

## Power and vulnerability

### Inhabiting the interstices

By Patricia Bentancur

“Some departure from the norm  
will occur as time grows more open about it.  
The consensus gradually changed; nobody  
lies about it any more. Rust dark pouring  
over the body, changing it without decay—  
people with too many things on their minds, but we live  
in the interstices, between a vacant stare and the ceiling,  
our lives remind us.”  
John Ashbery<sup>1</sup>

The images of Juan Burgos remind us, as Ashbery well says, how our lives are constructed with what we believe we know and with what we ignore. And it all occurs between perception and the subconscious. The effectiveness of Burgos' work lies in what we believe we know about it, while the importance of his oeuvre is precisely located in all that which we do not know. His images function as a hinge, one more, leading us through complex paths and through our own spaces. What we know and what we ignore, and all the lies on either side. This imaginary is built on a cognitive ideology that cuts across several planes. What is obvious to Latin Americans in certain topical images is immediately set against another sign, an Asian code for example. The capacity to understand them is directly proportional to the hemisphere and culture we belong. Burgos also uses neutral interstices, historical and mythic references common to the diverse cultures and religions, to our present times, while at the same time loaded with history and the past, and always immanently urban.

This latter argument is hard to sustain in an established manner. I thus propose it as a possible idea to enable an approach to his work, including the elements used to fill and the blanks thus generated, from a unit of space allowing us to believe we know where we stand.

The landscape we are faced with is inhabited: known to us and disconcerting, our own landscape while at the same time filled with oddities. This is Burgos landscape. In a previous text “*Paisajes Críticos*”<sup>2</sup> (Critical Landscapes), and based on Jacobo Sucari's premise<sup>3</sup>, I proposed thinking the landscape as a “monument”. But a monument should be understood as an entity in constant progress. A monument that seemingly contradicts its own etymological meaning, as it serves to shelter the ethics that serves to build it in a

---

<sup>1</sup> John Ashbery (2009): *Como de un proyecto del que nadie habla (Bilingual edition)*, Ed. La Flauta Mágica: Montevideo.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Bentancur (2009): *Paisajes Críticos*, Venice Biennial Catalogue.

<sup>3</sup> Jacobo Sucari, en “*Archivo, memoria y productibilidad*” (Archive, Memory and Productivity) (2007) states that monuments function as entities that fix history with *archive image* quality. That is why images built as a source for historical narration continuously betray their supposed “value” as capable of confirming past events. If we think the landscape as “moving monument”, and simultaneously as “not strictly constructed” but that constructs us, we would be able to assign its monumental and specific ethical quality as it is impossible to betray memory in the continuous becoming inherent to it.

new decidedly fragile and precarious manner. This new series by Juan Burgos is based on three female characters that inhabit and build, and are inhabited and built by their own individual landscapes.

### *Las Zarzas*

Burgos calls this triptych “*Las Zarzas*” (Dog-roses). Dog-rose: a wild and thorny rosebush that bears edible fruits and may be seen as a conjunction of femininity and power, or as the power of femininity.

Power is in turn personified by three women in the centre of the plane. As in classical painting, the images on the likes of a backdrop are treated as secondary, a necessary support to the seemingly main figure. But in this work they are much more than ancillary anecdotes and adjectives. None of the elements may be considered secondary, because it is the sum and combination of each that contributes to grant complexity and re-signify the so-called protagonist images.

These three women acquire the form of “virtuous” nineteenth century religious images, while at the same time transmitting the vulnerable and temporal privacy narrated in realistic novels. They belong to both the real and the unavoidably fictional history. If reality may be said to exist, we should also add it is likewise constructed.

While Eva Perón is the most “real” of the women dramatised by Burgos, she is at the same time one of the most mystified contemporary figures and believed to be a saint: “*Santa Evita*”. Thus she was called and continues to be called today by the poorer sectors of Argentine society, the “*descamisados*” (shirtless), as she liked to name them. This contemporary and Latin figure is in turn placed beside the mythical Christian image of “*Santa Rosa de Lima*” (Saint Rose of Lima). *Santa Rosa* was also a “real” woman (Isabel Flores de Oliva) literally transformed into a saint, the first saint of the “New World”, and has reached us as such. On the other hand, the “*Pachamama*”, the representation of “Mother Earth” according to the Andean people in Latin America, is the most “divine” of the three, and travelled in the opposite direction: a deity embodied by different women acquiring different names in the diverse cultures.

The triptych is therefore based on these three characters, who in several ways gather what is human and divine, real and mythical. Three “deities” contemplating in the imaginary they embrace the constructions inherent to the social, pagan and religious spheres -and they all represent political power, the power of nature and the power of faith.

Dressed with apparel linking them with religious costumes, these women of undaunted and serene visage, apparently foreign to their milieu but also to themselves, lift their clothes to reveal their naked bodies. But there is no humiliation in this voluntary exhibition of intimacy. Although it could be considered as an offering or self-sacrifice, there is affirmation, confirmation and glory in this action. It is an act of power. A primeval, primitive and questioning power that makes no demands is effortlessly deployed. A power that somehow leads back to the force of “revelation” in biblical history according to which God revealed his name to Moses through the ardent bramble

that burns but is not consumed. These women “reveal” themselves before us like the dog-roses mentioned by Burgos when naming his work.

The main axis of this work is therefore the fury that each of these figures unleashes by showing its sex, and that seems to press itself more on the thunderous background than on their own faces.

Eva Duarte de Perón (1919-1952) is one of these characters who burst into the public arena with the intensity of those who are capable of dividing society in two: her fervent admirers and the people who loathed her. Her figure is held sacred and venerated even today; you only need go to the *Chacarita* cemetery in Buenos Aires, where her remains are supposedly buried, to realize the extent of the “Evita” effect.

Although her political carrier was strongly linked with that of her husband, Juan Domingo Perón, she was radically innovative as First Lady in the context of an Argentine society de that didn't yet recognize the political rights of women and, imbued in the values of a macho culture, judged negatively even the fact that a women could have a political opinion. But, apart from being a wife, Evita managed to be a figure that shone with a light of her own. She was a Union member before meeting Perón, and a major part of her political assets were generated in that field. Apart from privileging the workers' cause, her public activity was also deployed vis a vis a social welfare system protecting the less favoured, that sought acknowledgment of women's civil and political rights, another pillar in her struggle. Evita's life may be read as a series of dualisms. In this case, as a constant struggle between the autonomous reaffirmation of her political power and the way she stooped down in relation to the magnanimous figure of Perón. The blending of words and gestures, of the combative force of masculinity and the tenderness of feminine love somehow served to express her characteristic manner of managing this tension and even astonishes Evita herself:

“I indignantly rebel with all the poison of my hate or all the passion of my love —I don't know which yet— against the privileges of those belonging to the higher circles of the armed forces and church authorities”

Her early disease didn't prevent her from maintaining her political activity till the very end, although in her last speeches she repeatedly alluded to her own death, like Santa Rosa de Lima, who in a nearly prophetic manner also announced her own. The Congress of the Nation granted Evita the honorary title of “Spiritual Head of the Nation”.

In the work of Burgos, both Evita as Santa Rosa have a knife buried in their leg. These images symbolise the will to act, being forceful. They express the courage to face fate with its hazards and, when necessary, the wish to inspire fear in the hearts of others.

*Santa Rosa de Lima* (1586-1617) is the first American Saint and was proclaimed the "Main Patron Saint of the New World". She is generally depicted with a crown of roses, which in the catholic iconography may be interpreted as a sign of distinction, a demonstration of loyalty and victory over sin. In Burgos' image the crown becomes a complex tattoo that occupies the lower portion of the body and is consumed by fire in her head.

As on other occasions, Burgos here also incorporates iconography from the history of art. In this case the figure is “standing” on a piece of mother-of-pearl that immediately refers back to Botticelli’s Venus, in spite of the fact that it is not the original shell found in his picture and is closer to the version of Ji Wen Yu, an artist who makes use of the history of art reinterpreting it with Pop Chinese images. Burgos, following a mathematical strategy, carries out an exponential operation and takes ownership of an appropriation the best represents him.

The story of Santa Rosa tells she spent her life secluded in a chapel she herself built dedicated to cater for the needs of indigenous, black and sick people in the city. But similar to Evita, this character occupied a place of leadership especially tied to women. In 1615, faced with the threat of a Dutch attack to the city of Lima, Rosa gathered the women to pray in the *Nuestra Señora del Rosario* Church in order to save the city, and when she heard they had disembarked, climbed to the Altar, tore her clothes and raised her gown to expose her body to defend Christ. A few days later, the Captain of the enemy fleet died mysteriously, the fleets withdrew and the miracle was attributed to Rosa. Since then she has been associated with the image of an anchor, a symbol of stability and firmness before the tempest. Currently in our region, her figure is linked with the natural phenomenon called the “Santa Rosa storm”. It is worth noting the symbolism of fish biting the saint’s cape in Burgos’ work, as they are generally considered to be “positive” symbols in Christianity, and related with fertility, purity, wisdom and resurrection. The Santa Rosa created by Burgos is presented in a chaotic landscape that constitutes a sort of tsunami, with enormous waves and octopuses hovering on top of buildings.

The second female image (following the linear manner of reading in the West) is the *Pachamama*, a figure that symbolizes nature and the force of the earth. Nature has been historically associated with the feminine as opposed to the masculine culture, and is personified as a woman in several cultures and religions. Female creation arises inside, from the depths of her belly, and refers back to the origin of things. By manner of example, Gaia, representing the Goddess Earth in Greek mythology, is considered an primeval deity, from the onset of all things and giving origin to all life. Nature is correspondingly linked to fertility and fecundity, but also to provision, the care and shelter enabling life to be, continue being and (re)produce itself. In the *Pachamama* image the biblical figure of the “blazing bramble” appears more explicitly; the green and the fire are combined in alternate fashion and beset each other. Burgos’ *Pachamama* imposes its power, thrusting her fury in the form of fire, a fire that invades the cities, while excavators and men destroy the land at its feet, and threaten its very foundations.

Cities, and especially their architecture, are used by Burgos in many of his series. To build them, Burgos manipulates the work of different artists such as Julien Opie<sup>4</sup> and Daniel Santoro<sup>5</sup>, whose own work quotes directly from *Peronista* imaginary. But it likewise resorts to the images of the liturgical Slavic Tetra-Gospel dated in 1502 found in a codex in a Moldavian monastery (as a manner of reinforcing the biblical ambience in these images) and in turn manages to convey a non-temporal atmosphere within this strange mix. The exhibitionist skirt belongs to Irana Douer and the legs with a thread of blood to the photographer Terry Richardson. In two of the collages there are also many

---

<sup>4</sup> The modern buildings belong to his *Glory, Modern Tower IX, VIII y XII* (2001)

<sup>5</sup> Burgos utilizes images from his own work *Campo ideológico* (Ideological Field) (2005)

elements taken from “Beyond Skin” the book by Ed Hardy (the flashes of lighting, the red and green waves). It is impossible to list the never-ending number of elements in his work that refer to the history of art, and range from the traditional to the more contemporary. Furthermore, in this work as in others, his iconography increases in density with this historical and cultural layering. Ultimately, this forms part of the perceptual game proposed by Burgos, now focused on the feminine, its strength, origin, power, rupture and revelation.

If we were to reflect upon Burgos’ work from the anthropological point of view, we would view his work and the process entailed in his oeuvre as “play” that escapes real space and becomes an answer. As posed by Hans Georg Gadamer<sup>6</sup>, it is not possible to think of human culture without a ludic component. Burgos’ images are, in essence, a fantastic and playful construction including memory, collection, invention and concretion of superimposed imagined worlds and symbols that create an extremely critical language brimming with irony. Burgos blends images and situations in critical compositions regarding a specific certain society, and while doing so seizes distant identities, stories and fables to reconstruct mass-media figures with present-day symbols.

This construction is, according to Heidegger, both symbol and allegory: an allegory, in this case, of an imaginary that only exists in Burgos and is integrated into a totality of meanings that makes it a symbol. This is Burgos country, chaotic spaces related to the impossible through its compositional symmetry. Animated constructions, ghostly precursors, images which, although possibly “familiar” and repeated and apparently safe, no longer embrace fantasies, and return to a gross Goya-style immanence, where barbarism and horror are eloquently proclaimed. In this revulsive space time stops to weave fiction together with the reality we inhabit and where it is we who are the protagonists.

This scheme may be easily understood when we reflect upon the inconsistency of our present times –far beyond the imagination of practically all beings. Is Burgos’ work a critical study? I interpret it as such, but also as a necessary space of “known discomfort”: an ambit to help us find what we intuit but do not possess.

*Patricia Bentancur is curator and artist. Director of Exhibitions and New Media at the CCE / Centro Cultural de España in Montevideo. Research Academic Program / Fullbright (1996-2000) Architecture and Contemporary Art: Education Department - Guggenheim Museum, Curatorial Department - New Museum of Contemporary Art and Art Management Master Program / New York University. Has work as curator in scores of exhibitions of local and international artists such as Félix Gonzalez Torres, Antoni Muntadas, Luis Camnitzer, Mario Sagradini, Ana Tiscornia and Marco Maggi among many others. Recently worked as curator for the anthological Clemente Padín exhibition: Películas, textos y documentos, (Films, Texts and Documents) (1967 – 2006). Curator and co-curator for the CEE Laboratories since 2002 to date. Contemporary art analyst, member of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA) Uruguay affiliate (AUCA), IKT/ International Curators of Contemporary Art. Co-Founder and advisory member of FAC/ Fundación de Arte Contemporáneo (Contemporary Art Foundation), Associate Artist / Atlantic Center for the Arts/ACA-USA. Has published essays and texts in catalogues and books and specialized reviews such as : ARTE: (Uruguay), Neter (Spain), Photography Quarterly (New York, USA), UNTITLED CONTEMPORARY ART (London / UK) among many more.*

---

<sup>6</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer (1996): *La actualidad de lo Bello*, Paidós: Barcelona.