

## MORTAL WOMEN

“An exotic, rarely seen bird.” Those were the terms used by Eusebio Leal when he referred to the upcoming artist Elsa Mora, who approaches the feminine universe without any false complacencies, to lay before us the questions arising from a given condition that reflects itself in this relationship with the environment and that transcends symbols or off-chance anecdotes.

The first time I ran across her artwork I felt at once that genuine identification with a very distinctive cosmogony, since although there is something familiar in her paintings (recalling Leonora Carrington's, Remedios Varo's or Frida Kahlo's work), hers have that rarely found quality of being a woman in a world where patriarchal values prevail. What I mean is that Elsa Mora resembles those artists who “influenced” her in the same way that all of them resemble one another. All of them have brandished their discourse as a way to express their insubordination and have made of themselves the protagonists whether it be in an implicit manner or surrealistically veiled.

In my opinion, any attempt to make her paintings fit into static or formal trends would ignore the autonomous rights of a language whose main purpose is to tear down this “sacredness”, and for this reason it integrates whatever means are necessary. Gothic or baroque motifs function in Elsa's paintings as contrapuntal elements in this liberating pursuit which has nothing to do with either idolatry or iconoclast.

Her work *Confession* (acrylic on cardboard), made in 1993, illustrates the change in acknowledging the “original sin” with the purpose of vindicating feminine behavior within the legend's own frame. Elsa Mora's women perform the ritual of biting the apple by means of a snake in a heathen action. The visual approach to medieval precepts is immediately shrouded by a sort of conceptual renaissance whose genesis could only be identified through a transgressive vocation, almost as if it were a reminiscence, granting legitimacy to this ancestral Bacchus cult.

The prevailing use of cold colors in the composition and the recurrent insertion of captions, which enhance the feeling of challenge, evidence how

much this artist has drawn from world literature. Since at times, her works remind us of Djuna Barnes's exquisite language or that of Virginia Woolf, whose generic awareness is always preceded by the creation of an essentially feminine atmosphere: the power of sensation constantly displaces the almost inexistent anecdotic motif, leaving to suggestion the communicative function which makes people notice and take in details. *"Since the world is still the same and God is untouchable it is quite difficult for me to be different"*, cries out one of the protagonists of a painting which always brings to my mind an irreverent Annunciation.

It is curious the weight renowned names have when critics review Elsa Mora's work. From Goya to Chagall, stopping off at El Bosco and Brueghel, specialists have tried to unravel the mystery of the poetry you feel pounding in these small format paintings. Perhaps it is Eusebio Leal, the well known historian of the city of Havana, who has best defined it when he said that this artist, *"absorbed in her own thoughts, witnesses the crystallization of the mystery, which consist in letting the hand do what the heart dictates."* And in this lack of premeditation might lie the poetic quality of an art characterized by a slow spatial shift or an equivocal hieraticism as a requirement to transform absolute truth into relative truth, (Absolute Truth. 1997): or *"the certainty that when a single thing has more than three meanings, it is something to worry about"* (The Meanings. 1997).

Every now and then autobiographical notes apparently interfere in this complex world and place us in a far more "realistic" setting. (Sunday at Las Bijaacas. 1996). Then Elsa's painting acquires sort of naive and sensual quality having shades of unusual poetry as you can see in works such as La Casita de la Paloma (The Dove's House) or Cada Acto Habla de la Persona (Every Deed Speaks of the Person) in which we might identify the author with that small figure, dressed in an amazing red, who is at the center of a far less magician and at times even everyday environment. Fortunately, however, most of Elsa's paintings are strongly attached to oneiric representations, to that *"virtual butterfly delicate and restless in a doomed world."* Because, as it happens, the closer the reference is, the more her painting loses that spark of rebelliousness which for me constitutes the essence of her discourse, yielding and giving in, without being aware, to that tenderness which flows from candidness.

Ever since her first solo exhibition up to the latest one, Elsa Mora has maintained an ongoing effort which becomes richer every day, in the pursuit of inner motivations. She easily overcomes the risks of temporality and circumstances and places herself in a level where permanence and universality grant her work that rare power of durability that emanates from each and every one of her paintings.

The artist has stated that she's not interested in getting lost in her inner world nor in taking up some new fashions. She just looks around and settles herself within an art dealing with this feminine world and current trends. This explosive combination may be what gives that seductive charm to her paintings. Not a prefabricated one, but a charm achieved through boldness and authenticity.

With her work *Mortal Women*. Elsa has reached a position which places her among the most interesting artists of Cuban visual arts. Her success in the United States evidences the efficiency of her language the mastery of a craft always used as a provocative and subtle means.

Perched as a rare bird in the contemporary garden, Elsa Mora will give much more to say to both critics and audiences. Her insertion no longer just in the Cuban art world (which has become stronger during the last decades) makes of Elsa Mora a figure to bear in mind whenever we speak of accomplishments in women's spiritual universe.

Transcending arbitrary classifications, resemblances and similarities, Elsa Mora's art is the outcome of genuine quest, born and developed in silence, reminiscent of both present and past, ritualizing and deconstructing sacredness at the same time and above all, linked to poetry by those subtle threads which make true art the carrier of the most suggestive and enigmatic meanings, those that strike us by their persuasive strength and their lack of guile. Rather than just a painter, Elsa Mora is a *sui generis* artist who we shall always have to take into account.

Marilyn Bobes

Poet, Journalist and President of the Literature Section of the National  
Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (U.N.E.A.C.)  
Translated by Lie. Rosa Maria Quesada.