

# Ángela Gurría

## Nature Exalted

Miriam Kaiser\*

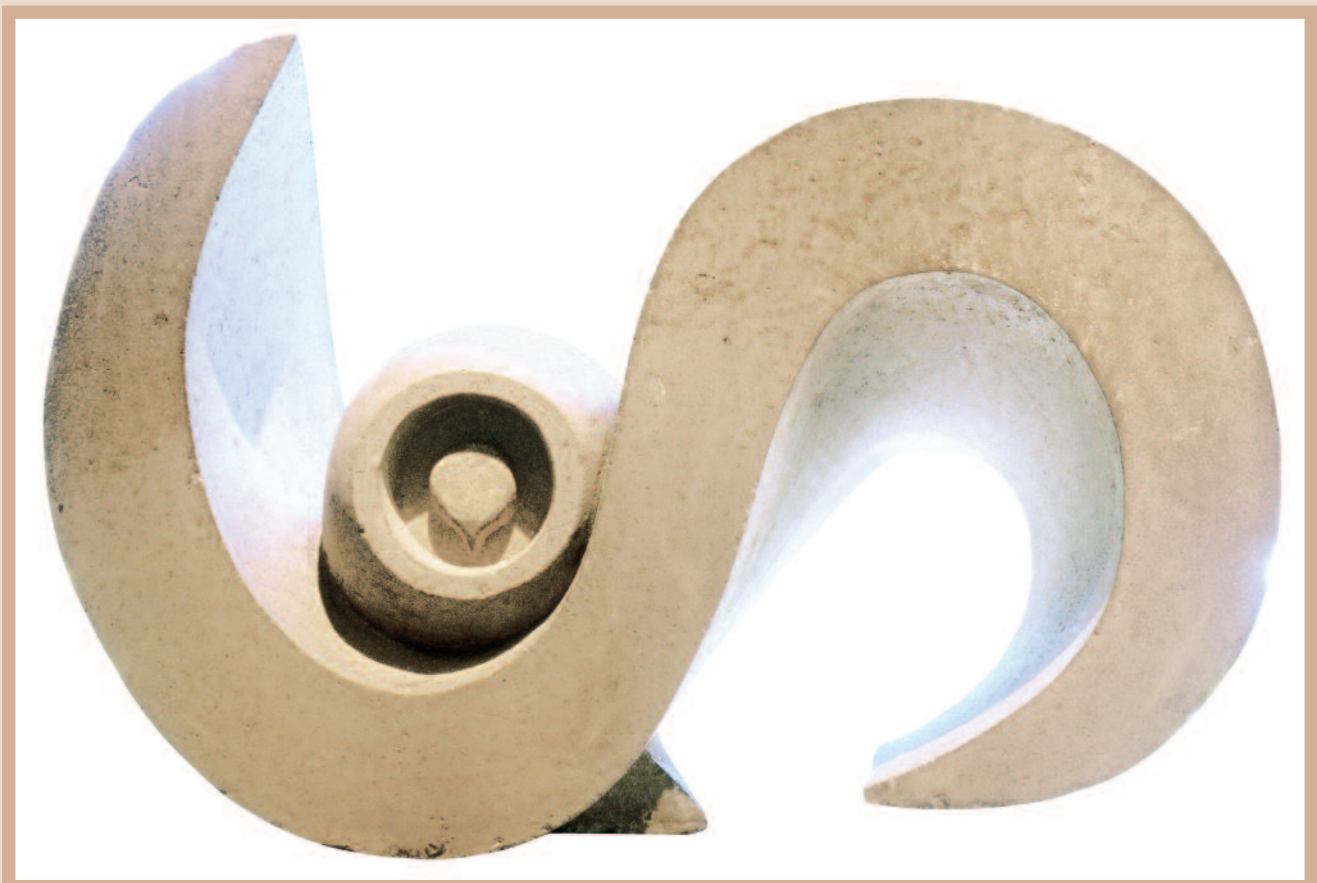
Man has felt the urgency, the need to express feelings, to show his surroundings and for that he must use his talent to create. And what is it he transmits if not what surrounds him: the sky, the sea, mountains, animals, his fellow men and his ways of speaking, singing and being: that is, nature in all its manifestations.<sup>1</sup>

\* Art critic and curator.

Photos reproduced courtesy of Mexico City's Modern Art Museum.

Artist Ángela Gurría drinks from that infinite spring with her own visual language, through her eternal, constant search and experimentation both with techniques and materials. Her visual proposals come to us transformed into contemporary sculptures.

She is recognized mainly as a sculptress since that is the medium in which she has developed most of her work. However, she has delved into the most diverse techniques throughout her long



Photos by Daniel Munguía

*The Dove's Dream*, 63 x 96 x 45 cm, no date (stone). Private collection.

career: sketching, as plans for another work or as a finished work, ceramics, the different printing techniques and stained-glass windows, to mention just a few.

As a sculptress, she has handled everything from small works to monumental urban sculpture with the same strength and intention, with the same power. Her large-scale works can be seen in Mexico City, in several places throughout the country and in some cities abroad.

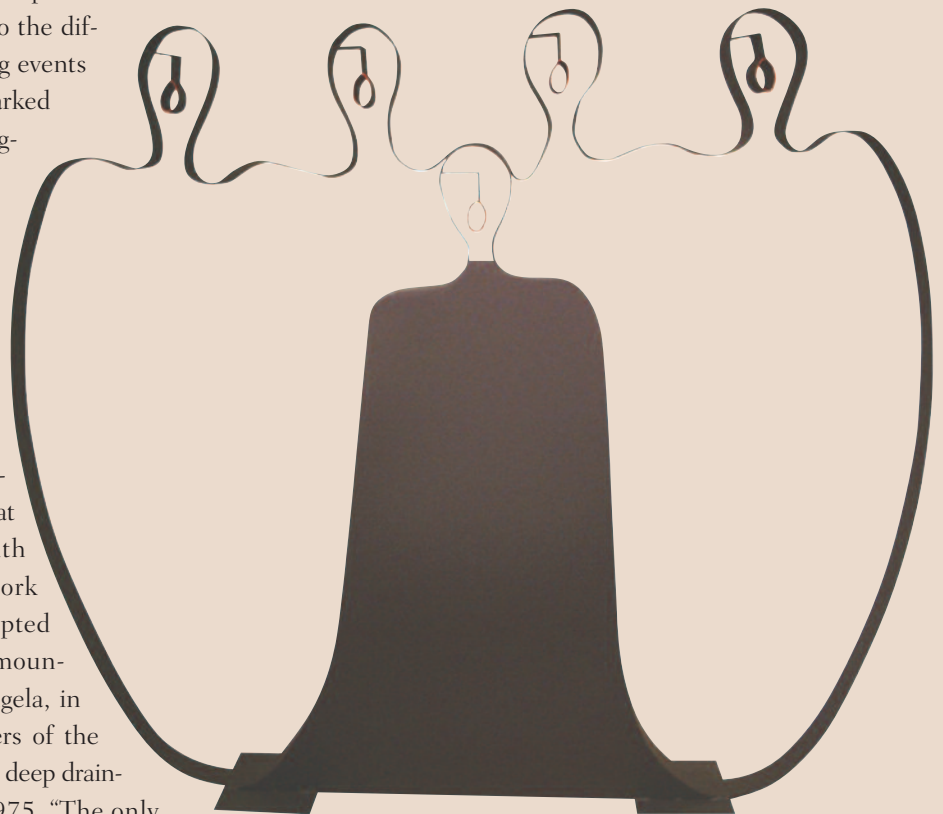
When a sculptor takes on what is today called urban art, he or she is usually invited to do so by an architect, an urban planner or a government official, who commissions the work to celebrate a historical figure or commemorate an event. For example, in 1967, the architect Pedro Ramírez Vázquez, president of the Organizing Committee of Mexico City's 1968 Olympic Games, conceived of the creation of the Route of Friendship as an activity parallel to the preparations, inviting sculptor Mathias Goeritz to head up the project. Goeritz, in turn, called on a large group of Mexican and foreign sculptors to create the route leading to the different sites where sporting events would be held. Ángela marked the beginning of that magnificent one-of-a-kind route with the black and white sculpture called *Signal*, which today, 36 years after its creation, continues to be a paradigm of contemporary art.

Ángela also paid homage to the workers of Cutzama-la, the hydraulic system that supplies Mexico City with drinking water, with a work called *Magic Heart*, sculpted from 1985 to 1987 on a mountainside. According to Ángela, in her homage to the workers of the Tenayuca, State of Mexico, deep drainage system from 1974-1975, "The only thing I did [sic] was to take enormous tubes, cut

them up and turn them into sculptures using several different-sized pedestals."<sup>2</sup> Another of her monumental sculptures, *Mexico, Monument to Mestization* (1973), is one of the most visited by tourists on the Heroes Walk in Mexico's border city of Tijuana.

I do not know if all sculptors ultimately want their work to be part of the urban scenery, but it seems to me that they do and that this desire can be traced back to the most ancient times of art, although it became stronger during the Italian Renaissance. We should remember the immense sculptures in Asian countries and in India, which, although their creators' names have been lost in anonymity, forcefully remind us of their religions through the monumental representations of their gods and elephants and all manner of animals with religious connotations.

Like in everything, there is both good and bad: there are visual proposals and what I would call "impositions," that in most cases have political



*Chorus (Children Singing)*, 190 x 222 x 10.5 cm, ca. 1980 (steel). Private collection.



Desert pieces.

Ángela Gurría has used the world around her; nature is reflected and recreated in most of her artistic endeavors.

traits or connotations. Other sculptures by well-known artists have been displayed throughout the world, gracing cities and becoming national symbols.

In any case, good large-scale urban art is invariably linked to architects and visionary urban planners who feel the need to integrate sculptures in specific spaces: they are the ones who commission them.

Sculptors usually work in small to medium sizes, on the one hand due to the space available in their workshops, which cannot always accommodate large pieces, and on the other hand for economic reasons. It is no exaggeration to think that many sculptures —usually called sketches or

models— “wait” to be turned into large-scaled works because they are originally conceived in a perfectly proportioned way in case they are someday turned into monumental sculptures for an urban space.

By this, I do not mean, of course, that all sculptures are conceived of as models for a larger work; sculptors will always have creations that were determined by the size of the stone or piece of wood, for example. A piece of marble or stone may languish a long time in a corner of the artist’s workshop until he or she finds the appropriate theme for the material. According to Gurría, this is the case of several of the sculptures that make up the exhibit “Ángela Gurría: Nature Ex-



*Mouse*, 45 x 35 x 104 cm, no date (directly carved in stone). FONCA Collection at the Yucatán Athenian Contemporary Art Museum.



*Landscape*, 63 x 92 x 64 cm, 1981 (stainless steel). Academy of Arts Collection.



*Snail with Quills*, 90 x 130 x 60 cm, no date (iron sheeting). Private collection.



*Basilisk*, 55 x 144 x 18 cm, ca. 1993 (bronze casting). Pape Library Museum, San Antonio Field, Pape Foundation.

Animals acquire innumerable forms; we see them about to take flight or cross a river, resting, lying in ambush or on guard.

alted,” such as *The Watering Hole* or *The Nocturnal Butterfly*, both in red marble. Here, the theme does not come first; instead, the sculptor sooner or later conveys the theme “as the material requires.” The phrase says it all: apparently, the material “inspires” the sculptor, dictating the form.

But, let us return to the issue of nature in the case of Ángela Gurría. It is clear that the artist has used the world around her, the world that concerns her; nature is reflected and recreated in most of her artistic endeavors. Cacti, whether umbelliferous or organ-shaped, and their flowers, are recreated in stone, marble and metal. Animals—tigers, butterflies, snails, frogs, mice, pigeons,

owls, birds, bulls and tortoises— acquire innumerable forms or “moments”; we see them about to take flight or cross a river, resting, lying in ambush or on guard. Clouds or mountains have also been turned into marble or stone, as have lagoons and human figures. The latter remind us of time immemorial: are they Asian, Greek, from some Mexican ethnic group? In fact, I would dare say that Ángela searches in her knowledge about pre-Hispanic codices and gives free reign to her love for the vestiges and iconographies of this country’s ancestors. This is present in a large part of her sculpture and not only in the human figure: we also identify it in her representation of death, where different materials and forms remind



*Couple*, 71 x 27 x 23.5 cm, ca. 1965 (stone). Private collection.



*Signal* (station 1 of the Route of Friendship), 18 m, 1968 (cement).

us of *tzompantlis*, the rows of real or stone skulls found next to ancient temples.

Trees are another motif in her sculptural quest, particularly the ceiba or silk-cotton tree that brings to mind the ancient and the religious connotation attributed to it (one outstanding example is the monumental piece, *Ceiba*, installed in the main lobby of Mexico City's Presidente Intercontinental Hotel in 1977). Water is another on-going theme: rivers have never been left out of her constant dialogue with the elements of nature. Ángela pays tribute to the Usumacinta River and also to watering holes.

But Ángela does not limit herself to her tribute to the elements. Traditional Mexican toys from Metepec in the State of Mexico, known and recognized for its artisans' majestic use of clay for hundreds of years, are also the subject of homage for the artist: magnificent trees of life, full of color and Biblical or humdrum stories, little horses, mermaids, flowers, shuttlecocks and much more. When invited to fill the Paseo Toluca, the majestic avenue leading to the city of Toluca, Ángela recreated some of these toys in stone, distributing them along the thoroughfare.

The sky, the earth, mountains and water are always present in Gurría's sculptures. I would go

so far as to say that even the abstracts remind us somehow of nature. It is, in short, nature exalted: an inexhaustible source of subjects that Ángela looks at and studies to turn them into tactile forms, volumes of different shapes, in accordance with the natural materials she uses in each case.

The most recent selection of her work in Mexico City's Modern Art Museum, not conceived of as a retrospective, is structured by the themes that she has dealt with throughout her long career.

Pieces from very different times speak to us of an artist who repeatedly comes back to her motifs because, far from using them up, each time she returns, she offers both a more comprehensive and playful focus, always revealing the personal, unequalled nature of her artistic endeavor. **MM**

---

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is an extract from the catalogue *Ángela Gurría: Naturaleza exaltada* (Ángela Gurría: Nature Exalted), published by the National Fine Arts Institute, through the Mexico City Modern Art Museum in December 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Ángela Gurría, 2003.