

Gleanings

The Art of Ana María Hernando

to glean, to sift, to sort

to place, to ponder

to view, to wonder

The Gleaners (Des glaneuses) (1857) is arguably the best-known painting by the French artist Jean-François Millet (b. 1814 near Paris, d.1875 in Barbizon). In this realistic painting, three peasant women bend heavily at the waist toward a field from which they gather the leavings of the wheat harvest. Many of Millet's paintings of rural workers present, on heroically-scaled canvases, a class of individuals not previously used as a theme in high art. The subjects of *The Gleaners* painting are in a pose of activity; they neither look toward nor engage the viewer in the manner of a traditional portrait. The attentive focus of their gaze is toward the task at hand. As in other Millet paintings of rural workers, including *The Sower (Le semeur)* (1850); *The Man with the Hoe (L'homme à la houe)* (1860-62); and *The Winnowing (La vanneur)* (1847-48), there is careful attention paid to the action of the body, the twist of the torso, the long stretch of the arm, the weight of the burden carried.

The exhibition *Star Flowers*, presented by Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art at Frasier Meadows, showcases eight collaged works on paper and two large-scale paintings on canvas by Ana María Hernando. Born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Hernando has lived and worked in the United States for nearly 30 years and for most of that time has called Boulder home. A distinguishing characteristic of her powerful and poetic artistic practice, which includes painting, drawing, collage, poetry, installation, and performance, is a strong connection built over decades to communities of women, including villagers in the mountains of Peru and cloistered nuns in Argentina. Her connection to the tasks that comprise much of the daily lives of women is subtly and poetically present in the works on view and connects her artistic practice to that of many artists who have explored the actions and meaning of "work" in its many broad definitions.

The experience of looking at collaged paper works by Hernando is implicitly tied to our understanding that each of the hundreds of translucent spheres that make up the central circular form is as delicate as the petal it seems to mimic, as light as the breath of the artist as she joined them to the painted surface. *Jasmine Sea* contains many of the signature elements of Hernando's artistic vocabulary. Translucent vellum petals glow as if lit by the sun shining through the back of a full blossom. The composition is grounded by a concentric circle that suggests a meditative mandala form. Our gaze is activated by a staccato ground of cyclamen pink, tangerine orange, and cranberry red. In *Round Inside My Heart I* and *II*, the mandala form takes on the energy of a spinning pin-wheel, pulsing against the edge of the composition. We are both pulled in and spun out from the work of art like the quiet in the eye of a storm.

Hernando made the collaged paper works at a time of personal challenge about which she shared, “I was in need of quietness...The white on white, the softness of the papers, finding patterns through repetition was very healing and a place of safety.” Creating this place of safety was her goal in sharing these works with the residents of Frasier Meadows.

The process of making the collaged works, one petal at a time one might say, was a slow and meditative one for the artist. We, as viewers, are by implication invited to slow down and look closely. About this experience, the artist says, “On first impression they might seem not really there, and by moving around them and focusing in their rhythm is that you begin to see them.”

Two bodies of work are featured in this exhibition. Moving from the intimacy of the tenderly collaged works on paper, we are invited to view and be immersed in the experience of the mural-scale paintings *Fire on Water (Fuego en el agua)* and *The Night (La noche)*. In *Fire on Water* saturated, deep marine blue and green punctuated with dots of near-midnight black creates the ground against which vivid contour lines of brilliant rouge and fiery orange define the shape of lily pads and upright blossoms in a sort of cathartic dance. *The Night* similarly uses the pulsing energy of opposites on the color wheel—red and green, blue and orange—to animate the seven-foot wide expanse of unstretched canvas. The process of these larger works required a very different physical process on the part of the artist. Hernando shared, “The tools need to be bigger—I have used brooms and big sponges. Then there is time for more details with smaller tools, but overall it's very physical, expansive and feels full of surprises.”

Moving back and forth between the delicate collaged works, petals and strokes of ink placed one at a time, and then on to the animated vibrance of a painted ocean of blossoms raising their heads above a vivid sea, we might ask what is the connection. Of this, the artist says, “The connection is for me in the possibility of a contemplative attitude, found in nature and in patterns.” It should be no surprise that the title of the exhibition, “Star Flowers”, was chosen by the artist to, as she said, “give a nod to the earth and the sky.”

- Barbara O'Brien

Barbara O'Brien, an independent curator and critic based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, was Executive Director of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, Missouri from 2012-2017, after serving as chief curator and director of exhibitions since 2009. O'Brien is an elected member of AICA-USA, International Association of Art Critics. Her three decades of curatorial practice and criticism have focused on the art and artists of our time. While at the Kemper Museum, she curated a solo exhibition by Ana Maria Hernando, as well as facilitated adding three artworks by Hernando to the Permanent Collection.

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