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La Catrina as a specter of seduction in the paintings of Elsa Quiñones

La Catrina como espectro de seducción en la pintura de Elsa Quiñones

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ABSTRACT

Written from the perspective of the philosophy of art, this essay seeks to confirm the thesis that the work of Mexican visual artist Elsa Quiñones—particularly her representations of the mythical figure *La Catrina*—can be interpreted through Jean Baudrillard's concept of seduction. Through the selection of two of her skulls, adorned with vibrant colors, petals, birds, braids, and abundant ribbons, it becomes evident that ritual and death—fundamental dimensions of this seduction—are key elements in Quiñones's aesthetic. Her *Catrinas* seduce us through death, mitigating the randomness of an accidental encounter with those who behold them; and through ritual, they reemerge into life through the artist's hand, as the eternal return of a sacred and primordial ceremonial form.

Keywords: *contemporary art; culture; Mexico; death; painting.*

RESUMEN

Elaborado desde la filosofía del arte, este ensayo pretende confirmar la tesis de que la obra de la artista plástica mexicana, Elsa Quiñones, en lo puntual aquella que representa a la mítica figura de La Catrina, podría ser interpretada a partir del concepto de seducción de Jean Baudrillard. Tras la selección de dos de sus calaveras engalanadas con colores vivos y pétalos, aves, trenzas y cintas por doquier, se constata que el ritual y la muerte, dimensiones fundamentales de esta seducción, resultan claves en la estética de Quiñones. Sus Catrinas nos seducen por medio de la muerte, aligerando el azar en un encuentro accidental con el resto de los seres que las contemplan; por medio del ritual, asomando a la vida gracias al arte de la mexicana, como el eterno retorno de una sagrada y primitiva forma ceremonial.

Palabras clave: *arte contemporáneo; cultura; México; muerte; pintura.*

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INTRODUCCTION

It has become commonplace to claim that visual arts and poetry have fallen by the wayside in their task of ideological, de-alienating intervention in the face of the onslaught of unregulated mercantilist capitalism or a confusing aesthetics of the everyday.

However, this assertion does not seem to be entirely well-founded, especially due to its totalizing nature and also because examples from Latin American art itself today reflect a very different reality. Thus, for instance, visual artists such as Pablo Guzmán, Pablo Ferrer, María Reverol, Hugo Robledo, Diana Kisner, Lucía Alborta, among others, present art full of symbolism, beauty, constructive rhetoric, colorfulness, abstraction, etc.—quite far from the attacks of frenzied capitalism or the ultra-heterodox practices of the aesthetics of the everyday.

This work intends to reflect—through the lens of the philosophy of art—precisely on one of the most recognized exponents of Latin American art, agreeing with Pineda (2011) that philosophy is not subordinate to art, nor is it its judge, but rather a spectator of creation and of the development of a human experience that prompts thought.

This essay argues that the work of the Mexican visual artist Elsa Quiñones[1], particularly that which depicts the mythical figure of *La Catrina*[2], ...can be understood through the concept of seduction, as coined by the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard in 1979. Specifically, I suggest that two dimensions of this seduction—ritual and death—are essential to the aesthetic of *Las Catrinas* painted by Quiñones.

All of this must be considered bearing in mind that the work of our artist far exceeds the theme of *La Catrina* and ventures into visual manifestations related to the most diverse aspects of the Mexican universe. Therefore, in Quiñones' canvases proliferate, among other objects and beings, suns, butterflies, fruits, trees with their leaves (some already mid-flight), cacti, blue moons adorned with ribbons and multicolored flowers, bicycles filled with little birds next to imposing blue doors and stone-colored frames, handcrafted dolls of infinite colors, a magical city in a new beginning, Virgins of Guadalupe, and girls with butterfly wings painting their own pictures.

The method used in this study was the single-case method (Stake, 2007), with the selected case corresponding to the visual artist Elsa Quiñones[3]. The units of analysis chosen were two of her works: *Life doesn't forget you* (2022) and *Welcome to life* (2015). Both were selected through theoretical sampling (Barrios, 2015; Vegas, 2016). Finally, following Flyvbjerg (2006), the selected case corresponds to the criterion of a paradigmatic case—that is, a case that hypothetically allows the development of a metaphor related to the field of inquiry.

DEVELOPMENT

Ritual and death: modes of seduction

It must be said that, by its very nature, seduction resists being addressed discursively. Nevertheless, Baudrillard (2000) manages to make us understand what it is about, whose seminal characteristic would be its reversibility: "seduction is destiny. It is what remains of destiny, of challenge, of enchantment, of predestination and vertigo, and also of silent efficacy in a world of visible efficiency and disenchantment" (p. 170).

In fact, seduction ends up being an esoteric metaphysics—the great opponent of the simulacrum itself, for: "We live, in any case, within meaninglessness, but if simulation is its disenchanted form, seduction is its enchanted one" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 170). Among the many facets seduction adopts in retreat from the assaults of production, there are two that seem key to

1 Some of the exhibitions in which the Mexican visual artist and graphic designer has participated include: 2024: M.A.D.S. Art Gallery. *Beyond. Contemporary International Art Exhibition*, New York; 2023: *I Am Mexican*. Solo exhibition. Gallery of Hotel Casa Santo Tomás; 2022: *Reencuentros*. International Group Exhibition. Casa Santo Tomás; 2021: *From the Earth to the Heart*. Gallery of Hotel Casa Santo Tomás; 2018: D'Lonngi Art Gallery. *Codes of Light*. Group exhibition / *Lights in the Soul*, Contemporary Mexico Cultural Center, Historic Center of Mexico City / D'Lonngi Art Gallery. *POP Art*. Group exhibition / *Master Minds*. *Heaven and Hell* Art Auction featuring works by Leonora Carrington, Salvador Dalí, Manuel Felguérez, José Luis Cuevas, Remedios Varo, and contemporary artists / D'Lonngi Art Gallery. Group Exhibition. Open Theme; 2017: Aguafuerte Gallery. *Mexican Homeland Month and Mexican Art*. Group Exhibition / Art Fair ASF (American School Foundation) / D'Lonngi Art Gallery. Group Exhibition. *Rituals Around Art*; 2016: *For the Love of Art II*. Contemporary Mexico Cultural Center, Historic Center of Mexico City / *Lights and Miracles*. Aguafuerte Gallery, Roma District / *Perspectives on Women*. Aguafuerte Gallery, Roma District; 2015: *The Colors of the Soul*. Solo exhibition at the ALIAC Cultural Center, Historic Center of Mexico City; 2014: *VII Exhibition of Mexican Art*. Emiliano López Gallery, San Miguel de Allende / *For the Love of Art*. Contemporary Mexico Cultural Center, Historic Center of Mexico City; 2013: *Expressions*. Art Workshop of Master Alejandra Pous / *Beyond Art*. Casino San Ángel; 2012: *Express Yourself*. Art Workshop of Master Alejandra Pous (Territorioscore, n.d.).

2 In short, this is a character created by the Mexican painter, illustrator, and caricaturist from Aguascalientes, José Guadalupe Posada, who has become the image most closely associated with the *Día de Muertos* and with death in general in Mexico—one of the cultural icons by which the country is recognized around the world (Secretaría de Bienestar, Government of Mexico, 2018).

3 In accordance with the protocol for research of this nature, and as an ethical and legal safeguard, the artist Elsa Quiñones has provided written authorization (via Instagram) for the digital images of her paintings to be included in this essay.

understanding the presence of *Las Catrinas*, as painted by Quiñones in several of his works. These facets or modes are ritual and death.

Seduction as ritual

This dimension corresponds precisely to seduction in its original phase. One could rightly say it is its primitive incursion.

Consequently, seduction included a ritual phase—that is, dual, magical, and agonistic; an aesthetic phase, reflected in the seducer's aesthetic strategy; and a political phase, that of "the informal form of the political," surrendered to the infinite reproduction of a form without content (Baudrillard, 2000).

But the French philosopher's view is rather skeptical, insofar as this original seduction seems to have vanished amid a universe transformed primarily into objects of simulation:

> The universe in which gods and men tried to please one another—even through the violent seduction of sacrifice—is over. The intelligence of signs and analogies that provoked enchantment and the power of magic is over [...], not only the gods, but inanimate beings, dead things, the dead themselves, have always needed to be seduced and conjured through multiple rituals, enchanted with signs to prevent them from causing harm. (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 166)

That is to say, what seduces about ritual is not its dialectical polarity—as the order of a universe governed by law and meaning—but rather its agonistic duality, as the domain of play and the entire sphere of rule.

It is the death-rule binomial that besieges the realm of rituality, as if it were a stalled chance, the very result of a ritual governed by original seduction: "By never stopping at the truth of signs, but rather at deception and secrecy, [...] it inaugurates a secret and ritual mode of circulation, a sort of immediate initiation that obeys only its own rules of the game" (Baudrillard, 2000, p. 79).

Seduction as death

Paradoxically, the key to this fateful facet lies in the very chance of death, in the naive gesture of death, which acts—despite itself—as an iconic gesture of seduction:

> Death appears without strategy, even without unconscious trickery, and at the same time clings to the unexpected depth of seduction—that is, to what happens on the margins, to the sign that walks like a mortal exhortation even behind the participants (behind death itself, not only the soldier), to the random sign behind which another marvelous or nefarious conjunction operates. A conjunction that gives this sign's trajectory all the characteristics of *an occurrence*. (Baudrillard, 2000, pp. 71–72)

If we follow the French philosopher closely, we find that what is enchanting is the astonishment of death: even with no plan, it arranges chance with the chance of a gesture—in other words, it intervenes in destiny with the minimal force of an accidental encounter. And yet, everything will unfold just as death murmured it, just as it hissed into Julius Caesar's ear on the Ides of March[4]:

> Once again, those lights in the sky. They cannot be torchlights. This is the hour of silence, the only hour of stillness in Rome. Even Antony must be asleep. Why can't Caesar sleep? Calpurnia too turns from side to side. Her brow is drenched in sweat, her lips move—twice now she has spoken my name. Clearly, she is afraid, and that is unlike her. Why would night terrors or some horrible omen alarm her? [...] This is a danger that, although I take no precautions against it, I suppose I should consider here in Rome. But in Rome I have only one more day. (Warner, 1996, p. 8)

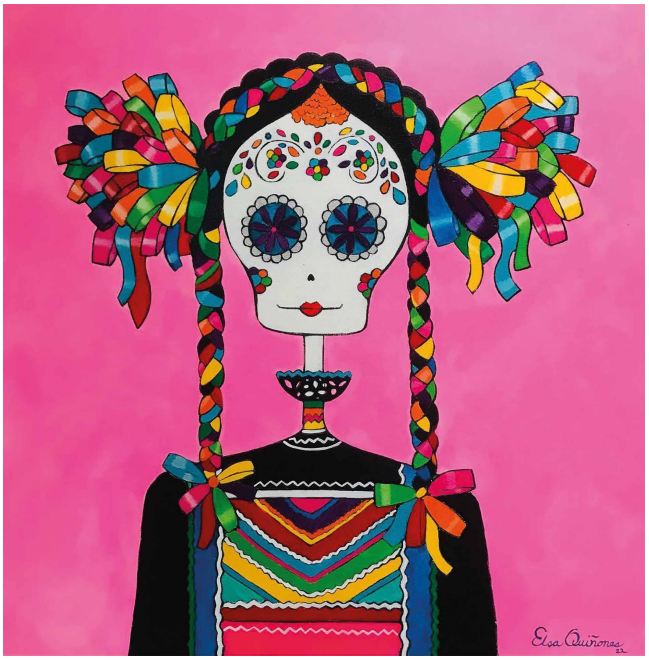
Thus, unplanned and unwilled, death—as an artifice of seduction—ends up becoming something very similar to *Helheim*, the gloomy realm of death in Norse mythology, where the sick and the old would end up, and from whose vastness, unbeknownst to them, not even the gods who entered could ever return.

Las Catrinas

La Catrina (the "deathly lady" or "the bony one") begins to appear along the streets of cities throughout Mexico, proclaiming to the world that it is time to remember those who have passed, turning the *Día de Muertos* into one of the most special dates of the year in a country illuminated with candles, adorned with iconic flowers, skulls, and traditions that parade everywhere during these two nights (González et al., 2024).

4 The Ides of March—namely, March 15th of the year 44 BCE—is the date on which Julius Caesar was assassinated in a conspiracy led by Gaius Cassius Longinus. On that day, Caesar, who had received multiple omens and warnings of his impending death, entered one of the halls of the Senate while the conspirators gathered around him. One of them, Tillius Cimber, approached him under the pretense of making a petition and, as Caesar read it, grabbed him by the shoulders so that another conspirator could strike the first blow to his neck. That was the signal for the others to unleash their daggers—twenty-three stab wounds in total—upon the body of a man believed to be divine, who still had the composure to cover his face with his toga after seeing Marcus Junius Brutus, one of the senators he trusted most, among his assassins. In this way, the concept of the Ides of March has endured in history as a symbol of fatal omens and death.

Figure 1
Life does not forget you



Note. Life does not forget you (2022), [mixed media on canvas, 80 x 80 cm], by Elsa Quiñones (Quiñones Arte, 2022).

With a blend of Hispanic heritage and precolonial elements, *La Catrina* carries a ritualistic connotation that, in any case, transcends the *Día de Muertos*. Whether in her characteristic Victorian dress, her floral headdress, or her indigenous attire—featuring folkloric elements or referencing a famous deceased person—tributes to the "lady of death" are visible in the beautification of the skull's form and her magnificent outfits (Fuentes, 2018).

The ritual of *La Catrina* goes as follows: her origin lies in the Aztec figure Mictecacihuatl, the goddess of death. According to legend, the Aztec goddess kept the bones of the dead, as at some point they might be used again.

The character is revived as a typical figure during the *Día de los Muertos*, now dressed in an elegant fashion. Initially, *La Catrina* was known as *La Calavera Garbancera*[5], the title Posada gave to the engraving depicting a woman in fine clothing and ornate designs that served to mock Mexico's upper classes. Over time, her figure endured as a symbol of protest, and since then, she has been incorporated into *Día de Muertos* celebrations on altars, while many dress up as catrinas and catrines (Rivera, 2020).

Life does not forget you (see Figure 1) is, in fact, a *Catrina*. Executed in mixed media on canvas, one could propose the thesis that it follows a pseudo-naïve or primitive style[6]—a categorization that could also be applied to the second Catrina, titled *Welcome to life* (see Figure 2). That is, the *Catrinas* of master artist Quiñones exhibit nearly all the attributes of naïve art[7]: an innocent appearance, spontaneity, vivid contrasting colors, simple forms, a direct thematic approach, and a framing free from linear perspective.

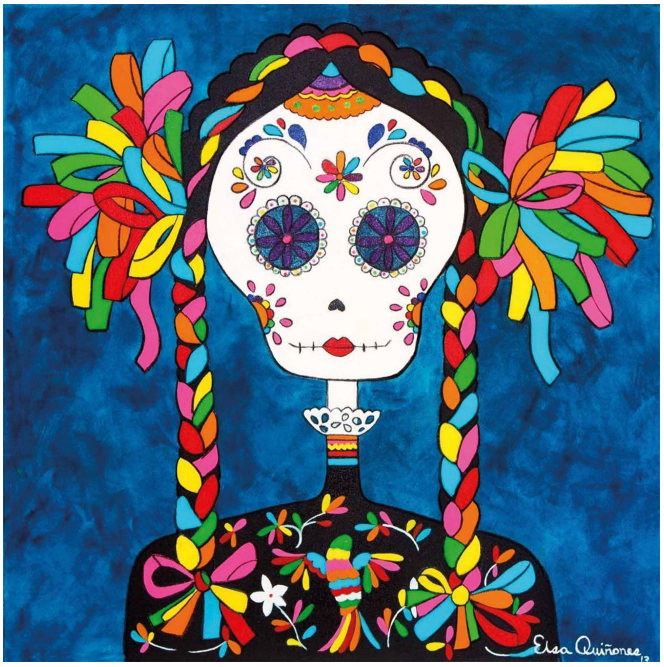
Nevertheless, what is decidedly absent from these *Catrinas*—according to a more or less universal definition of the naïve—is any indication of a lack of technical or theoretical knowledge, or of criteria for achieving a consistent chromatic composition.

5 The *garbancero* or *malinchista* was someone who, despite having Indigenous ancestry, pretended to be European and felt ashamed of their own culture.

6 Primitivism has been understood as a style that incorporates elements from ancestral or "exotic" cultures into the language of contemporary art. It is used in an intentionally laudatory sense: as something connected to the beginning, the origin, the natural state—authentic, spontaneous, untouched by the progress of civilization. Art, then, resides in the natural, the spontaneous, the intuitive, the impulsive—in what is "pre-civilized." And that original (still "pre-civilized") freedom is also found by the artist in the creativity of children. This is why much of modern art admires and includes the "primitive" essence of children's art (Tres minutos de arte, 2019).

7 Naïve art (from the French *naïf*, meaning "naive," and ultimately from the Latin *nativus*, meaning "innate," "original," or "natural") emerged in the early 20th century from a personal desire to cultivate a skill that could be appreciated within the family circle or among worldly acquaintances. Sunday painters, amateurs, retirees, and adventurous dabblers in painting or sculpture spent their spare time imagining pristine scenes and landscapes. Through the exuberance of color, they recovered the beauty of an inner world that revealed itself both to their own eyes and to others with the force of a hopeful vision (Rocca, 2021).

Figure 2
Welcome to life



Note. Welcome to life (2015), [acrylic on canvas, 80 x 80 cm], by Elsa Quiñones (Pintores Mexicanos, n.d.).

On the contrary, what is striking in the observation of these two *Catrinas* are the features that instead reveal a refined mastery of the composition–color binomial—and this, even before considering the cultural or folkloric reference that animates the mexicanism of each canvas.

In the case of *Life does not forget you*, we observe an almost perfect symmetry that conveys vibrant, multicolored ornamental forms set against a bright pink background that seems to inject even more life into the piece. Meanwhile, in *Welcome to life*, the face of the skull is dominated by red, pink, sky blue, tangerine, yellow, and violet petals, while her eyes are composed of the same flowers that appear on her face and torso—but only in violet tones, except at the center of each "flower," where a vivid pale pink button draws the viewer's attention.

As in the previous work, the torso of this *Catrina* transforms into a second canvas—one of black fabric, filled with colored leaves, all with white stems and flowers that blend seamlessly into the knotted ribbons (pink, orange, red, sky blue, green, and yellow) at the ends of the two outlined braids of the "bony one." Like yet another flower, a multicolored parrot serves as her heart, reflecting the same palette as the flowers and ribbons, in a festival of color and Mexican vitality.

Contradicting the French thinker's skepticism, Elsa Quiñones' universe revives the concept of ritual through the drawing and the color of her canvases. If Baudrillard (2000) claimed that late modernity had extinguished the intelligence of signs rooted in the power of enchantment, the artist's *Catrinas* demonstrate exactly the opposite: the skulls themselves become the magical signs that bewitch us with their spiraled violet eyes and their hypnotic pink seed-like irises.

What seduces us in the two works by the Mexican artist—and this is a metaphysical matter of great importance—is the ritual of the return to life (symbolic, pictorial, earthly), not only of the image but of the very being of *La Catrina*. And if this cultural-spiritual rite initiated by Quiñones does not represent the purest reversibility of Baudrillard's seduction (that reversibility which brings the dead back to life!), then what does it represent?

Returning to Baudrillard (2000), who suggests: "not only the gods but inanimate beings, dead things, the dead themselves, have always had to be seduced and conjured through multiple rituals, enchanted with signs to prevent them from causing harm" (p. 166). These very dead are those who, paraphrasing the philosopher from Reims, now seduce us transformed into the *Catrinas* of Elsa Quiñones—as if this pictorial resurrection were, at the risk of repetition, a ritual of seduction.

And what about death? What about death in the figure of "Death" herself, as represented in the *Catrinas* of the Mexican artist?

Death, which appears to be *La Catrina*'s greatest enchantment—adorning herself in splendid attire and coquettish gestures—and which, through Elsa Quiñones' mastery of mixed media and acrylic, returns to the world of the living as a seductive exhalation, bursts forth possessing both figures: the "bony ladies," one with the pink background and the other with the blue, the one bearing a parrot and the one bereft of it, mesmerizing us with an arrangement as frivolous as it is fated.

Just as Baudrillard (2000) intended: the astonishment of death (or of these skulls that layer life and death) suddenly reveals itself as seductive—chance lightened by a minimal gesture of asymmetry, of scattered color, of shine and opacity, of ribbons and braids, disguising destiny's intervention with the faintest force of an accidental encounter. Which encounter? That of our human gaze with the seduction whispered by the dazzling *Catrinas* of Elsa Quiñones.

CONCLUSIONS

The thesis proposed at the beginning of this essay has been confirmed: the pictorial work of Mexican artist Elsa Quiñones—specifically that centered on *Las Catrinas*—can be interpreted philosophically through the lens of Baudrillard's theory of seduction. Moreover, by zooming in on the two selected *Catrinas*, such seduction manifests, as argued, through two of its fundamental modes: that of ritual and that of death.

The *Catrinas* of master artist Quiñones seduce us through death and ritual, as if their symbolic return to life during the Día de Muertos were not enough to charm the living in the streets of Mexican cities—dressed in their magnificent outfits and adorned with eye-catching accessories.

Through death, as both works present themselves as the epitome of seduction—chance lightened through an encounter that is accidental, yet not random—with those who dare to contemplate them. Through ritual, as they emerge into life through the art of Quiñones, embodying the eternal return of a sacred and primitive ceremonial form.

It is as if these "ladies of death" sought to remain forever on this side of the world, coexisting with the living—confident that the ritual that remembers them and the death that constitutes them are sufficient strategies to seduce anyone who chooses to gaze upon them, adorned as they are, with their braids, filigree, and shimmering ribbons, with that profusion of stems and petals playing upon their bony faces, torsos, and necks black as their hair. One of them, with her seven-colored parrot ready to take flight.

But above all, both of them with rose-colored irises that seem to enchant even the most skeptical, the most alive, the least esoteric. And all of this, because the mixed media and acrylics employed by Elsa Quiñones are, ultimately, the expressive tools of an artist already seduced by seduction itself—as the Great Mistress, as the artifice of an unending ritual exchange.

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