

The Graceful Flight of the Woman-Bird

“I am the vision that arrives at dawn
with a bunch of transparent lilies
(...)”

I am a kaleidoscope in the mist of a vault
I am the woman who loves and expects nothing.”
Zaida del Río (“The Woman of Winter”)

At the end of the 1970s a body of work emerged in the Cuban art scene that rapidly filled a unique space. The drawings, engravings, installations, and paintings by Zaida del Río took their place at the top of the art production that emerged as a consequence of the teaching and personal talent of a group of artists that was soon recognized as the generation of the seventies. Summarizing it in this way does not quite express the depth of that work, its distinctiveness, the profound beauty of its lines, the cultured lyricism of a genuine Cuban-rooted tradition, articulated with universal religions and cultures; an essentially unique and sincere feminine work.

Although she has not entirely based her work on color, this artist’s production, mainly based on the line of her drawing, is traversed from beginning to end by a use of the range of colors that identifies her immediately with the atmosphere and luminosity of her native Caribbean. Much of the insular style of these latitudes marks her pieces, which is appreciated not only in the variegation or saturation of the blank space, but in the profusion of symbols that fill each image. Zaida del Río’s works are like dioramas of cultural signs, of intertwining of religions (syncretism); fountains of symbols in which mystic, eroticist, and feminine impregnate her paintings.

Poet of delicate verses, the author gives excellent titles to her paintings, in which she frequently includes phrases as if to give testimony that her work is born of the communion of both languages; that of painting and the one of words, signs, and letters in perfect synthesis. In the decade of the 1990s a new symbol appeared in her work, in which she had already broached the landscape themes of the bucolic Cuban countryside and the reference to animals. I refer to the image of the woman with bird head, an allegory of herself; a key figure in which Zaida transforms into a flying being in her imagination, as if looking beyond reality. The woman-bird is the symbol par

excellence of Zaida's work; it is she herself and the fantasy of the impossible; it is her poetic in a natural and primitive state. It means still much more, its symbolical capacity even excels another of her artistic fetishes that is featured in many of her paintings: the peacock; since this bird, emblem of India and constituent part of several Afro-Cuban rites, never achieves the strong referential weight of the woman-bird. This is the essence of her visual poetry.

That ability to fly present in her discourse is also an allegory to memory and time, since the fluency of her lyricism is another of the signs that characterize her; just like the sequential nature of the verses of a poem, or the stills of a film, or like the waters of a river or the imagination of a feverish being (herself) at the moment of creating her symbols. Time flows in her canvases and cardboards; time that goes by linearly.

The poet Miguel Barnet appropriately wrote these words: "No one can avoid the magic power of these figures. Not even those who may never know how to interpret them. Her paintings are alive and move among themselves with a rhythm similar to the one ruling the stars and nature."¹ At the same time I agree with the judgment of another poet (this one also an art critic), Roberto Méndez, when he says that the work in question is unclassifiable; such is the plurality of its sources, cultural, and thematic references as well as the diversity of signs that nourishes it. Méndez states, and I repeat, that it is "an open work in constant change."²

Sensuality and love form another central theme in her discourse. It is the naked bodies of men and women that embody her suggested eroticism. They represent a nudity of classic memories, specifically Hellenic, in which slender, well-formed bodies offer themselves in her paintings to the viewer as if they were surrendering to an uninhibited voluptuousness. It is natural for an artist who has admitted that she feels reality with her entire body to recognize the body as a metaphor of the universe at the time of creation. In this context eroticism is another continuation of the telluric and libidinous powers of the body, with its deep sexual implications as central theme of the art. Zaida del Río knows about those potentialities because she is capable of feeling them in her own body and has presented them freely in her paintings.

¹ Miguel Barnet, "Zaida del Río, el vórtice del sueño", in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, Nr 2, Havana, 1994, p. 22.

² Roberto Méndez, "El secreto de la mujer pájaro", in *Los cuerpos del siglo. Otra mirada a la plástica cubana*. Ácana Publishing House, Camagüey, 2002, pp 102-107.

The active and passive bibliography on this work increases gradually due to the attention of the specialized critics and other writers who have noticed her merit. On the other hand, her paintings are part of important international collections and have a prominent place in the permanent halls of the National Museum of Fine Arts. Each new exhibition of hers, and they are very numerous since the first one back in 1976, adds to her legacy in Cuban visual arts.

Winged deities, rainbows, flowers, peacocks, precious stones, Tibetan motifs and tobacco leaves abound in this showcase, crafted like fine jewelry by the trained hand of a goldsmith in full maturity. The glistening painting reflects the personality of the artist and how she sees the world; a discourse that moves between fantasy and a melody to which the images dance. Zaida del Río surprises us because she painted with surprise. Passion and surprise, surprise in the childish look, passion of the adult woman in love with life.

The woman-bird, daughter of Ochun, worshipper of Shiva and Krishna, faithful to her understanding of the astral and spiritual nature of the human being and to her polarities of energy and information of the cosmos; descending equally from the four signs: earth, wind, sea and fire; exquisite draftsman and consummate colorist, sensitive woman of unbridled imagination, returns again with this showcase that I am convinced will satisfy the Swiss public.

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