

Review exhibition text for Su Melo

Written by Arturo Desimone,
Arubian-Argentinian writer and visual artist.
Buenos Aires 2021

'The coil of many births: (auto-bestiary)'

One ceramic of a woman seated on the floor— titled “The Lady and the T-shirt” may conjure varying associations— that of a grown woman acting like a child, for instance, regaining her innocence by sitting on the floor, playing hide-and-seek under a sweater which may, or may not have shrunken in the newly encountered washing machine. Yet to another viewer, the phantasmagoria in “The Enthusiasm” might register as a sinister attempt at shapeshifting, at transgressing natural laws and boundaries. These contrasting forces— innocence of child’s exploration, (voluminously documented in the once-ground-breaking, today near-forgotten work of developmental psychologist Piaget) and the transgressive, almost violent break with natural limitations, seem to make their peace in Melo’s art, essentially a peace-making activity concentrated on ceramics. Innocence and transgression here cease being starkly opposing, or adversarial forces. Melo finds again a transgression in, and of innocence; an innocence that in no way forsakes mischief. Perhaps especially in our day it has become once again transgressive to innocently explore and discover, rather than claiming to have answers, clearly defined goals in the race forwards— the artist herself does not pretend to have the final answer as to her work, the object’s inner workings defy the maker, escape it as a new born animal, because a living object speaks, and the most living object is volatile. One sculpture conjures to mind an adult human female form trapped in the blob-like mass of a placenta, much as a calf just emerged from a mother-cow still wears the lining, the slime of its mother, of the feminine which appals and fascinates, terrifies and comforts by way of the life-giving magical potency. The bodies, and limbs struggling to escape a translucent, flowing wall— part nocturnal fairy-mist, part placental— recalls a line from a famous Andean folklore verse “El gusano escapa su prisión de seda” “The worm escapes its prison of silk” While admiring the metamorphosis of the butterfly in affectionate terms, we often forget what the pre-Columbian culture knew without having the microscope: that the metamorphosis, within the chrysalis involves violent and dramatic forces, as acids melt down and destroy the body of a caterpillar before its re-composition.

Melo’s method of coiling, at least partly derived from the traditional ceramics of the North of Chile, is an original and important insertion into contemporary plastic arts. With her “coiling” method, the sculpting begins at the base, a patient activity snaking upwards, in which the artist’s manual-mental effort raises the sculpture, a germination— rather different than the more common methods in Europe, which, described loosely, more resembling an attack on the formless blob, unwilling to accept that materials such as marble (geologically defined as metamorphic rock) are not static.

Melo explains how her “coiling” harks back to a pre-Columbian Pan-American world view and genesis-story, in which the circle was the beginning metaphor understanding the world. Coiling

represents a peace-making action in how it guides the creative energy, and the underlying way of thinking differs from the Western logic of the dialectical and oppositional forces as inherent to all progress or motion. In this sense, the coiling method underlies a calm in which intensity may bloom.

“My impossibility of making a pre-Columbian figure and showing it as art” an ironic title for a piece that becomes conceptual due to the title, gives away a very recognizably pre-Columbian-like statue, while also giving commentary on expectations, and on the often unfree, or imprisoning limitations that have been imposed on non-Western and perhaps especially South American art history. In Amsterdam in recent years, what would have seemed outdated conversations have only recently had to take place— debates, for example, revolving around whether Surinamese traditional figurative art falls under the category of art or of “anthropological artefacts”— an categorically artificial concern, which actually came up repeatedly, as a serious item of discussion at the Spui25 debate centre¹ and in other institutes over recent years, during nights devoted to the art and artists from the former Dutch colony in continental South America. “My impossibility”, as a conceptual piece could be interpreted as offering the ironic challenge to such short-sighted inquiries. Yet overall, Melo’s work luckily avoids the strictly or dryly ironic, preferring a moist expressiveness and a tenderness that caresses open the doors of the unconscious mind— (and not only that of the artist) as well as opening the portals of the body (These two remain inseparable.)

In a few of her earlier works, we see the pre-Columbian art history at play in a more forceful and free manner than in “My impossibility”. Melo’s expressive self-portrait head-busts “When you kiss me” and “All at once” each showing a self-multiplying face with many noses or myriad eyes, might bring European viewers to curiously associate them with 20th century modernist paintings and sculptures since Constructivism and Futurism, which tried to capture the optical effects motion-capture and early motion pictures— but perhaps these works much more strongly reverberate with pre-Columbian portraits such as, for example, the recently uncovered bust of a three-eyed, two-nosed [female visage in Veracruz](#), or the sculptures of female forms with multiple eyes [from Tlatilco](#). That the latter-mentioned, centuries-old artworks happen to be Mesoamerican, while the artist under discussion hails from South America, does not refute this parallel nor present any grave contradictions— any more so than a Chilean or Mexican artist expressing certain reformulations or archetypes that appeared in Picasso, or a Dutch painter’s having incorporated elements of Japanese woodblock painters like Hiroshige.

In Melo, however, the resonances are neither overly studied, nor are they based on a mere academic or even apprenticed transmission: rather, the artist mines within the archetypal, and within herself, a matter that keeps changing like living tradition itself.

—Arturo Desimone, Buenos Aires 2021

¹ ‘40 Jaar Onafhankelijkheid en 40 Jaar Surinaamse Kunst’panel talk event at Spui25 Podium, Amsterdam 2015. More about Su Melo’s artwork www.su-melo.com