



Isabel Morales*

Maldita Carmen: A Swig of the City

Urban art and graffiti are often seen as bringing to the streets what is usually set aside for the privileged few who visit galleries and museums. However, when it comes to Maldita Carmen — a young, Mexican illustrator and urban artist — the experience of encountering her art while walking the streets of Mexico City goes beyond the mere contemplation of a mural or well-executed design.

As someone who lives and walks in one of the largest cities in the world, Maldita Carmen knows

the streets, the forgotten walls next to massive highways, the roll-up metal of abandoned storefronts, the ever-hidden corners of a city where, despite it all, there's always a potential spectator walking by. In general, cities are the best canvases for any urban artist. Maldita Carmen's work is thus not limited to Mexico City but can also be found on the walls of other states in Mexico and abroad.

With a degree in Visual Communications, Painting, and Illustration from the UNAM's Faculty of Arts and the Academy of San Carlos, Maldita Carmen's professionalism has left its mark on her exhibitions — which she has held in many art galleries — but also on the city walls, or on any surface susceptible

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to intervention. As for her work in urban, public spaces, her motivations are manifold, but there is one common denominator: to reach and move passersby.

Painting in public spaces is a social act in and of itself. Unlike what unfolds in museums, that which is painted on urban walls and street furniture affects the daily lives of all who walk by. Her painting is also a democratic act, as one needs only be a pedestrian in order to potentially encounter the artist's work. Maldita Carmen is aware of this, but also of the responsibility involved, which may be why she has also addressed womanhood and feminism through her work.

Unfortunately, violence against women and fem-

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icide rates have grown exponentially in Mexico. Even today, in the twentieth-first century, certain aspects of Mexican culture are rooted in sexism, reflecting the ways women have been victimized throughout history. However, women's movements have made themselves heard over the last years, changing conceptions of women in one way or another.

The world of graffiti and urban art may be a space where men remain the majority. Yet more and more women are forging their own paths and appropriating streets and discourses, unafraid of expressing their ideas, perspectives on the world, and feelings. Maldita Carmen stands among them.

Surprised that there are still people who question whether women can make art on the streets of big cities, Maldita Carmen doesn't hesitate to express that she's fed up with violence against women — printing her messages on the various jars, bottles, and other everyday objects that she depicts. At the same time, her painting evokes the strength that has characterized feminist movements in Mexico.

Supporting popular causes through her work





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is also among Maldita Carmen's interests. For instance, she created a mural on the first anniversary of the earthquake that shook Mexico City on September 19th, 2017, in which several women who were working as seamstresses died — echoing the earthquake of 1985, when many seamstresses were crushed in the rubble of unattended buildings, with their bosses proving indifferent when it came to rescuing or compensating them.

In addition to showing her concern for society, her craft is intimately tied to poetry, as she always combines images with words. The everyday objects she paints on street walls take on different meanings given their large scale and their displacement from their normal context, with phrases that seek to unsettle whoever passes by.

Most often, she draws images of bottles, which then display her messages. These can easily be associated with alcoholic beverages, though she also draws pill jars, dropper bottles, and little bottles of nail polish. Instead of donning their usual labels, these objects are recast with phrases that seem to





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address the onlooker: “What more do you want?,” “No,” “Get out,” “Whatever you want,” “Come,” “Find me,” “Kiss me,” “Who do you think you are?” These questions and orders spark the imagination and provoke different reactions among onlookers, as every mind is home to a different world and heart.

In a city invaded by the marketing of superfluous and often harmful products, Maldita Carmen takes objects and resignifies them, changing their labels and giving them new names. Besides the bottles, another motif that runs through the artist’s work is that of medicine boxes — perhaps because just like tequila bottles, sleeping pills and pain killers can alleviate those who consume them, if only for a moment.

The most predominant colors in Maldita Carmen’s work are black and white, giving the objects that she draws a bold look — categorical as the phrases she writes on them. They’re clear-cut. Defined and attractive. It’s hard to turn one’s gaze, despite the fact that we’re accustomed to bright colors and billboards encroaching on the streets and avenues of the city. Perhaps it’s that we’re grateful for the sobriety: when the artist does use color, she deploys it discreetly.

A swig of the bottle, or a few drops of medicine, might give repose to big-city dwellers, who submit themselves to the hustle and bustle day after day. Those who stroll the city and find themselves at a corner graced by Maldita Carmen’s bottles and jars will come to a pause, short as it may be. A moment to think, imagine, or maybe just to feel. With a swig of this artist’s work in the urban landscape, we might briefly escape the inertia of city life. ■■■

