

A Woman's Body is Her Country

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From Cuba, the artist Rocio Garcia brings neither palm trees nor exotic dancers from the Tropicana Club, neither socialist realism nor magical realism, but rather her own unique vision of Cuban geishas. In this first exhibit of her paintings in the United States, Rocio (as she signs her work) offers a creative and necessary visual chronicle of the inner desires and disillusionments of women in Cuba at the end of the century. The paintings in this exhibit are dazzling, dramatic, disturbingly beautiful. Refusing to create an image of Cuban women that might imprison them inside a sexist or racist stereotype, Rocio turns to the Japanese symbol of the geisha — the masked woman — as a mirror through which to reflect on the meaning of sexuality in today's Havana, where pleasure and danger, wrenching material need and intense spiritual longing coexist in an uneasy balance.

Before the 1959 revolution, Havana was a haven for tourism, gambling, and prostitution. Fidel Castro came to power promising to change Cuba's image before the world. The "new man" would be worthy of Che Guevara's revolutionary idealism, while women would be firm pillars of the new society, never again forced to work as maids or whores. By the 1990s the revolutionary project had unraveled. The Soviet Union collapsed and a severe economic and moral crisis set in. With the end of Soviet subsidies that kept the economy afloat and the continuing U.S. trade embargo, Cuba had no choice but to enter the global capitalist economy at breakneck speed. Tourism, of the beach and nightclub sort, returned, and became the Cuban government's main source of hard currency. Add to that the irony that the U.S. dollar, or *el fula*, in popular Cuban speech, is now the only money in Cuba worth anything, while Cuban salaries are paid only in *pesos*. Prostitution is back with such vengeance that Havana is being called the Bangkok of the Caribbean. Foreign men, from Spain, Italy, Germany, Canada, Mexico, and even the U.S., go to Cuba again as they did before the revolution, seeking to play out their wildest pornographic fantasies with beautiful Cuban women who may be starving for dollars but can still boast that they are among the most well-educated prostitutes in the world.

The title work of Rocio's exhibit, *Little Pieces of Me For Sale*, comments on the way rampant prostitution on the island has become a sad metaphor for the more rampant merchandising of Cuba, which includes the sale of images of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara as tourist souvenirs. The island of Cuba, once proud like a revolutionary warrior, has become a woman who cuts pieces of herself to sell, like a geisha gone berserk. Indeed, the Cuban word for prostitute, *jinetera*, has engendered a verb, *jinetejar* (literally, "jockeying"), a term used to refer to any effort to hustle for dollars by providing personal services to tourists and foreigners. And these days all Cubans have to *inventar el d—lar*, as people say, in other words, invent ways of gaining access to the only currency with which to buy essentials like soap, cooking oil, and detergent that no longer are widely available through the state rationing system. Artists, musicians, scholars, and other professionals in Cuba try to stand above the fray, but they know that relations with visiting foreigners can land them grants and invitations to travel outside

the country and bring home dollars. The preferred destination is La Yuma, the popular Cuban term for the United States, the country made so taboo by revolutionary ideology that it has become seductive. In *Little Pieces of Me for Sale*, Rocio alludes to her own predicament as an artist who must frequently sell her work to visiting foreigners for much less than it is worth on the capitalist art market. With dry wit, she gives expression to the pain she feels as she is bled dry by her own need to "invent dollars" in order to survive and help support her family.

Rocio lives with her parents, sister, and nephew in a single apartment. She paints in the dining room of a friend's stately old house in the Vedado section of Havana. Her friend lends her the space out of respect for the fact that his brother, a painter who now lives in Mexico, was once a student of Rocio's. In order to earn much-needed dollars, her friend rents out two rooms of the house to foreigners, almost always men who bring with them a procession of ever-younger *jineteras*. It is no accident that Rocio's geishas were conceived just a wall away from the spaces where desire and need, pleasure and pain, beauty and shame converged. And afterwards, when the paintings were finished and hung in the rented rooms, young Cuban women made love in spaces decorated with Rocio's geishas, who silently but forcefully seek to tell the story of their passions and sadnesses. In Japan the geisha — literally, "a woman of artistic talent" — was trained to provide a range of services to men, often including sex. Rocio, who has never been to Japan, is attracted to the idea of the geisha as a prostitute with a high level of preparation and knowledge, a prostitute who is intelligent but often has to tolerate imbeciles. Although geishas may be trained to give themselves to men, Rocio doesn't envision them as inferior. Geishas wear masks of white paint; they don't reveal their inner selves. Using the geisha as a metaphor, Rocio seeks to endow the Cuban *jinetera* with spiritual depth and even subversive power. Rocio's commitment to understand rather than condemn has inspired her to render her Cuban geishas with grace and the fine lines and impeccable aesthetic economy of the Japanese artistic tradition. The women are nude, faces and bodies masked under white paint, hair shorn, eyes always withholding something essential. There is a dramatic visual energy to Rocio's geishas. The surface of the geisha is expressionless, devoid of affect, enigmatic, while inside there is a rich and intense psychological life, one with the violence and power of a volcano. Revealing and concealing their identity at the same time, they remain deeply ambiguous, expressing a strong warning about how much can dare be said under conditions of censorship and silencing. Though these geishas come from an island, Cuba, they appear deterritorialized, as if to confirm Virginia Woolf's assertion that women are the ultimate exiles, for they have no country. A woman's body is her country.

Some of the Cuban women who engage in sex work, Rocio has learned, are actually gay women who submit to male desire for their bodies in order to earn dollars while waiting impatiently for the moment when they can again rest in the arms of their female lovers. (Here, too, there is a metaphoric link to the traditional Japanese geisha, who lives in a community of females who are homoerotically bonded). Rocio plays with the sound of the word "gei-sha" to suggest that the prostitute might well be "gay," a woman who finds greater pleasure in an amorous union with another of her own sex. Not that lesbian relations and women's intimate friendships are romanticized in her work. On the contrary, they are fraught with painful uncertainty. In *The Geisha and the Angel*, two women, rather than Adam and Eve, sit around the proverbial bowl of apples, and the knife, as if it were a snake between them, suggests the possibility of a terrible

betrayal about to happen. The horror of *She Who Smokes Opium* is that this geisha doesn't know that her pleasure is surveillance by other malevolent geishas who appear ready to plot against her. In *Full Moon*, Rocio brings on stage the Wolf who so terrified Little Red Riding Hood and is a frequent character in her work; now, he haunts two women, one of whom has chosen to be conquered and another who is trying to save her from his violent desire, while in the process turning into a wolf herself. Nor does Rocio exclude the possibility that the "gay-sha" might be a male transvestite masquerading as a woman, as in the kabuki-inspired *Strip-Tease*. (Indeed, in eighteenth-century Japan, the first geishas were male). And she is likewise able to imagine the gay voyeur in *The Dream* as giraffe-necked and lascivious, while, in *The Move*, she reflects upon male sexual vulnerability and offers her compassion as well to Cuban gay men who earn their living as sex workers.

With considerable skill and originality, Rocio fuses the inherited male artistic forms of the West with Asian artistic and literary traditions, avoiding the perils of both orientalism and occidentalism. Not only does Rocio eliminate this binary opposition, she cleverly self-orientalizes before the colonizer can even get his act together. The result is a spectacular and unforgettable form of expressionist art that is totally unique to Rocio and that can accommodate wry humor as well as the high drama of terrible destinies. Like other women artists of our time, she offers a critique of the male gaze while appropriating it for her devastatingly feminist purposes. Her work, while embedded in Cuban realities, offers a powerful statement on the ways women may be trapped by their own fears and ideals they cannot live up to. With unsparing honesty, she reveals the anguish that each woman must endure in her quest for sexual joy and freedom. One of the aesthetic challenges Rocio set for herself was to paint a "maja" or "Olympia," the quintessential female nude of the Western male gaze, painted by Velázquez, Rembrandt, Titian, Goya, and Manet, among others. These female figures typically cover their erotic zones with a shy hand. The *Maja Geisha* combines Western and Eastern visual traditions to depict a woman who perhaps is masturbating, but who definitely is flirting with the sword of power. How will she use this sword? The response comes in a counterpointing work, *Geisha Samurai*, where the sword is used not to win power, after all, but for the purposes of self-censorship and self-destruction. We see how, behind her beautiful face, the *Maja Geisha* conceals strong and unpredictable passions. In Japan harakiri was limited to samurai males, though there are tales of samurai wives who killed themselves after a husband's death or to regain sullied honor. But Rocio endows her geishas with the privilege of performing a harakiri. Imaginatively fusing geisha and samurai conventions in her *Geisha Samurai*, she creates a compelling image that simultaneously expresses feminist rage and feminine powerlessness. Violence, implicit and explicit, haunts the work. Swords and knives are never lacking; frequently there is blood. Rocio's geishas know they are seductive, know they express a dangerous sexual vitality, and they struggle not to be devoured by the male gaze, and when they lose that battle, there is blood. The ancient blood that flows from a woman's body.

References to Picasso and Matisse, whose work she studied during her seven years as an art student in Leningrad, abound and are given a subtle feminist twist. Rocio's *Geishas of Fifth Avenue*, an appropriation of Picasso's *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, refers to the posh avenue in Havana where many prostitutes gather, waiting to be picked up. The deceptively pretty violet hues of the painting contrast starkly with

the collective female scene of desire and degradation. A group of geishas, in a variety of poses, swords at the ready, united, await their "victims/victimizers," and they appear not to be afraid. Rocio won't tell us what these geishas will do next: Will they rebel? Undo the structures of power? Or accommodate themselves? How about the geisha of *The Manicure*? Will she simply clip the nails of her torturer with her cutting shears or do something worse? Rocio's paintings are suffused with a sense of impending doom. Like clips from a suspense film, they depict a dramatic scene that has just occurred or is about to occur. It is the viewer who must fill in the missing scenes. We are made complicitous against our will, forced to imagine the catastrophe, the debauchery, the violence, the excruciating joy, the smell of blood, and most difficult of all, an afterlife without heroes.

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