



# Review

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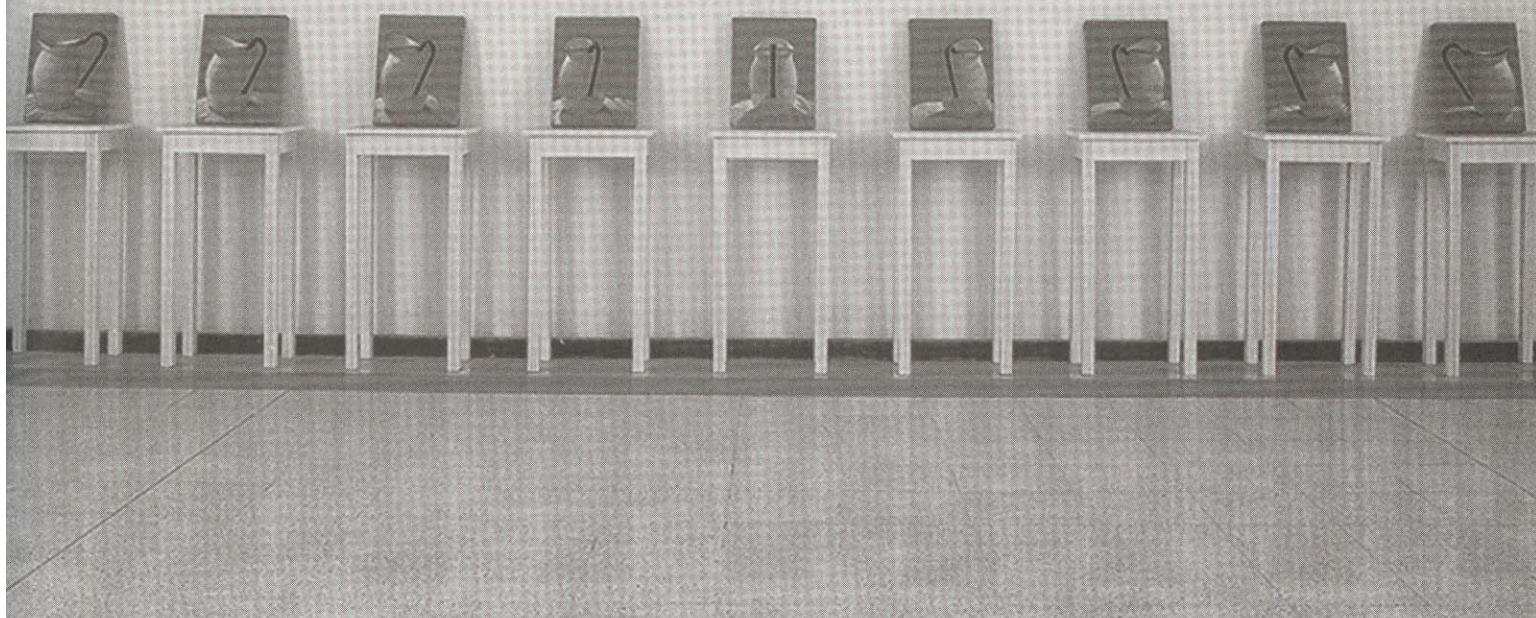
# 67

Poetry/prose by Claribel Alegría, Manlio Argueta, Arturo Arias, Gioconda Belli, Ernesto Cardenal, Otto Raúl González, Ana Istarú, Víctor Montejo, Roberto Quesada, Sergio Ramírez | Interview with Pablo Antonio Cuadra | Texts by Antonio Benítez-Rojo, Ana Castillo, Achy Obejas, Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, Nelly Rosario | Art by Francisco Alvarado-Juárez.



Interviewed by Cecilia Brunson

## Josefina Guilisasti



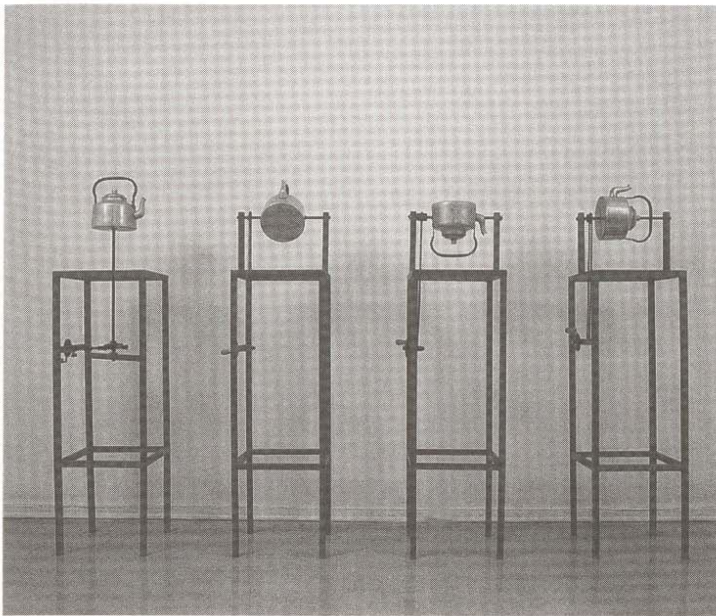


Josefina Guilisasti was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1963. From 1981 to 1985 she studied Fine Arts at the University of Chile. Since the late 1970s Chilean art practices have been dominated by a direct response to the country's repressive political system. Within this framework, the University of Chile, historically bound to a tradition of political awareness and resistance, encouraged painting as a form of protest. Most art students who graduate from the University of Chile are painters, and most of them are politically involved. For many of these artists, the kind of abstract formalist painting encouraged by the mainstream in the United States since the 1950s seems slightly incomprehensible, distant, or absurd. In its place, the artists favor a figuration based on direct observation and an awareness of a tradition that goes back to Cézanne and Cubism.

Guilisasti's work engages in a dialogue with representation in painting. Her model is the still life, frequently perceived as a minor pictorial genre, and, historically, often excluded from the high ranks of artistic subjects. By limiting herself to painting and representation, Guilisasti's work raises questions not just about "art" and "painting" but about many other issues relevant to culture in contemporary Chile.

The following text is based on an interview with Josefina Guilisasti carried out in March 2002 by e-mail.

- CB Your work is informed by the simple yet complex function of looking and observing. In other words, not only do you look at an object and represent it, but you are also involved in an on-going analysis of the act of observation itself. How do you try to represent this process of observation?
- JG My work begins by recognizing the impossibility of capturing the totality of the object. However, one can say that in my work the totality of the object is captured. For instance in *Naturaleza muerta* (Still Life) [p. 54], a photographic record of the decomposition of a red pepper, all angles are covered. In *El jarro sobre la mesa* (Jug on the Table) [p.51], an enamel tin jug is painted in 12 panels according to a 360-degree rotation of the object. It appears that the model is captured uniformly at every angle. The viewer follows a pre-set visual system imposed by me.
- CB Even though in your systematic representation of the model one might think that the object is reconstituted, in fact, there is a certain lingering emptiness. It is equivalent to making an inventory of all the objects belonging to someone, but that person is still not there. Your work has a certain character of visual deception. How did you arrive at this systematic method?
- JG Initially what attracted me to the single model was the possibility of working with series—of objects or groups of objects. Eventually this led to an interest in the effects of the passage of time upon the objects and how time affected the making of the piece itself. Now my work is about how one's vision runs over an object, the totality of the model, in time and space. This problem of how to confront a three-dimensional surface in a two-dimensional surface had been worked out by Cubism. I have engaged in that discussion by exploring the issue in terms of space and time.
- CB My impression is that you also search for a certain immobility of things, a sense of permanence, and a suspension of time. By accumulating different perspectives of the same object, you imply a passage of time that is strangely absent in the object itself. This is not unlike what happens in Cézanne's paintings of



*Gris máquina* (Iron Gray), 2001  
Four aluminum kettles  
Courtesy of the artist

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*El jarro sobre la mesa* (Jug on the Table), 1998  
Nine paintings, 30 x 40 cm [11 13/16 x 15 3/4 inches]  
Nine tables, 45 x 30 x 85 cm [17 11/16 x 11 13/16  
x 33 1/2 inches]  
Courtesy of the artist

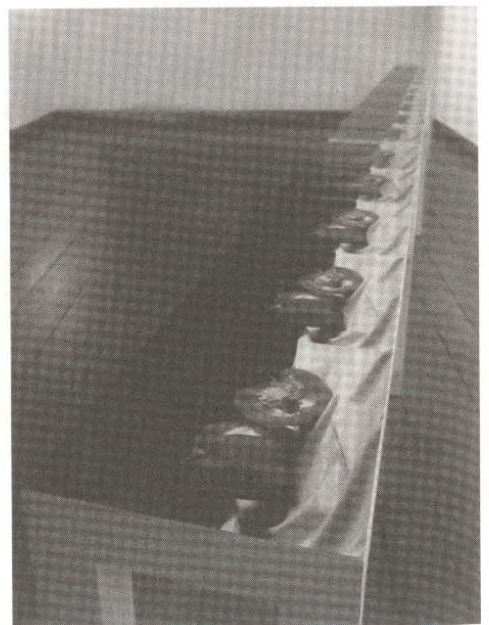
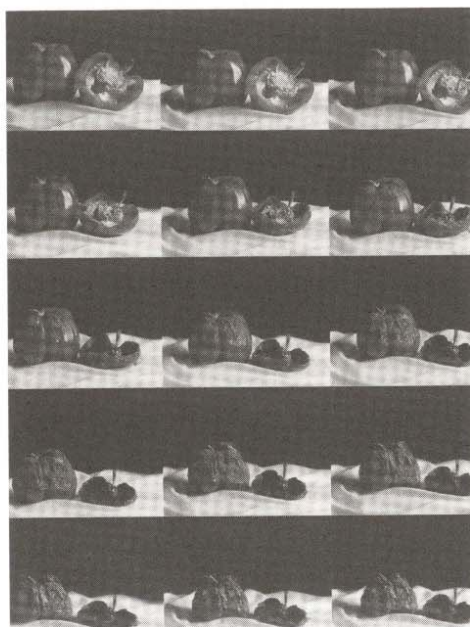
Mount Saint Victoire, where he creates a similar mood of suspension.

- JG *Gris máquina* (Iron Gray) [above] is an installation of four iron-gray, painted-metal structures supporting four aluminum kettles, each in a different position. A rotation lever moves the kettles, conveying all possible visual positions of the model. The work recalls the Cubist concept of space-time by trying to embrace all views of the model simultaneously. The use of limited tonalities also recalls Cubism. However, instead of the artist creating the synthesis in paintings, as the Cubists did, in *Iron Gray*, the synthesis is constructed by the spectator.
- CB Do the objects you select (aluminum kettle, enamel jug, old wooden chairs) have any specific connotations?
- JG The objects I choose as models of representation are elements that used to belong to our everyday life and today are out of circulation. One could say these are stereotypes that belong to the same aesthetic.
- CB If the object is out of circulation, does it have a specific “message”? Does the object evoke a memory or an experience?
- JG I have no desire in my work to evoke memory or an experience. For instance in *Dos camas, un velador, una silla y un crucifijo* (Two Beds, a Night Table, a Chair, and a Crucifix) [p. 55], the models—wooden furniture—were fixtures of early 20th century bathrooms, kitchens, and hospitals. The sanitary provisions are reflected in the furniture's whiteness and simple, impersonal lines. I have photographed each object against a white backdrop in a studio, reducing each to anonymity. All personal anecdote is erased in favor of an aseptic white anonymity. The object's individuality is denied.
- CB Can you claim that your intention is to separate or distance the object from its particular associations, from its origins?
- JG What I am interested in thinking about is where that object will finally be placed—in the installation itself. Therefore, in choosing the model, I always consider it in terms of where it will be installed, incorporating it or adapting it into the exhibition space. Thus, the model always works in accord with the installation of the piece.



- CB When you begin a work, what is your starting point? What leads up to the model? Where does the initial idea come from: the object, the material, or the pictorial exercise?
- JG Before I start a piece, I look for a model that relates to the fundamental issues raised by the genre of still life: the relationship between representation and the model and the relationship between the model and the spectator. Once I have found the appropriate model—one that can bring out the delicate relationship between object and representation, function and simulation—I subject it to the demands of the place where it will be exhibited. All this happens before I start a work. Everything must fall into place and make sense. This prior plan is especially important for me because I carry out the piece; I make it happen in real time. I am involved with the piece on a daily basis until it takes shape.
- CB With such a methodical system of representation, are you more interested in a formal result, or in a poetic dimension?
- JG For me the model gathers a poetic dimension. The model becomes completely separate from its material reality. Its volume, texture, and materiality become palpable through a series of exercises that try to apprehend the model. In these representations I am not trying to give the spectator the visible object made real but rather its pure visuality. Still life is a genre that historically relied on visual deception. It is here where my work is positioned in a dialogue with painting alone.
- CB And when you see the model set up in the gallery do you sometimes feel that you want to go on making changes? Do you feel the need to modify? Reorganize?
- JG The work is over when it is installed. It is during installation that the pieces of the puzzle come together. However, I believe it is crucial to maintain flexibility in the piece, and remain open to change when it is being mounted.

*Naturaleza muerta*  
(Still Life), 1998  
Fifteen photographs,  
30 x 40 cm  
[11 13/16 x 15 3/4 inches]  
Courtesy of the artist





CB When do you know a work is finished?

JG The work is finished when the plan and its execution scheme come to an end. The end of the work is bound to the limitations of time within the initial plan. For example in *El gabinete de un aficionado* (The Amateur's Cabinet) the exercise I set out for myself demanded that for four months I would take snapshots of other artists installing their works. In those four months, I photographed the mounting of 19 exhibitions. I took a total of 350 snapshots. The limits of the work are set by the four months, the 19 exhibitions, the number of photographs taken, the day of the opening of my exhibition, and the 40 photographs I selected to display; how the work was displayed also had a logic. The arrangement of the pictures on the wall is based on an etching by Frans von Stampart and Anton von Prenner (Vienna, 1735); they did it for the art catalogue of a gallery back then. I recorded the works of others just the way the pictures of the amateurs' cabinets in the etching reproduce the work of other artists. This invites the viewer to become part of an exhibition space that is different from that of the gallery he/she is visiting.

CB What is the role of the spectator in your work?

JG At the end of the day, the spectator is the most important element of the piece. The work is activated in the mental response, in the engagement with what is represented. This participation is based on the fact that the spectator is able to mentally transcribe, understand, the fictive space, by observing the work. Ideally, this thought process should take the viewer to think about where the work was originally created: the artist's studio. I try to guide the spectator's vision until it coincides with my own.

CB We have seen in your choice of images that you have a preference for objects that are out of circulation, that are distant from a contemporary aesthetic sensibility. Why do you work with these images?

JG At the end, when the pieces of the puzzle are laid out, what one sees is that I have registered a passing impression of objects and events that are easily overlooked. I work with images that are no longer with us, so when I bring them back into circulation, I want people to hold their gaze and mentally bring the puzzle together.

*Cecilia Brunson is Exhibition Coordinator at the Americas Society. She curated the exhibition False Start: Contemporary Artists and Sports (2001), and co-curated Never Exhibited: Artists from the Marieluise Hessel Collection (2000) and The Arch of Desire: Women in the Hessel Collection (2002); the latter celebrated the tenth anniversary of the Center for Curatorial Studies. She is researching a book on Chilean art of the 1990s.*