

# "For me, everything is about a *woman's voice*"

PORUGUESE ARTIST ANA PEREZ-QUIROGA IS BRINGING A LESBIAN PERSPECTIVE TO THE ART ESTABLISHMENT WORDS SYMA TARIQ

Ana Perez-Quiroga, who is becoming known in her native Portugal for her absorbing and often personal art, sits in her living room overlooking central Lisbon. She is talking proudly about being a lesbian artist – something that might create certain barriers in this crisis-hit and often conservative country. Having exhibited at well-respected galleries such as Carlos Carvalho and Filomeno Soares in the Portuguese capital, as well as the National Museum of Art and Antiques, Shanghai's Museum of Contemporary Art and Amsterdam's Rietveld Academy, this role is something she is still figuring out for herself.

"The Portuguese are, generally, conservative," she says. "But at the same time, for example, they have legalised same-sex marriage. I think that is the poetry here, this kind of duality, and both elements live side by side surprisingly easily. If I was working in another country, I would maybe not have the same opportunities as I do here."

"Perhaps there is only room for one respected lesbian artist at a time. Portugal now has artists making queer or even politically queer work, and thank god. But it is still a man's world. Generally, you have artists such as Sarah Lucas, or Tracey Emin, but then who else do we turn to as women who want to tell our own stories?"

The 52-year-old artist, who also teaches part-time, maintains an institutional ambivalence that has perhaps led her further into those institutions. In April she will exhibit with around 14 other artists in Guimarães, the 2012 European Capital of Culture. "These other artists are the top artists in Portugal, so why me?" she muses. "I don't sell. I am not in their range at all."

A recent exhibition (*O mundo nas suas*

verdadeiras cores [The world in its true colours], 2011) at Lisbon's Appleton Square effectively explored this question. As part of the project, 225 strips of silk were displayed in three groups – the first group sold complete to a collector, the second belonging to the artist, and the third sold individually at a cost of €60 each. Every strip of silk bought could be framed, or used as a scarf, in the spirit of Neo-Concrete Brazilian artist Hélio Oiticica's vests (which he called "living sculptures"). By buying a strip, the buyer becomes an investor in the project, which will eventually result in a publication where the buyer also has to give reasons why he or she chose that particular piece of fabric, transforming him or her into a co-author. The colourful and interactive exhibition was emblematic of the artist's playful performativity.

## **"We believe that you are only an artist if you sell your work"**

"When you think about women's work, it has a lot to do with fabric, at least in Portugal – embroidery, garment-making, decorative work," she explains. "My goal was to try to see if my work was important in the art world. I really needed to see if people are interested in buying, simply, my things. We live within the idea that you are an artist only if you sell your work."

Perez-Quiroga often likes to situate herself in her pieces, whether it's the photograph of herself and a former lover imitating the famous portrait of a naked John Lennon on top of Yoko Ono (SD+APQ, 2007), a perfor-

mance where she walks through Shanghai's shopping malls in silk pyjamas during a time when it was forbidden (*The walking women*, 2010), or a series of plates showing her lying on an oversized table in positions inspired by depictions of women by painters such as Bouguereau, Freud and Velázquez (*I hate being fat, eat me please!*, 2001).

Other times, her work is more about us. In *Rather Dead Than Donkey* (Vigo 2006), viewers are challenged to think about their daily pleasures, fears and desires by interacting with objects such as perfume sticks or donkey ears. In *Tratado das Pedras segundo APQ* (2007), 11 works reconceive ideas of Western geological and Oriental painting landscapes, creating a dialogue between two perceptions – man as the measure of all things, and man as a mere grain of sand. Almost a Memory Glitch (2009) is an otherwise inconsequential story of buying a memory card, and *The Almost Blow of a Bicycle* (2008-2009) is in a similar vein – a photographic retelling of the theft of a bike that is returned locked.

"When these funny experiences happen, I use them. I think women don't have a voice in such regard," she says. "This happened to us. For me, everything is about a woman's voice. When you put yourself in front of people to say something because you are a woman, it creates visibility. This story about a bicycle can be one of thousands of stories – it is a story of common life. We can do everything with this kind of display, which is what artists such as Sophie Calle do. She recreates her own stories so effectively. If we put this kind of life history out into the world, into the art world, we can certainly have a voice." 

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