

DISCUSSIONS OF GENDER IDENTITIES AND VISUAL ART IN POSTWAR EL SALVADOR

ELENA SALAMANCA

Between 1980 and 1992, El Salvador endured a civil war between the then-government and the National Liberation Army of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, (Spanish abbreviation FMLN). Following the 1992 peace accords, the FMLN became a political party and currently in a second presidential term. The Truth Commission, established after the signing of the peace accords, brought to light various persecutions, acts of torture, disappearances, forced displacement and murders. During this period, artists in El Salvador were divided in two distinct camps. The first camp consisted of artists who identified with the “left” and made politically-inspired art that represented the violence, torture and massacre of people, seen in the paintings of Carlos Cañas, Roberto Huezo and Benjamin Cañas. The second camp included artists focused on perfecting traditional painting techniques for beautification, portraying idealized visions of rural life.¹ These two paths of discussion—the representation of the nation and the imagination of the nation—equally failed to address issues of gender and identity.

1992 marked the end of the civil war in El Salvador and began a process of social transformation. In culture, and especially in visual art, the end of the war paved the way for critical debate previously ignored due to the urgency of the armed conflict. Yet despite this transformation, the discussion of gender remained entrenched in a traditional female-male binary.

The rare exception to this phenomenon was Julia Díaz (1917-1999), the first woman in El Salvador to receive acclaim for painting a female nude without the influence of academic studies or the training of life drawing classes. At this time, traditional teachings often advocated for the portrayal of women within tropical scenes: as exotic objects ready to serve the world of men. In contrast, Díaz's painting “Woman” (1976), depicts a female figure wearing a lace bra with a background of bodies, perhaps feminine, piled one on top of each other. Although Díaz's woman is exposed, she is an individual, a subject, and a solitary figure among a multitude of ominous flesh. Even today, this painting acts as starting point to discuss the female nude as a work by a woman for women. The tangled bodies suggesting a multitude of possible gender and sexual identities.

At the time, Díaz's breakthrough did not make waves, and following the country's peaceful “emancipation” the female body ceased to appear in art as a subject, but instead began to revert back to appearing within exoticized scenes. Perhaps a form of escapism, this approach served to enforce traditional views of gender fueled by El Salvador's generally conservative Catholic society. Following suit, many artists returned to the muse, and to portraying the female as an object of desire and possession, failing to question the relationship between biology and social gender construction.

In the past decade, some Salvadoran contemporary artists have succeeded in breaking through representations of male-female binaries, and questioning the conservative history of male dominated art. This becomes apparent in the work of three artists endeavoring to undermine gender stereotypes. Nadie (Javier Ramirez- 1985) appropriates the feminine to break normative approaches to gender. Nadie meaning “nobody,” the artist positions himself within an undefined space existing between traditional gender definitions. Mayra Barraza (1966), working primarily with painting and drawing, depicts the female body while stripping femininity as an identifier to instead present undefined human forms. And Carmen Elena Trigueros (1963) uses femininity as a device for internal rebellion, activating her body through performance and labor-intensive tasks. Collectively, these artists question identity and gender, the relationship between political culture and visual culture, and explore how non-traditional approaches to the representation of the female form can disrupt preconceptions of the visual art canon.



Adelaida Guzmán Saldos, 2016. Mixed media. 5.5 inches x 8.3 inches. Image courtesy of artist.

Nadie is Adelaida

In the work *Adelaida* (2016), the artist Nadie (Javier Ramírez), cross-dresses as the widow of Gerardo Barrios, an important politician and military figure in Salvadoran history. To make the work, Nadie took his self-portrait using a webcam and digitally applied a paper doll dress worn by Mary Todd Lincoln, the wife of Abraham Lincoln. This self-portrait playfully recalls a dress up doll, with pieces of cut-out clothing that can be constructed and applied. Viewing identity as a mediated construct, Nadie presents transvestism in a manner that breaks from authority and hegemony: family, religion, the state and the law of the state.

In El Salvador, the space for gender in art has primarily corresponded to the gender of an artwork, and although not always obvious, there still exists a separation of genders in the approach to art. Generations of artists have resorted to working within traditional feminine and masculine modes of representation: embroidery, lace, hair against violence, weapons, gangs. Any work that rebels against a conservative sexual binary is considered pioneering. Nadie's work occupies this space, using transvestism as a means of transgressing boundaries.

For some time, Nadie has worked along the diffuse line between gender identity and social construction. In his series *Sorpresa* (2012), Nadie uses the paper packets that wrap small surprise toys found at Coniferia Americana (a well known local candy factory), which Salvadoran children would receive according to their gender: girls' items relate to beauty or the kitchen, and boys' toys relate to cars or weapons, among others. Nadie created a series of self-portraits using a hybrid of these toys that combined and confused these stereotypical gender constructions. These works were later exhibited as part of *About the Artists From: This is Not a Degeneration?* an exhibition curated by Ernesto Calvo featuring 26 Salvadoran artists born between 1978-1987 at the Cultural Center of Spain in El Salvador.

Nadie attempts to depart from convention by symbolically positioning himself as a transvestite within the political sphere. This positioning invites new perspectives on gender in a space that has historically been affiliated with scenes of drama and violence.

The Flesh in History

As the country experienced an increase in violent crime following the 1992 peace accords, gender and violence have become common themes within contemporary Salvadoran art. In her drawing and painting series *Republic of Death* (2006-2009), Mayra Barraza addresses this violence as it pertains to femicides, choosing to represent these murdered female subjects without an identifiable gender. At the start of the project in 2006, Barraza also began a blog titled “100 days in the Republic of Death,” where she documented murdered citizens in response to this renewed violence. This task proved enormous. In 2015, there were more than 500 murders per month in the country. Her blog also became a place for documenting the deaths of women, often mutilated and decapitated and left in plastic bags. Although her works focused on violence against women, the artist also considered contemporary ethical questions, stripping these women of identifying female body parts and characteristics to instead depict bare exposed flesh subjected to violence. The act of de-gendering the body allowed the work to operate as a segue to comprehending pain and evoking empathy.

In a moment when politicians and citizens alike grapple with renewed violence in post-war El Salvador, the work of Mayra Barraza articulates the public's state of fear. Weaving questions of gender identity through her depictions of murdered people, Barraza makes a political appeal...

The Edge of the Needle

Carmen Elena Trigueros uses traditionally “female” activities such as sewing and embroidery, as well as textiles and other organic materials including biologically feminine hair and blood, to create subtle gestures that in turn make strong assertions about traditional gender roles. *Lavandera* (*Washerwoman*) (2014) and *Bandera* (*Flag*) (2017) are two works that challenge patriotic symbols in history through traditionally “female” actions such as embroidery, sewing, washing and ironing. In *Lavandera*, Trigueros washes a large national flag in a public space in response to a popular local saying that “one washes one's dirty clothes at home.” Washing the flag of the blood that has metaphorically saturated it for years, she references the history of war and violence in El Salvador, and the role of the female voice, traditionally excluded, in advocating for peace. Confined to working behind the scenes, and often within the domestic environment, Trigueros brings the activity of washing into the public realm, breaking away from the traditional application of tasks done by women.

To create the work “Bandera,” Trigueros sewed a white patchwork flag from pieces of clothing and fabric donated by members of the public. An ironic tribute to the 25th anniversary of the signing of the post-civil war peace accord, Trigueros instigates an action of collectivity and affords a language of tenderness to years of deadly violence.

Both “Bandera” and “Lavandera” build upon a history defined by men in the public realm—both the language signed on paper and spoken in force. These works recontextualize a common language used by women, challenging both the official and cultural histories of women confined within the constraints of gender.

Together, these contemporary artists make an important assertion: opportunities for artistic reflection are as diverse and unpredictable as the experiences of gender itself. In postwar El Salvador, the necessity to explore alternative experiences and understandings of gender, and to question the traditional male-female binary, effectively breaks with traditional, often exclusionary, social norms. Until now, art in El Salvador has failed to break these codes and discern a space for multiplicity. By exploring the intersection of gender and identity, while reflecting on past transgressions, these artists have successfully stirred critical debates.

Elena Salamanca is a historian and writer. She has published five books, and is currently writing her Doctoral thesis on *Central American exile in Mexico and the Central American Union Projects at the University of Mexico*. She has been a columnist for *El Faro*, *de El Salvador*, and *Plaza Pública*, Guatemala.

This article is published in collaboration with a YES Grant for Artists, made possible with the support of The Robert S. Wenner and Mario Cader-Frech Foundation, and Ellen Sue Venzer.

Notes

¹ Art under Duress : El Salvador, 1980-Present; Arizona State University Art Museum Staff 1995.