

Impresiones Corporales: tracing life and death through beauty and connection

by Javiera Luisina Cádiz Bedini

Impresiones Corporales is a rich, loaded name, and so is the body of work it represents, composed of twenty-two curvilinear forms made of local wood, and a tender moulding of the soft edges by artist elisa ortega. The sculptures are drawn, designed, and destined to be touched and cast onto the bodies of those who hold them— a process the artist views as a form of connection with her audiences and a mode of communicating with oneself. When I saw the work for the first time, I was struck by the organic texture of the objects: light wood treated only with audience's hand oil for protection and laden with formations that convey the age, depth, and location of the tree from where the wood originates. It is recycled matter. Like us, one day it will return to the earth.

elisa was born in Córdoba and, after many years in California, now resides in Barcelona. The Spanish-American artist spent over a decade as an immigrant and social worker between Spain, Guatemala, and the U.S. She grew up in the aftermath of Franco and Spain's transition into democracy, experiences that imbue her work with a practice influenced by stories of precarity in the Spanish Civil War (1936 – 1939) that her grandmother shared with her as she salvaged and “mended hand-me-downs” for the family. The echoes of scarcity pushes the artist to transmute discarded objects, giving them new life. She reclaims wood, textiles and found objects, rewriting their histories while at the same time maintaining their traces. elisa's body of work explores what she describes as a commitment to environmental sustainability and a practice against extractivism, while at the same time interrogating notions of borders that urge social connectivity. Ideas of acculturation, displacement, movement, and migration are present in her imaginary. In addition, elisa's feminist vision underlays all her work with a conviction in equality, and these are daily themes she touched on as a social worker dealing with diverse, often forgotten communities impacted by addiction, abandonment, and pain. While the artist is a deeply private person who respects the confidentiality of others, those that know her, understand the profound imprint these stories leave on her work, and this allows us to make meaning from her often abstracted forms.

This short reflection is the result of an activation of Ortega's work that took place on Wednesday 24th of January 2024. While there are moments of hope— such as those inspired by South Africa taking Israel to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague as an attempt to halt the genocide— this activation happened at a time in which we are experiencing ongoing global suffering. This cannot go unmentioned: the war in Palestine and Ukraine, and unrest in Ecuador are only three of numerous global conflicts underlaid not only by gross human rights violations, but the destruction of the land itself. As we'll see, the environment plays a central role in the artist's *oeuvre*. The activation of *Impresiones Corporales* is described as a happening imagined and carried out by the artist, and one which I have had the privilege to reflect and write on. On this day, audiences were guided to hold, hug, and adapt the pieces to their bodies, reflecting

the intimate relationship between people and objects, while simultaneously attempting to blur binary notions that separate the two. In light of violent territorial conflicts, the activation is an ongoing investigation into people's relationship with space, movement and the corporeal as a generator of conversation, and as a strategy of consciousness, connection, and resistance. Arundhati Roy reminds us: "There is beauty yet in this brutal, damaged world of ours. Hidden, fierce, immense. Beauty that is uniquely ours and beauty that we have received with grace from others, enhanced, re-invented and made our own. We have to seek it out, nurture it [...]."¹

I share two close readings that enable me to both think about elisa's art and contemplate the relationship to our planetary contemporaneity. "Rothschild's Fiddle" (1894) by Anton Tchekhov and Elvira Espejo Ayca's *YANAK UYWAÑA. La crianza mutua de las artes* (2022) allow me to read the artist's work through both a literary and art-historical perspective. This, along with group participation encouraged through a subsequent poetry reading of poems that have been generously shared from all corners of the world, I hope will inspire a move away from the ardent divisions, bias and otherness that are being reflected and perpetuated on a global scale, both by the media and by oppressive political structures. Here, two key ideas guide my reflections—coffins and the materiality of objects—to bring to life the sculptures that become the very conduits of interaction between you, the audience, and elisa, the artist.

i.

In "Rothschild's Fiddle", Tchekhov (Taganrog, 1860 – 1904) tells the story of the life and death of Yakov Ivanov, who "lived in a poor way like a humble peasant."² Yakov is a maker of coffins, and despite not being Jewish himself, he also plays the violin for a Jewish band that performs at weddings. The short story poignantly details Yakov's life and his unappreciation for life itself. It is only after his wife Marfa dies that he begins to contemplate beauty for the first time, particularly the benefits he has experienced through the care and tenderness provided by Marfa with whom he has spent half a century. For various reasons, this story resounded in my memory when considering elisa's sculptures. In the first place, her sculptures are carved in the same way as a violin, or a coffin. All three objects are wooden, they mirror the shape of the human form, and somehow, they contain the remnants of sound, or hold the power to compose while still retaining silence in their immobility. *Impresiones Corporales* opens avenues of thought and feeling in different realms: in night of death, and in the life of creation, and Tchekhov's very short story fragments these timeframes in quick succession. Like the objects described by the writer, elisa's body of work remains abstract when in disuse—it is only the musician, the deceased or the viewer that give weight and warmth to the violin, the body, the coffin, or the sculpture. The very definition of contemporary art is its completion by the audience.

¹ Roy, Arundhati. *The End of Imagination*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2016. Pp. 63.

² Tchekhov, Anton Pavlovitch, and Ronald Hingley. "Rothschild's Fiddle" in *The Oxford Chekhov*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964. Pp. 1.

It might seem strange that I am comparing elisa and her sculptures to Yakov and his coffins, but what we read and imagine in the story of Tchekhov, is what we witness, touch, and feel with *Impresiones Corporales*. In this moment of deep alienation, there is a need—almost an obligation—for solidarity, and the artist allows us, through this interaction, to experience appreciation and beauty through touch and connection.

ii.

Connection to the land, to each other, and our past and present selves is also advocated by Elvira Espejo Ayca (Ayllu Qaqachaca, 1981) in both her writing and practice as an indigenous artist, weaver, and poet. Going against the colonial gaze, Espejo Ayca fosters action through “senti-pensar” (feeling-thinking) like many of her contemporaries in Bolivia, and as part of a cosmovision of the world that begs we disrupt hierarchal notions of knowledge and place ourselves within nature and not apart from it. This emotional and intellectual understanding of the world is all-encompassing, and it does not privilege an enlightened view of our surroundings because it understands that nothing is superior to the act of being in harmony and humility with our respective environments, which includes all living and non-living entities. In *YANAK UYWAÑA. La crianza mutua de las artes* Espejo Ayca writes:

Yo me he preparado como artista en la comunidad, y luego en las universidades ha sido muy complejo, porque nos meten estos conceptos de constante separación: razón y sensibilidad, arte y ciencia, sujeto y objeto, sociedad y naturaleza.³

The connection to earth itself and the adherence to a non-binary thinking is what Espejo Ayca thinks and feels is the healthiest way of standing in the world: “para nosotros la razón y la sensibilidad no se separan”.⁴ This, too is present in *Impresiones Corporales*: elisa marks no way of reading the work, she imposes no hierarchy or intellectual framework, there is no order, no beginning, no end...there are no titles, just objects that hold space and time, and seek touch. Having no finish, polish, or varnish, elisa implies that it is only the oil of our hands that intensify the work, that add a protective layer. We are our means of protection, of survival. We add meaning to the object with a consciousness that it exists through a multiplicity of opportunities: nature, the artist’s training and work, and the receiver of the artform. These objects are imbued with histories-in-the-making.

³ “I trained as an artist in the community, and then in the universities it has been very complex, because they introduce these concepts of constant separation: reason and sensitivity, art, and science, subject and object, society, and nature.”. Translation my own. Espejo Ayca, Elvira. *Yanak Uywaña: La Crianza Mutua de Las Artes*. Primera edición. PCP Publicaciones 2. La Paz: PCP - Programa Cultura Política: Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2022. Pp. 5.

⁴ “For us reason and sensibility are not separated”. Translation my own. Ibid. Pp. 6.



The two related events of *Impresiones Corporales* are carried out for Fluchtpunkt/Vanishing Point 3 of Tangent Projects (Carrer Marti Codolar 41 - 43, Local 2, 08902, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona) in collaboration with Luiza Fagá (photographer), Sejal Parekh, Mana Pinto and Tsering Frykman-Glen:

Activation: Wednesday 24th 2024, 11 am to 13 pm, led by elisa ortega montilla

Event: Friday 26th 2024, 19.30 to 21.00, led by Javiera Luisina Cádiz Bedini

elisa ortega montilla is an artist who works and exhibits between the U.S and Spain. She completed a Master of Fine Arts at the University of California in 2019, after over a decade of international social work. Her projects have been shown in solo and group exhibitions, and art fairs in Spain, Guatemala, Mexico, China, and the U.S, including the Torrance Art Museum, the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, the San Luis Obispo Museum of Art and most recently, at the Textile Art Biennial at Est_Art Space, Madrid. She has received numerous awards, grants and residencies from the Rafael Botí Foundation, California Art Council and Haystack School of Craft, among others. She is currently part of the Independent Studies Programme at MACBA and is a member of La Escocesa.

Luiza Fagá is a documentary filmmaker and editor. She has worked in films exhibited in different Latin American, North American, and European festivals. Among them, the experimental short "El presente es un animal que habita en mi estómago", directed by her and exhibited at Images Festival (Canada, 2015), the feature documentary "En el Umbral", directed by her and screened at Images Festival at Images Festival (Canada, 2015), the feature documentary "En el Umbral", directed by Coraci Ruiz, which premiered at MIX Brasil in 2020 and since then has circulated in national and international festivals and exhibitions, such as Hot Docs (Canada, 2021) and distributed by DocsBarcelona (2022). MA in film from the Netherlands Film Academy. She is currently attending the PEI (Independent Studies Program), based at MACBA, Barcelona.

Javiera Luisina Cádiz Bedini is an independent curator and researcher born in Chile and raised in Argentina and South Africa. Her research focuses on connected histories of artistic production in Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Most recently, she has created and collaborated on projects and exhibitions at Parallel - European Photo Based Platform (Portugal), Fondazione Modena Arti Visive (Italy), V&A Waterfront for the construction of the Zeitz MOCAA (Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, South Africa), MACBA (Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona), Arxiu AM, The Green Parrot and The Over (Spain). She lives in Barcelona and forms part of the PEI (Independent Studies Programme) cohort at MACBA, where she's also part of the Ràdio Web studies group.