**The Worshipper of the Image: Transgression and Metamorphoses in Lucía Pizzani's work**

*“Her eyes were completely open, and from her lips a night moth hung with the face of death on its wings.”*

Ricard Le Gallienne

The Worshipper of the Image

The woman as a symbol of transgression -non submissive, fatal and tragic- is the departure point of Lucía Pizzani's latest project, presented in the same space where she won the XII Eugenio Mendoza Award (2013) just a year earlier. Her winning project, *The Unknown of the Seine*, explored the long-lived fascination for this funerary mask, an icon of the Victorian era. The urban legend says that the mask's model was modeled on the face of a young and beautiful maiden who committed suicide, whose body was found in the Seine in the decade of 1880. The woman's beauty so captivated the forensic surgeon that he decided to preserve her features for future generations; the unexpected result was that only a short time after, many copies of the mask began to circulate around art galleries and salons in the Paris of the *Belle Époque.* The appeal of this strange woman is not only her sinister yet romantic aura, but also the implications of the enormous amount of copies of her mask, making her image one of the first to circulate in a massive, modern way of distribution, that is: reproduced and disseminated across a wide geographic territory.

Its cultural status was so relevant that in 1900 the British writer Richard Le Galliene used the mask as the main character of his novel *The Worshipper of the Image*, playing both the role of the object of desire and the villain. The storyline, of evident romantic overtones, narrates how an unconcerned gentleman finds a copy of the mask in an antique shop and, because of its uncanny resemblance to his wife, decides to take it home. The mask's supernatural and evil powers haunt the man, pushing his wife and daughter to their death and finally killing him too. The last image of the novel is precisely the quotation that opened this text: when the man sees how a butterfly, with the face of death on its wings, comes out of the mask's mouth. Le Galliene leaves the rest to the reader's imagination…

The death butterfly is a horror image of prevailing weight that resurfaces in novels, movies and other cultural products every now and then: from Edgar Allan Poe in his *The Sphinx* (1846), to the movie *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Focusing on this image Pizzani began to investigate butterfly shapes as metaphors for women, as symbols of their body and the natural world, which are constantly mutating from one state to another with their huge potential of transformation. Pizzani has never avoided macabre or awkward themes. Death, the body and viscous organic shapes are an essential part of her methodology and interest her not only as a visual artist but also as an environmentalist, considering her previous long lasting work in Provita, an NGO for the preservation of the environment and the fact that she got a degree in Preservation Biology at Columbia University (NY). This background had lasting impact on her way of understanding the creative process and representing the feminine condition, a subject she approaches in every single piece.

**From chrysalis state to hatching**

The bond between these two projects becomes evident in the show's first work. *The Silent Woman* (2013) is a video featuring a life size mask of the *Unknown of the Seine*. The mask seems static, but after a few seconds we can see how a butterfly slowly emerges from her mouth, reminding us of *The Worshipper of the Image's* finale. What we see here, however, is not a butterfly but the silhouette of Loie Fuller, a modern dancer and theater lighting pioneer. Fuller became famous in 1896 thanks to *Serpentine Dance*, a small silent film in which the dancer spins a pair of enormous silk wings, resembling a playful butterfly.

As we have mentioned before, Pizzani has a profound interest in ecological processes and this project gathers several works that combine various conceptual strategies; some are related to social and gender issues while others explore biological matters. The evolution from chrysalis state to butterfly, a main component of the lepidopteran life cycle, is explicitly reflected in *Cronógrafo Monarca: 9 births, two deaths and one disappearance* (2013). To carry it out, Pizzani kept in her studio two dozen live chrysalis hanging on a wall. She recorded every small change in their life cycle, from their births to their first flights. The video fragments show us different vital moments, and it is affecting because it manages to transcend its mere documentary value to make a profound statement on the inescapable passage of time. On a wall nearby Pizzani also exhibits one of the butterflies that was part of her experiment but died in the process. The magnifying lens hanging on the side turn the viewer into an improvised explorer for a moment, allowing him to approach and observe, almost scientifically, the lepidopteran species; the first in a series of metaphors scattered all around Pizzani’s show.

**Hatching trough, or the painful moment of change**

 Metamorphic processes have originated some of the most lucid reflections on the human condition that come to memory. The examples are varied: Kafka's *Metamorphoses* (1915), the many variations of the wolf-man story, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), or the wonderful and tragic *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley (1818), to mention but a few. Here Pizzani confronts similar themes by using the biological transformation processes of the butterfly's life cycle. The first change is when the caterpillar turns into a chrysalis; the second when the butterfly hatches from the chrysalis, spreading its new wings and starting to fly. Both processes are portrayed by Pizzani in her *Cronógrafo Monarca.* The hatching is a moment of transformation and splitting which, to the inadvertent eye, may even seem painful, even though butterflies don't endure any physical suffering. This process is perhaps more similar to the human adolescence, for it is a period in which the body abandons its infantile features, developing as an adult, a concluding stage.

Other similar examples that come to the mind are the chick hatching from its egg shell or the snake changing its skin. These transformation processes (biological or psychological), are referenced in the *Hamaca-capullo (2013)* video, in which Pizzani creates a performative action inside of a very organic-looking hammock; shut and sinuous, it resembles the *pupa* (the scientific term to designate the butterfly's larvae or chrysalis).

Pizzani moves her body wrapped in these fabrics, her performance documented in still images and edited in a flowing slow motion sequence that creates the sensation of a suspended movement. Exploring a similar theme but using a different methodology is the *Cuencos* series (2013); in this five life-size photographs Pizzani is portrayed doing another performative action, emerging this time from a group of enormous ceramic vessels crafted in traditional fashion by a group of women from the town of *El Cercado* in Margarita Island, Venezuela.

The vessel as a container, chrysalis or womb, serves Pizzani as a metaphor of the hatching moment, and also of childbirth. A body abandoning another body, out into the world, with a new skin.

The device of the female anatomy and its contours as stages for fictional narratives is again employed in the series of ferrotypes *Annie, Paola, Julia, Patricia y Katherine* (2013). It shows a group of women wearing chrysalis suits, which are also exhibited in the first room of the art gallery (*Textiles*, 2013). All portraits, shot in a classic, Victorian manner –exposing collodion emulsified plates to light– take their title from the woman inside the suit. The use of this ancient technique and the strange configurations of bodies and fabrics result in a series of evocative images that seem to belong to an ethnographic expedition, in which an unknown tribe of strange customs that used these dresses in ancient rituals, was found.

In the next room of the gallery the chrysalis-women come to life in the *Cáscaras* video (2013). An idyllic landscape in the shores of a crystal like river is the place where the women begin to twitch urgently, wanting to break free from the paralyzing membrane, to gain their freedom. The soundtrack mixes sounds from the natural world -the wind, the water current, song birds- with electronic elements, creating an enigmatic atmosphere. In the following scenes we see the caterpillar-women individually and in different landscapes, asserting their individual identities outside of the group. The topography of natural landscape fuses with the topography of the feminine body. Each chrysalis-woman is wrapped in a differently printed/colored fabric, performing her own set of movements; these are features that confer a unique personality to each of these women, in spite of their anonymity, due to their covered faces. In other scenes we glimpse their eyes through the holes in their suits, thus rendering these characters more meaningful and real. The chrysalis-women stare at us as they shake. They seem serious and determined. Is Pizzani establishing here a metaphor for women’s liberation? Is this video perhaps showing the moment prior to hatching as a reminder of the pain, doubt and solitude involved in any attempt at freedom?

**Butterflies, witches and other night heroines**

The itinerary through *The Worshipper of the Image* reaches its end with the *Nocturna* series (2013), a tribute to Loie Fuller and her *Serpentine Dance*. In *Nocturna I* (2013) Pizzani assumes Fuller's guise, covered in fabrics that evoke butterfly wings. But while Fuller danced joyfully and her costumes were often in pastel colors, which gave her performances a festive and charming character, in *Nocturna I* Pizzani doesn't even move. Instead, she remains static, staring to an unknown point in space, seemingly slumbered in an inexplicable ecstasy. The fabrics wrap her in a deep black color, giving her the appearance of the dark, nocturnal butterfly anticipated in the title. The image, printed in a huge size and hanging high up from the tallest wall at *Sala Mendoza*, dominates the gallery monumentally. The artist's image is imposed on the public in an almost sculptural manner, as an icon that controls the exhibition's space and its visitors.

In *Nocturna II* (2013), Pizzani's previous action is animated on video. In this work the costumes's black fabrics work as a screen for the projection of the motion picture *Création de la Serpentine* (1908) by Segundo de Chomón, a film maker known as the “Spanish Méliès”, and starring Loie Fuller . Here, Fuller materializes as a result of some alchemy performed by the devil, who has previously interrupted a peaceful evening of music and dancing in a French salon of the early 19th Century. Fuller starts dancing and multiplicating, as if she were a swarm of insects, invading space. The ballerinas spin around, shaking their costume wings until they explode in flames and disappear. Meanwhile, Pizzani observes the swarm projected on her skirt from above, as a sort of meditative demiurge, submerged in a deep state of trance. Although Pizzani only shows the scenes with the ballerinas, not including Chomon's film from the beginning, the demonic metaphor is a key element for interpreting this work: the dark, fatal woman -whose uncontrollable seductive powers were equated through years with Satan, leading to the invention of the witch and the subsequent witch hunts- is the symbol considered by Pizzani a starting point for her whole project. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, in the novel *The Worshipper of the Image* the villain is the image of a beautiful woman whose malignant yet fascinating power unchains a series of misfortunes that ruin the masculine character. The confluence in the historic dates of these different events is also interesting: the “Unknown from the Seine” became an icon late in the decade of 1880; Le Galliene published his novel in 1900 and Chomón immortalized Loie Fuller's butterfly choreographies during the years around 1900 and 1910. What is it that attracts Pizzani to research the Victorian Europe and the *Belle Époque* over and over again? A possible answer is that this is precisely the historic and cultural period in which women began their struggle for freedom.

The suffragette's movement achieved its first big success in 1893 in New Zealand, the first country that passed a law that granted all women over 21 the right to vote. From there on, different collectives and activists began to spread across UK, USA, France, Ireland, Australia and Canada, organizing themselves in groups and partnerships, struggling for their rights even in a violent manner, with many activists even dying in demonstrations and hunger strikes.Victorian women were particularly troublesome individuals, living in a time in which they were still valued -according to tradition- for their beauty and submissiveness, but also in which collective movements had also began their struggle to increase women's agency and representation in society. This turned some women into seditious and dangerous subjects, who “deserved” moral and physical punishment, thus perpetuating the cycle of frustration, insurrection, revenge and the growing disagreement between the sexes. The transition from a submissive woman to a woman that owns her fate -with its inherent pain and conflict- finds its delicate, poetic echo in Pizzani's butterflies: submerged in an eternal process of transformation from caterpillar to butterfly, changing their bodies in order to evolve. A specimen that, after this elaborate transformation, opens its wings and flies. Free, daring, and beautiful.

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