

Interview of Mercedes Llanos by Daniele Balice

D.B. : Let's start from the beginning. Where are you from and how did you end up being a painter in New York?

ML : I am originally from Mar del Plata, Argentina. I have lived in several cities and countries throughout my life. I resided in Tennessee, USA for part of my teenage years and earned my BFA there. After graduating, I returned to Argentina and lived there and in Chile. During this time I realized that I needed a studio to do my work and I began to reflect on the importance of painting and my need to share my inner world with others. I decided to return to the United States to pursue an MFA and the university that appealed to me the most was CUNY Hunter. Upon landing in New York City for my interview, I immediately felt the vibrant energy of the city and knew it was the right place for me. I finished my degree in December 2021. This is my third year here, interspersed with a pandemic. I am still getting to know this city.

D.B. : When I opened the gallery I recalled that I was more fascinated by painters that were approaching the medium of painting in a more conceptual way. In art school I was forced to dislike painting, considered as a tool for capitalistic speculation. How do you position yourself in today's art world and what is the role of a painter nowadays?

M.L. : That's a hard question to answer. I think it will take 50 to 100 years to really think about what I am doing today in the grand scheme of things. However, I am a firm believer in physically experiencing artworks, not looking at them. I want to create works that are felt by the body, through the manipulation of paint, materiality, dimension, etc. In a way I oppose the digitization of art by requiring the viewer to see the work in person. Most of my works are at a scale larger than the body, producing an immersive experience that rivals that of the virtual.

Another position I can identify with is the empowerment of Latin American women artists. I am confronted with many issues of female repression related to a patriarchal South American upbringing. All my life I have witnessed the role of the woman as passive rather than active, the woman being the object of men's desire. Somehow, through a mediated form, I navigate these issues of inequality within my subconscious by exploring and instigating my dreams and translating them into paintings. By returning to what has been undone, this work induces a feminist perspective into the surreal world of dreams and mysticism. Hilma af Klint, for example, asked that her work not be exhibited until 20 years after her death because the world was not ready. She died in 1944. Hilma af Klint, for example, requested that her work not be shown until 20 years after her death, because the world was not ready. She passed away in 1944.

For me, making art is a lot about energy transferring and connecting. Exerting my energy into the surface by drawing and painting, and sharing it, allowing the work to connect with those who encounter it. It's a form of communication beyond language and beyond the barriers of it.

D.B. : Some of your work has to do with the chimerical world of unconsciousness and dreams. In some work you also refer to shamanism, as an alternative form of exploring the human condition. This isn't the first time artists explore this realm, but in your case and in the time we live this takes a completely different value. Can you explain to us how you integrate those experiences in your work?

ML : I have always believed in the world beyond the visible. Spirituality was a very connecting force between my grandfather and I when I was a child, we lived together and we went to church together, prayed together. As much as I am not Catholic nor do I agree with its teachings, and the suffering this religion has caused, this was the introduction to the realm of the spiritual.

A series of live events have led me to experience shamanism but I'm in no way an expert, I would say I only put my toes in the water.

D.B. : Can you tell us a bit about your work that will be exhibited in Paris?

ML : About the work exhibited for this upcoming show in Paris, it is an extension of a longer project I have been working on since the beginning of 2021. I am creating a large collection of works that are depictions of my dreams, as well as drawings related to my menstrual cycle. This is a lot about being in tune with our bodies, our internal energy (chi) and our magic. I believe these dreams I have are extensions of my waking life and foreshadow future events. Concisely, these works represent a subconscious state as well as that which is materialised and in the physical world. My dreams, in contrast, are ephemeral and fleeting. They don't remain, they are as light as thought running through the mind, or a memory. The closer in tune we are with these fleeting moments during our sleep the more we can understand that time span is distorted, and what we may think of the past may be the future, the present eternal. Things that have not happened yet in waking life may already have happened in our dream state. I am very interested in these concepts of time warping in the dream world, I may be dealing with issues from the future and issues from my childhood, or even a past life, all in the same dream, all in the same moment.

In this work I explore my desires and fears. Desire in particular has been an aspect of the feminine that has been repressed and cancelled throughout history, and to this day it remains a significant issue in my home country Argentina. I try not to inhibit myself and let go of any type of prejudice or "shame"; therefore one can see the work has very sexual connotations, issues of reproduction and womanhood, even abuse. I'm interested in walking the line between pleasure and pain. (Love and hate) (fear and curiosity). I think my body in general craves these polarities.

The large drawings are more direct representations of the events of my dreams, I'm showing a visual journal of my dreams as well which shows quite literally what is going on in each one. The paintings, in contrast, contain more abstractions. I'm very into the alchemy of paint, mixing and smearing colours on the canvas, creating atmospheres more than narratives. And movement, movement is something that is very important to me, I think of how the work keeps on living beyond its creation, and simulating a constant motion is a way to do this. With drawing mixed within the painting, I'm allowing for the freshness of the trace to live in the painting. Erasing and redrawing, covering and wiping, are all parts of the process that create a history within the painting, like a life lived. This becomes apparent the more one looks, the work will take on different perspectives and meanings depending on how many times it is visited. The open-ended work allows for the viewer to connect with the work in personal ways.

The smaller (still quite large) drawings in this show are intuitive forms in a ritualistic manner, created with menstrual blood, followed with charcoal and ink.

D.B. : We went to the Musée d'Orsay together and although it was the 100th visit for me, it was the first time for you. I really enjoy visiting that place with younger artists. Which work impressed you the most?

ML : I loved going to the Orsay with you and I'm actually gonna go back when I return to Paris, it went by too fast for me to digest it all. (plus my hungover state didn't help). But what I really loved was seeing the Toulouse-Lautrec works and drawings, he's been one of my favourite artists since I began painting. I loved seeing in person in *Bed, and Alone*, by Toulouse-Lautrec, for the delicacy and intimacy of the moment. It was good to see that so much of what is being done today, even a lot of my loose strokes and marks, had begun during the impressionist and post-impressionist period in France. It's really amazing. The merging of body and space in Bonnard's, Vuillard's, and Monet's work was also incredible for me to see, it is evident that the space that the figures inhabit have the same importance as the figures, and it is just as alive. My favourite moments are when figures/ground merges to create one vibrant whole.