesh and blood of lives deemed expendable and disposable, alongside other 'natural resources'.

*In this piece from the series **Invasion Succession**, the specific absence she appears to be hinting at is the absence of the migrant workforce employed in intensive agriculture. The missing figures*



*have been extirpated from the image, as the culmination of an unremitting attempt to relegate them to the margins of our social imaginary. A significant portion of this systematically ignored workforce is made up of labourers of North African origin.*

And as we have already said, 'Moorishness' constitutes one of the basic pillars of the hegemonic imaginary of Spanish identity. This cultural fascination with the legacy of the Moorish territories of Al-Andalus burgeoned immediately after the fall of the Nasrid kingdom of Granada, but it was the nineteenth-century foreign perspective that gave definitive form to the trope.

*Nineteenth-century Europe imagined an Al-Andalus adorned with all the clichés of Orientalism: from luxury and indolence to cruelty and the most sophisticated of perversions... And, of course, the harem! It is the scene most often depicted by Orientalist painters... which is significant, given that it was the one space none could enter.*

Orientalism came late to Spain, in 1859, and was a direct result of the Hispano-Moroccan War. It proved to be the most popular military campaign Spanish society had ever known, viewed as a way of making up, symbolically, for the affront of losing the country's colonies in South America. The intoxication of victory was channelled into a vast volume of literary and artistic work. To this day, the two bronze lions that greet visitors to Spain's congress building in Madrid bear the legend: 'cast with cannons taken from the enemy in the African War'.

*The second wave of colonial wars in Morocco sought to replicate that propaganda success. However, this attempt once more to redirect the country's bruised imperial fantasies towards North Africa after the catastrophic losses of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898 met with unexpected resistance. Two more calamitous battles were added to a long list in the history of Spanish colonialism: Wolf Ravine in 1909 and Annual in 1921. Indeed, the latter turned Abd al-Karim al-Khattabi, founder and first president of the Republic of the Rif, into a legend of the global anti-imperialist struggle.*

Another consequence of the colonial wars in Morocco was the emergence of an Africanist officer class in the army, which was to leave an indelible mark on Spain's recent history.

*This is the context in which **Gabriel Morcillo** produced his Orientalist paintings. Morcillo's work has recently been re-examined from the perspective of queer studies, and his exaltation of homoerotic hedonism has been interpreted as a transgression of the binary arrangement, whereby colonialism is seen as an act of violence by an aggressively phallic Western world against a feminised, voluptuous and sensual Orient.*

And it is true that his work is more complex, but the fact that the objectification of the body of the colonised individual extends to the sphere of homoeroticism in no way detracts from the violence of the act. We should consider, for example, the clear parallels between today's tourism and colonial brutality, with its tendency to penetrate, possess and dominate. Do not both promise an experience of total, unrestricted liberty? The body of the *Other*, as slave labour or for cheap sex, is absolutely available.

*Maxime Rodinson wrote a now classic book entitled La Fascination de l'Islam (or Europe and the Mystique of Islam in its English translation). Moorishness creates a double loop of attraction and rejection and, although there is a game of*

*transgression and transvestism, it is by nature a strictly hierarchical relationship, which does not admit any interrogation of the mechanics of domination, of who has the right to use the other and instrumentalise his or her image: whether it be Franco with his Moorish Guard, General Valera garbed in his djellaba or Morcillo with his soft porn.*

Dutch researcher Nederveen Pieterse reminds us that the images of the *Other* do not document his or her reality; rather they are a projection of the concerns, worries, obsessions, fears and fantasies of the society that produces and consumes those images.

*Yet these images are not produced by some abstract notion of society; historically they have been made by a small number of men. It is interesting to note that there are many women artists whose work does not include images of women. With very few exceptions, they neither paint, sculpt, nor photograph them...*

At most, they are only depicted in fragmentary form, as in the disturbing photograph from **Helena Almeida's** series *Seduzir*. In Almeida's work, the principal, and practically exclusive, protagonist is the fragmented image of the artist's own body. Not only is it a field of work and research; it is as an active subject, lying somewhere at the antipodes of the conventional portrait.

*What one can venture to say is that there exists, if not always a clear awareness, then at least some intuition or suspicion of the artificial and self-serving nature of such images, that illustrate the category 'woman' as an instrument of domination.*

One gets the impression that they sought to avoid representations that they found strange or alien, with their inevitable cultural and ideological charge. Instead, they drew their own outline, their profile, their edges, to somehow underscore that they had been 'emptied'; they preferred to work on what stood outside, in the shadows, in the traces, in the absences.

*True, such an approach is not exclusive to women artists. Nor is it a common feature of all of them, for clearly, there is no unique 'woman's gaze'. Nonetheless, we can see a certain desire to avoid being explicit or direct... to dodge the traditional dichotomies and predictable antagonisms associated with binary heteropatriarchal logic. The purpose is to produce a new iconography: to express those revelations of the female poet hailed by Rimbaud.*