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Myrna Báez: Her Art and Her Identity

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In 1971, the noted Argentine art critic, Marta Traba (1930-1983) declared Myrna Báez was the most qualified artist in the visual arts in Puerto Rico (*Propuesta*, Traba 121).¹ In the last forty years, Myrna Báez has emerged as one of the most outstanding painters and graphic artists of Puerto Rico (Figure 1).

Báez was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico in 1931, and currently lives in the capital, San Juan. She is the fourth of five children. Her father, Enrique Báez Rodríguez (1896-1983), a native of Puerto Rico (Mayaguez), was a successful civil engineer. Her mother, América González Nieves (1896-1988), also Puerto Rican (Gurabo), was a schoolteacher. From her mother, a precocious, young Myrna learned to be independent and determined; it was her mother who insisted that all her children be educated in the arts. She enrolled her daughters in piano and ballet

Figure 1

lessons, took her children to the theater, and insisted that they read widely. Báez became a voracious reader, and in 1939, at age eight, Báez traveled with her mother and sister to New York City where she visited the World's Fair (1939-1940) in Queens. Themed "The World of Tomorrow," the World's Fair was billed as a luminous assertion of optimism in the face of the Depression. At the entrance to the fairgrounds this theme was reinforced by its dominating symbols, the *Trylon* and *Perisphere*.² These symbols were meant to introduce the new technologies presented at many of the Fair's exhibitions (Hart). At the age of nine, Báez took her first painting lessons, but as she states, she was "always copying something and not creative" (Báez, Feb 13). Her first knowledge of art came through these classes.

Báez's home was not decorated with paintings, and Puerto Rico offered little in the visual arts at that time. Her formal introduction to the visual arts did not occur until 1951 when she moved to Spain. To understand Báez's limited exposure to the visual arts in Puerto Rico, it is helpful to consider Puerto Rico in the context of the history of art in Mexico and Cuba. Unlike Mexico and Cuba with long histories and traditions in the arts, Puerto Rico, since colonial times, lacked a flourishing culture in architecture and the visual arts. However, Puerto Rico could claim a long tradition in folk art—specifically the carving of *santos*, and this tradition remains strong in the island's culture. Puerto Rico also produced two extraordinary painters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: José Campeche (1751-1809) and Francisco Oller (1883-1917) (Lezama).³ But it was not until the forties that Puerto Rico experienced the migration of Spanish artists and intellectuals to the island. This influx of talent transformed the visual arts in Puerto Rico.

These artists enriched and stimulated the cultural environment of Puerto Rico by teaching at the University of Puerto Rico, publishing art reviews in the local press, and establishing professional galleries. The first art museum was not established until 1955 when the Instituto Cultural Puertorriqueño (Institute of Puerto Rican Culture-IPC) opened. In the early fifties, the first commercial galleries opened in Puerto Rico: the Don Roberto Gallery which was housed in a gift shop, Gallery Campeche in San Juan, and Galeria Pintadera in Hato Rey (Zavala, “Documented”).

These events were seminal in the establishment of a strong artistic tradition in Puerto Rico. The gubernatorial administration of Luis Muñoz Marín (1898-1980) gave further impetus to the artistic movement in Puerto Rico. Marín governed from 1949 to 1965 and he made the visual arts a core feature of his program of social change for Puerto Rico. For example, he made the visual arts part of a massive literacy campaign, and the health department used the visual arts in public health programs, featuring many posters designed to promote good health (Benitez, “The Fifties” 141). After the establishment of the Puerto Rican Commonwealth in 1952, Governor Luis Muñoz Marín founded the Instituto Nacional de Cultura (National Institute of Culture) in 1955, and the cultural environment, particularly in the visual arts, gained new momentum. The political reaction was mixed. Despite Marín’s forward thinking and notable social improvements, the Commonwealth was denounced by pro-statehood and independence advocates as a continuation of neocolonialism. Advocates for statehood and others for independence continue to rally for their cause, while defenders of the commonwealth insist that Puerto Rico enjoys the “‘best of two worlds’: an independent political and fiscal administration with most of the privileges of U.S. citizenship” (Benitez, “Neurotic” 75). As Marimar Benitez states, “the ambiguous political relationship between Puerto Rico and the United States has had a deep impact on the collective subconscious of our people and manifests itself in the visual arts” (Benitez, “Neurotic” 75).

Myrna Báez began to identify with the Puerto Rican Independence Party and its ideology while a student at the Universidad de Puerto Rico (University of Puerto Rico-UPR). She began her studies at UPR in 1947. The University of Puerto Rico was not only the first higher education institution established on the island (1903) but also the flagship research university. During this period, Báez immersed herself in the invigorating intellectual atmosphere of the university, attending political rallies and the many cultural events that were offered. It was a time of tremendous cultural change for the university. The Museo de la Universidad (Museum of the University) was established in 1949 and it filled a lacuna in the cultural atmosphere of Puerto Rico.

It was not until the fifties that the plastic arts gained national recognition in Puerto Rico. Some of the members of the generation of the fifties had studied abroad while others trained locally. Artists, Félix Rodríguez Báez (b. 1929), Lorenzo Homar (1913-2004), Rafael Tufiño (b. 1918), and José A. Torres Martinó (b. 1916), organized the Centro de Arte Puertorriqueño or CAP (Puerto Rican Art Center). The center officially opened in 1950. Pedro Albizu Campos

(1893-1965), who led the radical Nationalist movement in Puerto Rico, made a strong impression on these artists. In 1952, Albizu Campos, with pressure from the United Nations, successfully removed Puerto Rico from the list of colonies.⁴ The art produced by the generation of the fifties was saturated with a Nationalist feeling that celebrated Puerto Rican identity (Benitez, “The Fifties”). The uncertainty and vagueness of Puerto Rico’s political position took root with the artists of CAP, and their influence would be an important element in the formation of Báez’s artistic vocabulary in the late fifties when she studied with Homar.

In 1951, Báez graduated from the University of Puerto Rico with a degree from the College of Natural Sciences and went to Madrid to pursue a medical career. On her way to Spain, she stopped in New York and Paris where she took in as much of the culture as she could (Báez, April 4). By 1952, she had developed a clear passion for the visual arts, abandoned her medical studies and applied to the prestigious Escuela Central de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (San Fernando Art Academy). Báez’s initial application was rejected. For a year, she attended classes without receiving credit, built her portfolio, and immersed herself in Madrid’s artistic milieu. Báez was accepted into the academy in 1953, and her work was used as an example for the other students. Her dedication to the study of art was matched by her involvement with Madrid’s intelligentsia. In this environment, Báez found kindred spirits with similar cultural concerns and social-leftist political ideals. Her years in Madrid would form an integral part of her life and career. Her friendship with the young Spanish painter, Juan Genovés (b. 1930), was significant and Báez acknowledges the tremendous impact Genovés had on her development (Báez, Feb 13). Genovés was associated with the avant-garde movements that sought to inject new energy into Valencian art. Like other artists, he reacted against *Art Informel* and introduced figurative images in his pictures by collage or by the incorporation of photographic and cinematic motifs. As I will discuss later, in Báez’s mature style, the figure rendered in layered glazes would become a central theme in her work.

In 1957, Báez graduated from the academy with a degree in painting and returned to her native land. She studied graphic art (linoleum blocks, woodcuts, plexiglas, silkscreen, and color graphs) at the Taller Artes Gráficas of the Instituto Cultural Puertorriqueño (Graphic Arts Workshop of the Institute of Puerto Rican Culture) under the renowned graphic artist, Lorenzo Homar. At the workshop, Báez was exposed to political debates of the time that revolved around the political status of the island. Under Lorenzo Homar’s guidance, Báez learned the importance of affirming Puerto Rican values, of vigilance against cultural assimilation, and that “serious artistic creation was a patriotic act” (Zavala, “Mirror” 98). These principles have guided Báez’s artistic career.

Homar became a colleague and a friend. Perhaps it is Homar’s technical mastery that is most evident in Báez’s work. Like her teacher, she mastered each of the mediums. Her ability was recognized from the beginning. In 1957, her painting titled, *Iglesia (Church)* was chosen for the exhibition, “Christmas Festival,” at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño. This exhibit was but one of the many national and international exhibitions in which Myrna would participate.

Throughout the sixties, Báez exhibited her work in and out of Puerto Rico and Spain. Báez traveled and taught in Puerto Rico's public schools and held art classes in her studio to make a living. She taught because it would have been impossible to survive without the income from teaching in the schools. Báez worked as a teacher until she was recognized enough to begin selling and showing her work consistently. In 1990, she left teaching and devoted all her time to painting. She has said that in order to be a true artist, one must devote all of one's time to working on art (Báez, Feb 18).

Traveling was integral to the formation of her art. For example, in 1965 she visited Venice, and the pigeons in the Piazza San Marco inspired her serigraphs, *Paloma* and *Palomas rojas* (*Pigeon* and *Red Pigeons*) (Zavala, "Documented" 191). In 1962, Báez held her first solo exhibition at the Instituto Cultural Puertorriqueño titled *Drawings, Prints, and Paintings by Myrna Báez* (Figure 2). In the catalog accompanying the exhibit, Dr. José R. Oliver praised her work:

Figure 2

It is in this way that we see the work of Báez: A good colorist, she does not seek grand chromatic effects in color, but rather the lyrical or dramatic emotion of the moment; courageous, she seeks out and confronts problems, disdaining the formulaic and the already-solved; sensitive and emotional, she seeks the essential soul that gives life to all her forms (Zavala, "Documented" 189)

During the sixties and seventies, while abstract art was dominant in other parts of the world, Puerto Rican art was more figurative and realistic. Eleanor Blau, writing for *The New York Times* observed that Puerto Rican art tended to be figurative and realistic because it had small exhibition venues in the mainland and few American artists showed their work in Puerto Rico. Blau went on to suggest that the absence of Puerto Rican art in U. S. galleries stemmed from the fact that Puerto Rico lacked a true identity—that is, not part of the United States or a Latin country—therefore “the island’s paradoxical situation does not allow them to fit into a category” (Blau C12).

In the sixties and seventies, it was very difficult for artists not to be seduced by the New York scene. All of the Latin American countries were having trouble getting recognition from Europe and the U.S. mainland. Interestingly, although Puerto Rico was part of the United States,

its artists were overlooked. Puerto Rico's situation was especially difficult. Other Latin American countries saw it as part of the U.S., but to Puerto Ricans, it was a Latin American country first, and then part of the mainland. To compound the issue, Puerto Rican artists lacked support from the government. Benitez writes that the pro-statehood stance of the ruling party, Partido Nuevo Progresista (New Progressive Party—PNP), has been clearly at odds with the nationalist stance. Therefore, works that address social problems and preserve Puerto Rican culture have little support from a government that is determined to advertise the image of Puerto Rico as the fifty-first U.S. state (Benitez, “Neurotic” 76).

In this political climate, Báez kept firm to the principles of her teacher and mentor, Homar, and never surrendered her artistic convictions. In 1960, Báez traveled to New York City for several months to assist a friend who had just given birth to her first child. While in New York, she attended the Art Students League. The informal structure of the League allowed Báez to develop her work and exchange ideas with the teachers and students. More importantly, she was able to study the permanent collection at the League, which was an invaluable learning tool for all students (Pisano). Báez would return to New York City in 1969 to continue her study of graphic arts at the Pratt Institute. In 1969, she was also one of two women to be included in the book, *Pintores contemporáneos puertorriqueños (Contemporary Puerto Rican Artists.) Ediciones Artísticas de Puerto Rico* (Zavala, “Documented” 192). Báez attended New York University where she took an art history class with Irving Sandler, author of *The Triumph of American Painting*, and became familiar with New York art scene, which would impact her work.

Perhaps one of the most important events in Báez's career occurred in 1971 when she met the renowned Argentine art critic, Marta Traba. At the time, Traba was exiled in Puerto Rico. In the sixties and seventies, when Traba's ideology turned to Marxist theory, she was the victim of political persecution. Influenced by the writings of Herbert Marcuse, Henri Lefebvre, and Umberto Eco, Traba's writings introduced the concept of Latin American art to the Americas (Bazzano-Nelson 87-8). In 1971, she published her landmark book, *Propuesta polémica sobre arte puertorriqueño*, in which she criticized the artists who were imitating the art fashions in the United States (Traba). Traba rallied to the defense of those who adapted new artistic approaches. She found in Puerto Rico an “art of resistance” to U.S. cultural imperialism—a theory that Traba had formulated in her best-known book, *Dos décadas vulnerables en las artes plásticas latinoamericanas 1950-1970*.

For Traba, the only way Latin America could overcome its status as a cultural colony of the United States was to resist all artistic modes that weakened the signifying and ideological functions of art. Traba stated that the Latin American artist had a vocation but their art needed to have a political function. According to Traba, even the most innocent works help to define the peculiarities of a national culture and help in clarifying things (qtd. in Benitez, “Neurotic” 76). Traba “began to favor the work of Latin American artists whose ideological edge and ability to produce critical meanings required stronger links to their communities of origin” (Bazzano-

Nelson 88). Her ideas found favor with Myrna Báez who translated them in her paintings. Their friendship would last until Traba's death in 1983.

Traba and Báez were kindred spirits. In Báez, Traba found an artist who was not swayed by the glamour of New York styles but was trying to develop her own voice. For Traba, Myrna Báez was one of the Latin American creators that she fully appreciated. As a result, with Traba's help, Báez had many exhibitions in Latin America including the *Latin American Biennial of Graphic Arts* in Columbia. By 1970, the first *San Juan Biennial of Latin American and Caribbean Prints* was organized. Báez participated and has continued to exhibit in this biennial every two years. By the end of the seventies, Báez had exhibited in biennials throughout Europe and South America including: Italy (*IV Biennale Internazionale Della Grafica D'arte*, 1975), Venezuela (*I Biennial of Latin American Prints*, 1977), France (*Xe Biennale Internationale D'Art*, 1974), and England (*Sixth British International Prints Biennial*, 1979) (Zavala, "Documented" 196-8).

In 1990, after almost thirty-three years of balancing a teaching and painting career, Báez resigned from her teaching position at the Universidad del Sagrado Corazon (University of Sacred Heart) to become a full-time artist. She had compiled a body of work that included prints and paintings such as landscapes of the Puerto Rican countryside, its towns, still-lives, and room interiors. From her body of work, one thing becomes very clear—Myrna Báez is above all a colorist. Her style has remained true, and she continues to use subtle light changes and shade to suggest specific times of day and climatic conditions in her paintings—especially in her landscapes. Her goal is to express the specificity of the island's geographical and floral elements. Using acrylic paint, she is able to use washes, airbrushing, and glazes to achieve a transparent quality to her painting, which results in a unique style. Báez has immersed herself in her culture and examined every detail of her island, and she is able to translate that experience to her canvas (Figure 3).

Figure 3

From covering up an image with another image but still allowing the viewer to see through it, Báez portrays feelings of uneasiness about how Puerto Ricans feel about their country. Through shifting of planes, Báez' images reflect how her culture is constantly being changed and disrupted and hence a person's identity is equally uncertain:

I do not want to do landscapes for tourists nor make pictures of the sentimental, nostalgic or folkloric things that people in this country suffer from due to a lack of identity. I am using landscape because I'm interested in the form, because I'm interested in color, because I'm interested in the place ... I'm interested in expressing: light—that which surrounds us, the shapes that have formed me, that have made me and that move me. (qtd. in Sullivan 28)

While her landscapes do give a sense of the panoramic beauty of Puerto Rico and affirmation of her national identity, it is her nudes that are the most intriguing. Báez has painted many nudes, especially the female figure. Many subjects in her paintings are family and friends. As is the custom in Latin American countries, Báez's immediate family, like her extended family and friends, continue to be central to her life, and this "family" continues to grow and become subjects in her paintings.

Although Báez has painted several male nudes, she favors the female nude. Báez knows the female body from a woman's experience—she paints what she knows (Báez, Feb 18). In 1960, Báez produced her first two drawings of female nudes while she was in New York. The nudes were exhibited in her first individual exhibition at the Instituto de Cultura

Figure 4

Puertorriqueña in 1962 (Zavala, "Mirrors" 129). But it was in 1964 that she painted the first of many nudes, *Desnudo del divan* (*Nude on Sofa*). Its whereabouts are unknown (Figure 4). Inspired by the classical nude, this painting was followed by three more nudes in 1967, also inspired by the classical tradition. Her female figures echo the nudes that fill the annals of the history of art. Some of her nudes are seated; some are reclined. In painting the female nude, Báez accomplished several things. With the nude, Báez is invoking its long and complex history in

Western art. Báez also pays tribute to that history by pointing to some of her inspirations—Titian in *Danae, Homage to Titian*, (1978), Manet in *El patio de mi casa (The Patio in my House)*, (1980), and Velasquez in *La Venus Roja (The Red Venus)* (1979) (Figure 5). Báez never relinquished her fascination with the human figure in favor of abstraction. This approach to painting is rooted in early influences that date back to her days at the academy in Spain and also to her friendship with the Spanish painter Genovés. Nevertheless, her nudes of the sixties, seventies and eighties correspond to the reemergence of the nude figure when there was a return to figuration. The representation of the human figure rejected the material and cerebral concerns of minimalism and conceptualism. The aim was to concentrate instead on the psychological, personal, and emotive power of the human body (McDonald 19). Similar currents in paintings were evident in the eighties in Latin America. Mediums and styles were interconnected, and there was a tendency towards figuration, neo-surrealism, and neo-expressionism (Barnitz 298).

Figure 5

For feminist artists, it was a way of challenging the patriarchal ideal in art and also a commercial norm of feminine beauty. In the sixties and seventies, various artists attempted to replace the classical ideal of the female body with a body that pointed to maternal bodies of ancient mother goddesses tied spiritually and essentially to Nature and the Earth (McDonald 2). Instead of reducing the female form to fetish cliché, research by feminist writers began to challenge and change that thinking. Out of that environment, artists such as Mary Beth Edelson, Carolee Schneemann, Ana Mendieta, in the seventies used their bodies to engage in complex, symbolic works that addressed issues of feminism, sexuality, and racism, among others (Ebony 13).

Like the women artists working in the seventies, Báez's nudes are not beautiful in the classical tradition, but they do possess great beauty of spirit and acknowledge their connection to nature. A woman who is a feminist, has always supported women's rights and has been one of the principal advocates of the Puerto Rican women artists' movement, Báez is interested in constructing images that reinforce her identity as a woman. Her nudes, modeled with round forms, echo the artist's body, become an allusion to her gender and are also a vehicle for self-

discovery (Figure 6 and Figure 7) (Zavala, “Mirrors” 104). Taking her inspiration from artists such as Helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis with their unprimed canvases and thin washes (which she admired), Báez began to approach painting in a new way that would develop into her mature style. Her knowledge of these painters and their techniques came from her stay in New York in 1969 and her visits to museums and galleries there. Báez was also a subscriber

to *ArtNews* and *Art in America*, and through these publications, Báez would have been familiar with the artistic trends of the period.

Báez conveys an intensely personal vision of space, light, and energy, owing a debt to the work of the major color field painters but equally due to her experimentations and interests in form, color and light. The figures are transparent and translucent. Composed of multiple glazes created by the different, superimposed fields of color—the result is a luminous composition. The viewers are shifted through planes of color-induced atmospheric space. Báez creates an unfolding journey into the unknown atmosphere controlled by her own artistic sensibilities. Her nudes infuse the spaces they inhabit with energy in the same way that a self-assured woman turns heads when she enters a room. The female nude becomes the tool that identifies her as a woman, as an artist, and as a

Figure 6

Figure 7

Puerto Rican. As the writer Fernández Zavala stated, “[W]hen an artist is by her nature as strong as her artistic and political beliefs, her statements and her subject matter tend to envelop her, and acquire a gender-oriented script” (Zavalla, “Mirrors” 103). Báez uses the female image to affirm her values as well as the values of Puerto Rican women and the community as a whole. In the words of her teacher, Homar, that art making is a “serious artistic creation [that] is ... [a] patriotic act” (Zavala and “Mirrors” 98).

Mryna Báez is a critical figure in the dissemination of knowledge about the visual arts in Puerto Rico and an avid supporter of its culture. She has been one of the key elements in the promotion of artistic education on the island. A committed feminist, Báez has also been responsible for promoting the careers of many of the most significant younger Puerto Rican artists.

Notes

¹In 1970, Marta Traba was in residence at the University of Puerto Rico. Her passionate stance, the debates that her position provoked, and, in particular, her publications left a profound imprint on the art community in Puerto Rico and were an important milestone for Puerto Rican modern art.

²Trylon or trilon is a box in the shape of an [equilateral-triangular](#) right [prism](#). At the 1930-40 World's Fair in New York, the trylon was a seven hundred foot spire.

³A carving, usually in wood, that depicts saints, angels or other religious figures.

⁴As a result, Puerto Rico attained self-government under its own constitution. See Benitez, "Neurotic Imperatives" 75.

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