ArtNexus

Liliana Porter

El Museo del Barrio

By: Paula Solimano | Feb 2019

Reopened after almost a year-long remodeling, El Museo del Barrio, an institution devoted to the promotion of Latin American and Latino art and culture in the United States, presents a journey through the artistic evolution of Liliana Porter (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1941). Titled *Other Situations* and organized by Humberto Moro, the exhibition is divided into four non-linear sections and features more than thirty works created between 1973 and 2018, all of them exploring the boundaries between reality, representation, and fiction.

Porter's career began with a focus on printmaking. Trained in the genre at Pratt Graphic Arts, in the mid-1960s she cofounded, alongside Luis Camnitzer and José Guillermo Castillo, the New York Graphic Workshop. Today, as it has for many years, her practice extends into other media such as photography, object art, installation, painting, and theater. What it retains is a fictionality that masks just as much as it clarifies her images.

Liliana Porter. *Other Situations*, 2018. Installation view at El Museo del Barrio. Courtesy of El Museo del Barrio and Martin Seck.

Exhibited first at the SCAD Museum of Art in Savannah, Georgia), *Other Situations* begin with a selection of two-dimensional works dated in the 1970s. In them, the outlines of geometric shapes—a square, a triangle—traverse different supports, times, and spaces. A line painted on the artist's hand and then photographed, from 1973, is photo engraved onto paper and then pencil-sketched on the museum wall, creating a visual framework to encompass more than forty years of work.

Walking attentively through the exhibition, we encounter Porter's characteristic figures unfolding on a variety of supports and in many different situations. A small plastic character wields an ax to destroy the surface of a pedestal, while, from a shelf, another one paints a wall blue. Featuring traditional art-exhibition organizing elements, the gallery's physical space fuses into each worker's fictional world, creating a hybrid reality that we recognize without being able to participate in it. The miniature workers sweep, sew, repair life-sized objects. While their activities are of the everyday kind, their proportions suggest their being overwhelmingly unending: they demand a measure of time that overtakes our dimensions and attention.

In a different category, although included in the same "situations" section, are a number of paintings in which various actions are either about to take place or have just passed. Similar to the shadows Porter sent by mail in 1969 (*Sombra para dos aceitunas* [Shadow for Two Olives], *Sombra para un vaso* [Shadow for a Glass]), these are outlines painted on a wall that, paradoxically, anticipate the presence of the viewer. Meanwhile, various minuscule objects are strewn about in the paintings, signaling events that occurred and we were not in time to see.

The subjects of the photographs in the third section of the exhibition are also mass-produced items but informed by a powerful historical and emotional charge. Souvenirs of iconic and variegated figures like John F. Kennedy and Johannes Brahms are situated in pristine white spaces and made to participate in a collective dialogue that congregates, again, a number of different spaces and times. Found in antique stores and flea markets, Porter's objects fill an artificially constructed gap with sentiments derived from popular culture. We move from identifying with the work of anonymous laborers to recognizing our hopes and dreams, frustrations, utopias, and projects in fallen idols, martyrs, dictators. Among them, we also find out childhood toys and recycled gifts. Space is filled with tears, but also with laughter: our emotions have become commercial merchandise. Christ on the cross is now a butter cookie. One face is the religious image, the other is the ingredients used in its confection: sugar, flour, eggs.

On exhibit in the final gallery are two videos that, as their titles suggest—*Actualidades* (Current Events) and *Matiné* (Matinee)—refer to the media filtering of our experiences in the world. Once again using toys and found objects, Porter creates absurd, catastrophic, fun, and terrible situations that belong both in the household space and in the public arena. Each scene is preceded by a fictional headline, a phrase that despite its familiarity—or perhaps because of it—appeals effectively to our sensibility. The representation, however, challenges our predisposition: *Violencia doméstica* (Domestic Violence), for example, is just a plastic arm ripped from a doll's body.

While Porter's work can be understood as connected to postmodernism and its critical relationship with the commodification of the work of art and of images in circulation, it also poses questions that go beyond all predetermined frameworks of time, space, and location. These questions move towards and into a different not necessarily postmodern reality. What is our proper scale in universal history? Is there indeed, such a thing? What is the meaning of our labors? What prompts our emotions, and why? To what do we hold on as protection from the unknown? Porter's concerns are both weighty and light. Perhaps, as Milan Kundera said, History is just as light as a singular human life—unbearably light, like floating dust.