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PIONEERING ARTIST

A Conversation with Mónica Mayer¹

Mónica Mayer showed me an apron that her daughter had had made for her. It's hanging on the door of her studio. It reads, "I am the primary source." The phrase alludes to the fact that Mónica is one of the most important artists in Mexico who is also a feminist, one of the initiators, and also a witness. Mónica Mayer studied art at the UNAM's National Art School (ENAP) and went on to study at Goddard

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General shots of the exhibition "If You're Wondering, Ask: A Collective Retrospective of Mónica Mayer," University Museum of Contemporary Art (MUAC), 2016. Photos by Oliver Santana, courtesy of the MUAC.



College and the Feminist Studio Workshop in Los Angeles during the pivotal decade of the 1970s, where her thesis, advised by Suzanne Lacy, was “Feminist Art, an Effective Political Tool.”

Once back in Mexico, together with Maris Bustamante in 1983, she founded the Black Hen Powder collective, the country’s first feminist art collective. Then, in 1989, with Víctor Lerma, she began the *Pinto mi raya* (My Line in the Sand) project, which seeks to “lubricate” the artistic system to make it work better; it is an archive that collects the critical articles about art published in Mexico’s newspapers. A large part of her work was gathered together in 2006 in a retrospective at the University Contemporary Art Museum, “If You’re Wondering, Ask,” named after one of Mayer’s most representative performance pieces.

When I asked Mónica why she and Maris Bustamante named their group Black Hen Powder, she explained that a powder made from black hens is a popular remedy for evil

eye and that they already knew that it was going to be rough going for a feminist women’s collective, so they decided to vaccinate themselves beforehand. At that time, Maris and she were vying for spaces and recognition for women artists and were interested in discussing issues like abortion and rape.

When Mónica began creating art, the theory was just beginning to emerge; but fields like literature, psychology, sociology, law, and the arts were already opening up. In contrast with the United States, in Latin America, the feminist

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struggle was eminently leftist, and it joined with the movements that fought to eliminate class barriers. Mónica calls it “serious politics,” since at that time the feminist struggle and the gay movement were not considered part of the prevailing political agenda. The political movements of the 1960s that, for example, gave rise to the '68 movement in our country, were at bottom related to gender issues because they called for social freedoms for citizens, but gender issues were not on their lists of demands. That is why even Monica says that at that time, she wouldn't even have thought of being part of a movement like that or being thought of as a social actor of that kind. “Suddenly, it turns out that we're all part of that history.”

Today, many people recognize that it is necessary to fight for women's inclusion in important roles in society. But at that time, as Mónica says, even her professors and activist *compañeros* at the ENAP asked the women why

they were studying if they weren't going to become artists but were going to get married. They would say, “Women were less creative because they weren't cut out to be artists but to be mothers.” While such positions abounded in the university, there were also wonderful teachers like photographer Kati Horna and Irene Sierra. The women students also read authors like Simone de Beauvoir and Susan Sontag, and the testimonies of Benita Galeana and Domitila Barrios de Chungara. At that time, although many women were activists, they weren't thinking about gender issues yet.

Mónica's artistic generation is called “the Generation of the Groups,” which was highly influenced by the 1968 movement. By the 1970s, art was considered a means of communication that enabled one to be in contact with society. In that context, collectives emerged like Mira (Look), Germinal, Tepito Arte Acá (Art Here, Tepito), and Proceso Pentágono (Pentagon Process), whose political line was clear. Parallel to them emerged another, called No Grupo (Non-Group), which questioned what art was and how it should be presented.

At that time, in the San Carlos Art Academy, “there was a whole mystique around '68.” But nothing was being taught about women artists: “Even Frida wasn't very well known at the time; she was Diego's wife.” These sexist



Mónica Mayer, *The Clothesline*, participatory installation first exhibited in 1978.
See pregunte.pintomiraya.com/index.php/la-obra-viva/el-tendedero.



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which a woman displayed her nude body vigorously dancing with a city in the background.

Mónica Mayer was a feminist activist in the Mexican Feminist Movement (MFM) together with other women like Lourdes Arizpe, Mireya Toto, Sylvia Pandolfi, and Marta Lamas. This group belonged to the Feminist Women’s Coalition, which published a newspaper called *Cihuatl* (Woman), one of the first feminist publications in the country (along with *La Revuelta* and *Fem*). As a medium for both information and denunciation, *Cihuatl* covered issues such as the decriminalization of abortion, sexual violence against women, how housework is made invisible, and labor discrimination.

The Feminist Women’s Coalition was formed in 1976 by the National Women’s Movement and the MFM. Later, *La Revuelta*, the Women’s Liberation Movement, and the Women’s Collective joined it. Meeting in a small venue on Ebro River Street, they spent hours discussing different positions—many radical—in long sessions as they smoked and discussed above all abortion and rape.

Mónica also participated in the Women’s Cinema Collective organized by Rosa Martha Fernández, who filmed movies about abortions, rapes, and the debunking myths about women. “That was my first real school: you went to the borough building with women who had been raped, and the doctor would say, ‘No, no woman can be raped because they can’t open your legs against your will because these muscles here ‘blah, blah, blah.’” There were very few feminist activists. The first demonstration for the legalization of abortion and against forced sterilization was attended by about 30 women. “It’s a very long, very difficult battle to get these ideas accepted by society.” This is certainly worth mentioning, since 50 years after 1968, this year, hundreds of thousands of Argentinean women mobilized to decriminalize abortion, showing the strength the feminist movement has achieved, and even so, the Argentinean Senate’s refusal also shows that there is still a long way to go to ensure our rights.

biases in aesthetic criticism led Mónica Mayer to begin to ask herself how to change this perspective.

In this context, the new revolutions of the feminist and LGBTTI movements emerged, seeking to redefine what was political and work with new supports for art. The first feminist poster was created for a march against the motherhood myth. “And that’s wonderful, because, how do you protest a myth? It’s the counterpart of materialism. And, on the other hand, these women were questioning culture and its foundations and myths. In that context, it was a matter of understanding that the revolution had to start from the way we see our body.”

Several artists began making new kinds of art. For example, Nahum Zenil painted explicitly gay canvases. Other artists like Magali Lara, Martha Hellion, Ulises Carrión, or Felipe Ehrenberg experimented making art in non-traditional media. In the late 1970s, Pola Weiss, the pioneer of video-art in Mexico, did a piece called *City, Woman, City*, in

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MÓNICA MAYER



1975 was International Women’s Year. Lectures were given at the Mexico City Museum and the exhibition “Women as Creators and Theme in Art” was held at the Modern Art Museum. Almost all the works displayed were by men, although a few women painters were represented, such as Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Marsole Worner Baz, María Lagunes, and Geles Cabrera.

Given the scant dissemination of women artists’ work, Mónica’s generation explicitly and systematically set out to be a group of feminist women artists. They began organizing exhibits of women’s art. “We’re not the first. María Izquierdo organized an exhibition in 1934 of revolutionary women artists and wrote about many other women; also, when Frida Kahlo died, women artists organized an exhibition in her honor of solely women artists.”

Mayer collaborated in the organization of the First Mexican-Central American Symposium of Women’s Research in 1977, curated by Sylvia Pandolfi, Alaíde Foppa, and Raquel Tibol. “I had never seen so many works by women all together; and they were great pieces by living artists.” This artistic activism always went hand in hand with reflection and art criticism that weighed the most valuable pieces artistically and not only for their political position. “Just because you’re a feminist doesn’t mean that you’re making art or that that art is really profoundly questioning things.” With this focus, as part of her feminist group activity, Mónica held the exhibit “The Normal,” in which gender was treated as non-binary and which questioned precisely what normalcy is in gender. “I think

it was an exhibition that, more than feminist, was pre-queer.” Also in 1977, together with Lucila Santiago and Rosalba Huerta she presented the exhibit “Intimate Collage” in Chapultepec Park’s House on the Lake, the first exhibition of feminist art in Latin America.

Several women accompanied Mónica on her journey; among them, Jesusa Rodríguez, Magali Lara, Carmen Bouldosa, and Rowena Morales, who constantly dialogued about how their work related to feminism and gender. Two predecessors of this conscious art are, for example, Marta Palau and Helen Escobedo.

I didn’t want to be an artist who suffered like Frida Kahlo or Nahui Ollin. I wanted to be a successful artist like Helen Escobedo, a wonderful artist and public servant who opened doors to the Generation of the Groups; I wanted in practice to have that sororal, generous attitude. Although because of her generation, Escobedo’s attitude was as though she had to be one of the group, one of the boys; our generation was already independent, but not separatist.

Mónica Mayer started out on the road to performance art at the San Carlos Academy, which was beginning to offer workshops. In the United States, performance art was eminently political, since it exposes the author to the viewer “with your gender, with your sex, with your age, with your weight.” This new art form also made it possible not to follow a canon, in contrast with the visual arts. The art had to be what its creators needed it to be to promote



Detail of *The Clothesline*.

their message, even if this challenged the critics' opinions. At that time, Suzanne Lacy, Mónica's advisor, began the "Making It Safe" project to rebuild the social fabric of marginalized communities. "Part of the project was offering a self-defense workshop for little old ladies, doing poetry readings; we made an exhibit on the main street and I made my clothesline." Artistic objects were left behind. In their place, actions were carried out to raise society's consciousness. This way of creating has its antecedents in conceptual and post-war art.

Mónica wrote the book *Rosa chillante. Mujeres y performance* (Intense Pink: Women and Performance). In it she relates that the 1980s saw a boom in feminist art collectives, with groups like Tlacuilas and Retrateras (Women Illustrators and Portraitists), Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder), Coyolxauhqui Articulada (Articulated Coyolxauhqui, Queen of the Southern Star Gods), and Bioarte. Later, in the 1990s, artist Lorena Wolffer developed a project called "I'm Totally Iron," in answer to and to counter the slogan of a well-known department store, Palacio de Hierro (Iron Palace), "I'm Totally Palacio." In that project, a dark-skinned girl is clearly countroposed to the women department stores portrayed as ideal.

Other women who have also been at the cutting edge of insurgency with performance art that demand's society's attention are Niña Yhared, Iris Nava, La Congelada de Uva, Yolanda Segura, Adriana Amaya, Lorena Méndez, Doris Steinbichler, Laura García, Elvira Santamaría, Katia Tirado, Lorena Orozco, and Pilar Villela. I also asked Mónica

if she knows the young performance artists of The Daughters of Violence: "Oh, I'm a big fan, and I love that they shock me."

Our country's women's artistic movements have opened up new spaces. "Two years ago, the Carrillo Gil Museum published its statistics about how many women had exhibited there compared to the men. They haven't done anything yet to change that, but they have recognized it [that there are fewer women]."

Art criticism should also focus on women's art, since it has tended to emphasize the personal lives of the artists rather than their work. "Even when I had my retrospective in 2016 at the University Contemporary Art Museum, one journalist wrote that when

I had my children I stopped working, and that's not true; even though I spend time with my family and it's important to me, I haven't stopped [working] for a moment."

Feminist activism in art has managed to open up many spaces for women artists. However, many issues still remain to be resolved. While people's paradigms seem to have opened up to including gender and women's rights, "We have changed a huge population in word only, but in daily life, in practice, it hasn't changed. Everything still remains to be done."

The art world does not offer equality with regard to studios, exhibits, publications, or archives, either. "We have to denaturalize the different kinds of violence: the violence of a teacher who harasses is the same as one who doesn't take a woman artist seriously." Academia and the artistic milieu do not demand the artistic level of women that they do of men. "It's our responsibility to take ourselves seriously, to demand more of ourselves; we carry patriarchy within ourselves, too. The idea of the solitary artist is patriarchal, in contrast with the idea of collective work done in solidarity. This conception is feminist, and the critics don't know what to do with us." **MM**

Notes

1 A Spanish-language version of this interview was published in the book *Memoria en pie. 1968-2018. 50 años de resistencia artística, crítica, independiente y popular* (Mexico City: Tintable/Secretaría de Cultura, 2018).