



*The Cycle.*

## EVERYDAY GODDESSES ALEJANDRA ZÉRMENO'S ART

Christian Gómez\*

In the vestibule of Mexico City's Women's Museum, four female bodies face each other. The figures, each with a hand on her chest and another on her belly, have formed a circle, a silent encounter. They are black- red-, pink- and aqua-marine-colored. The expression on their faces is of someone who is about to say something, with lips slightly parted, as though they are waiting for someone, man or woman, to decide to join the conversation. A frank, naked dialogue.

\*Philologist and cultural journalist, [christiangomez01@hotmail.com](mailto:christiangomez01@hotmail.com). All photographs reproduced by permission of Alejandra Zermeño.

This space for encounters, for possible dialogue, is the result of artist Alejandra Zermeño's work. Her most recent series consists of these bodies: sculpted portraits of Mexican women. Together with other graphic art and woven pieces they are part of the exhibit "*Cherchez la femme*," where she represents histories of abuse, inequality, and models of backward lives imposed by education.

"This is not a feminist call," says the sculptress about this moment in her work. "These works seek to return to a state of respect for recognizing ourselves in the gaze of the other."

Prompted by this exhibit, a significant moment in her career, I visited her studio and we talked about the different issues that have surrounded her oeuvre: the relationship of human beings with their surroundings, with skin, with space, her interlude in the world of cinema, the problems of sculpture. The artist returns to her own history and talks about the catharsis of doing her work. At the same time, she insists that it is one stop on the road of her investigation, which already suggests other routes.

#### HIDEAWAYS

Alejandra Zermeño's studio is in a traditional neighborhood in the city's downtown area. The colorful house where she works stands out among the grey walls of the old buildings. Inside, you can appreciate its special organization. An enormous room with the floor covered in blue plastic and a pink wall is where she sculpts; a small room stores materials on the point of being turned into something else; an office —artists

have offices, too—; and a small room full of crated works, of piled-up bodies.

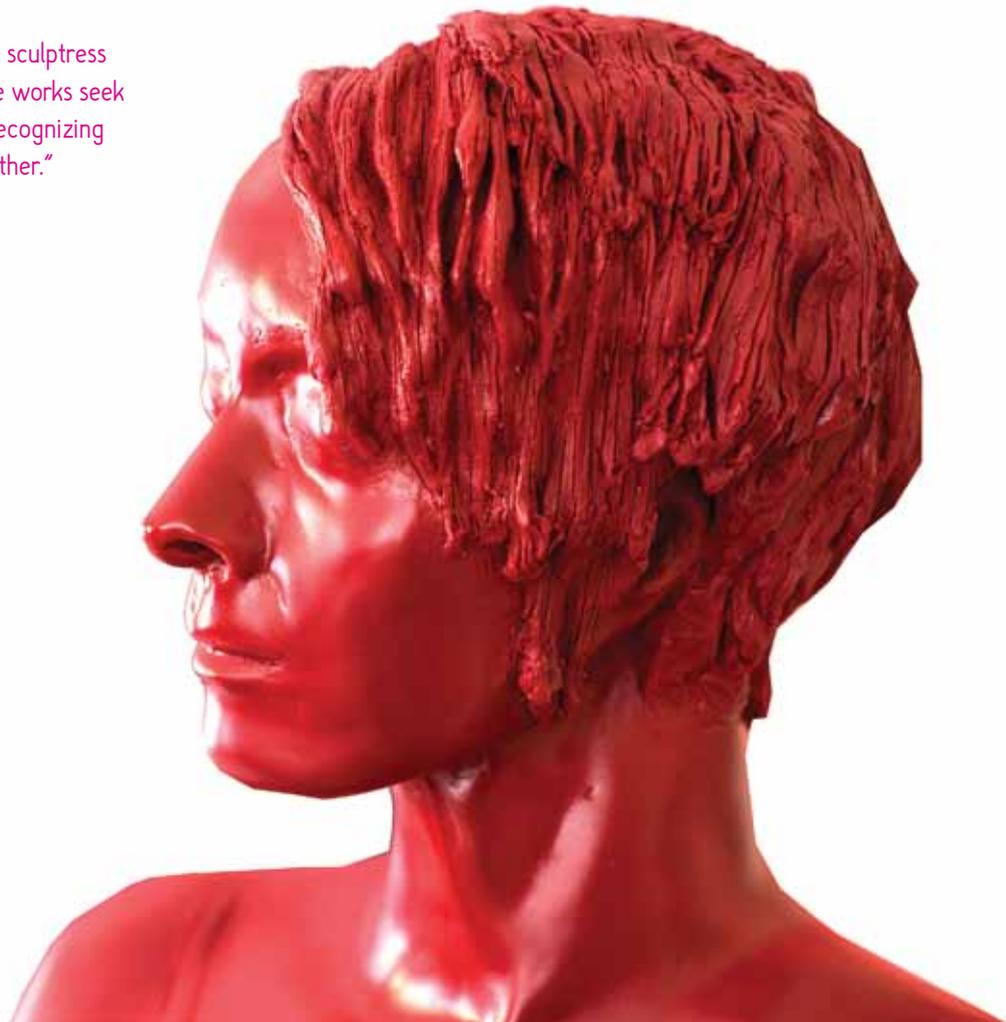
On the walls are postcards of her exhibitions and honors, like her first place in the 2009 Women in Art National Painting and Sculpture Competition or the acquisition prize 2008 at the First Contemporary Sacred Art Biennial in Monterrey.

Alejandra returns to her office with tea, cookies, and fruit. The teakettle, the plates, and the cups belong to another time. Just like almost every object in that space. Every book or postcard seems to harbor a history. In those surroundings, the artist tells hers, which we could refer back to that moment in her childhood when she was eating cookies in the kitchen and, hidden, she would moisten them to make figures.

"I remember the anxious ecstasy that it gave me to model. From a very young age, I also drew and watched people's faces. I was interested in the human body. At that time I didn't understand, but I was surprised by human beings' capability to just be alive," she remembers.

That sensibility, that relationship with things, all of that which today defines her work, seems to have gestated in the

"This is not a feminist call," says the sculptress about this moment in her work. "These works seek to return to a state of respect for recognizing ourselves in the gaze of the other."

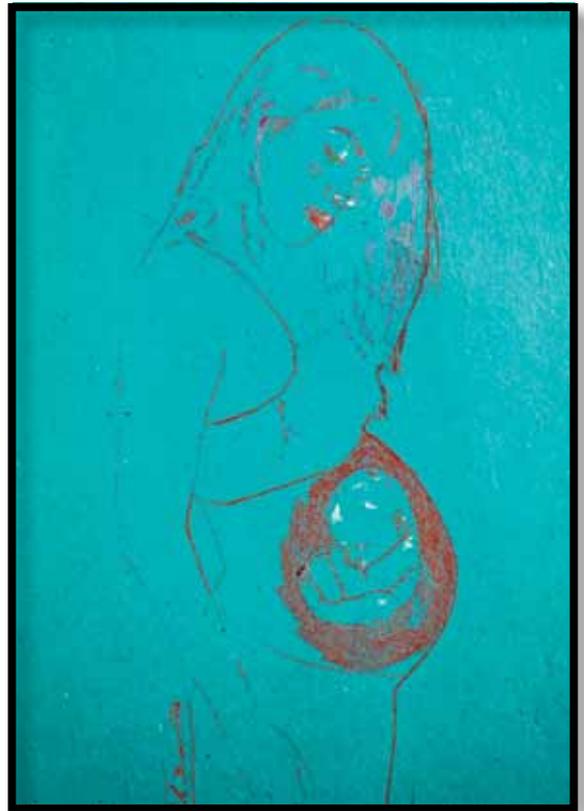


different hiding places. Like a special relationship with the past, an intense process of self-discovery.

“I was a very solitary little girl. My mother was a teacher; she worked two shifts and had to raise three children. That’s why I was alone a lot; my imagination soared. From hiding with the cookies to creating spaces for myself. Now that I’m an adult and have a more rational contact with art, I realize how art heals. Artists may tell you that works are made up of form, concept, light, contact with the public, the studio . . . but it’s not that. Art is a return, a connection with something much more profound that makes it possible to heal situations from your past, present, and even future.”

## INSISTING

The story does not end with that primordial preoccupation that makes Zermeño always return to sculpture. The road was not simple. She was left-handed and they made her use



*The Plenitude of Being.*

After her mother’s death, the artist’s next investigation moved toward talking about the feminine in dialogue with women around her.



*Empowerment and the Clever Fox of the Storybooks.*

her right. In her first ceramics course at 15, she failed because she hadn’t done things with her right hand, the right way. “You have no talent,” they told her. “You like fantasizing; you have no ability; it would be better to start a business,” she says a guidance counselor told her.

But it was an exhibition of Mexican sculptor Javier Marín at the Fine Arts Palace that made her decide to do everything possible to train as a visual artist. So, at the San Carlos Academy she learned art history and, together with other young people, caught the bug of wanting to make art. But technical training was frustrating. There was no place for experimenting. By then, expenses were piling up, and she took the road not of selling work, but using her abilities as a sculptor to do special effects in movies and television.

But although this was no simple matter either, the field turned into a formative period in her relationship with materials. “That’s where I realized that I didn’t even know how to make a mold. They looked at me like I was going to ruin

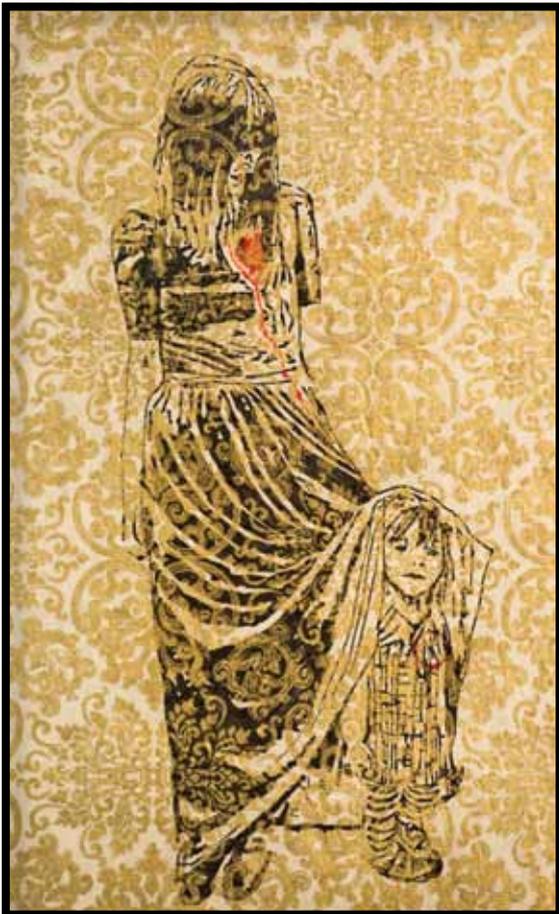
everything. I went out to the park and cried about how terrible I was," she remembers. One of her challenges was to make a mold of U.S. American actor Mickey Rourke. Being able to complete the project when Rourke was shooting the film *Man on Fire* (2004) in Mexico was a defining technical learning experience.

From then on, she considered the possibility of making life-sized sculptures and made her special effects work finance her own sculpting. At first, she did one sculpture every six months, but her rapid rise in the world of cinema allowed her to learn and produce her own work in her studio. The last film she did was Mel Gibson's *Apocalipto*, thanks to which she saved enough to be able to return to art completely.

"Since in the movies they need everything yesterday, I acquired discipline and learned an enormous amount about processes and materials, above all about how to solve problems, because a sculptor is always coming up against problems, like in a lab."



*Mama/teacher.*



*Dress as Blanket.*

#### THE BODY, THE MATERIALS, THE CITY

Since then, she has divided her work among the different series, conceived as investigations into different themes, materials, and personal processes, and the fundamental task of processing her own projects. The themes are always different. Zermeño explores different dimensions of human beings.

Once she left the world of cinema to work fulltime as an artist, she began to work on themes like the human body and its relationship with its surroundings. The first series developed like this, *The Industrial Being*, proposed reflections about the implications of moving through the city. As a consequence, the materials used in the work were industrial in origin.

*Artificial Territories* was the second series that she became deeply involved in. At the same time that she was studying her master's degree at the San Carlos Academy, between experimentation and formal questions, she went back to a technique that she had learned at the age of six: crocheting. Incorporating it into her sculptures let her think about the role of clothing as people's second skin, on the one hand, and, on the other, it was a way of expanding sculpture. Also, crocheting was a metaphor for the constitution of living beings.



Cherchez la femme.

This project was key to what would come in the artist's career. In the same way that bodies take shape cell by cell, the process taught her the way that concepts, projects, and works are produced step by step. So, after her investigation about the city, materials, and the body came two of her most personal projects. The first was "BIDA (Internal Biology of Animals)," the first series that after many years of work she managed to create exactly as she had imagined it. The series, a reflection about animal mechanisms for survival in nature emerged as an homage to her mother, the pillar of her family, who at the time was ill with cancer.

"It was a difficult moment. On the one hand, I was working on the collection from the hospital, watching my mother decline, and the change in museum management meant that they almost cancelled the exhibit. On the other hand, I managed to say that life is wonderful and we have to fight for our dreams."

#### CHERCHEZ LA FEMME

After her mother's death, the artist's next investigation moved toward talking about the feminine in dialogue with women around her. The result was the series *Cherchez la femme*, an

Incorporating crocheting into her sculptures let her think about the role of clothing as people's second skin, on the one hand, and, on the other, it was a way of expanding sculpture.

intimate exhibit that took her back to the workshop and made her review her processes. Once again, she made molds from people, she thought about the relationship between drawing and line, between workshop and solitude.

"This collection began as the idea that it would be just self-portraits, but at the very first one, I stopped short. My mother was a single mother with three children and I grew up with the vision and the example that women suffer a ton. They're the ones abandoned, they're the ones who sacrifice, who work. The feminine defined in social standards was not one of my reflexes. I grew up with lots of fear of being a woman. I wanted to be a man because I thought that men didn't suffer," she remembers.

That's where her relationship with the phrase "*Cherchez la femme*" came about. In French, it is derogatory and suggests that behind every problem there is a woman. However, she wanted to put this idea in tension, so she abandoned the

self-portrait project to propose to the women around her that they look for themselves to create an awareness of being. She decided to include the other women's histories because she needed to see herself reflected in the eyes of other women and men.

The process consisted of interviewing women close to her between the ages of 26 and 56. She turned the sculptures into psychological portraits. This time, her question about the constitution of the body included an emotional dimension. She used elements of the histories that she filtered with what she noticed; through her gaze, she underlined a beauty that they saw in another way. At the same time, she encountered histories that overwhelmed her: sexual abuse, inequality, disproportional demands in education. That, together with her own history: the arduous work of dealing with a profession made for men.

The series was, therefore, an exercise in recognition that sought to move through the cycles of women until death; that's why she included her mother's. Creating herself to find the other: "an awareness of returning to listen to each other

to then look at the other and recognize each other with their gaze."

Sketching, like the bodies gathered in a circle at the Women's Museum, represents the possibility of an encounter: of forms and concepts, or opportunities that counterpose themselves to obstacles, of the equilibrium of things. Thus, Alejandra Zermeño's work has become a possibility of translation between her own history and forms; between work, the agents that make it possible, and the public. After this very intimate collection come extraordinary explorations into siblings and animals.

"This is not a feminist call, or a gender issue; rather, it's a call to the conscience in order to return to a state of respect, a natural state, of listening to each other and recognizing each other in the gaze of the other. This is a small exercise in my professional life of reflecting myself through the gaze of the other. For me, the creation of objects has been a way to understand why I exist. And, taking symbolic elements like materials, or elements that I integrate into the work, the person who I am, that person we are, comes into being." **MM**



*Sasuke.*



*Sravasti.*



*Rabbits of the Desert.*