

Amèlia Riera

MRS. DEATH



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[LA VIRREINA]
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This exhibition revolves mainly around her most rebellious work produced between the mid 1960s and the late 1970s, a period that coincided with the late Francoist years and Spain's transition towards democracy. It was the time when denunciation impregnated all facets of her work and she created two of her main series: the *Ex-voto* and the *Serie Sade* ones, which were key to her trajectory and earned her fame—or infamy—as a necrophile and sadist.

While her work ranges from paintings and installations, with drawing, graphic work and even the creation of her own character in between, this exhibition shines the spotlight on her “cruel objects”, in which her constant criticism becomes more evident. A battle that not only fights against the Francoist regime, but takes aim at everything else too. This requires new readings from today's perspective to show just how current the issues are: the subversion of archetypes used to represent women and their sexuality, a reflection on the lack of communication between heterosexual couples, the visibility of power relations, and bodily disciplining—the governed, subjugated and even expropriated body—and subjectivity. All tinged with an existentialism that was at the heart of Amèlia's work from the very outset, and which rises to the surface here by taking a fresh look at part of her last, unrealised exhibition project, a cry about the fleetingness of life, the rapid passing of time, and “funereal vertigo”.

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Pere Pedrals

The game starts in the streets, in the shop window, where the *Eroticona hambrienta* (Hungry Seductress, ca. 1978) is lewdly exhibited. Attracted by the flickering, the passer-by will approach to get a better look at the woman's body in the window and will be surprised to see two nipples offered on a tray. And he will be even more surprised by the rice paella glowing on her belly. Then, unsuspectingly, he will lean into the window and discover that her pubic hair is actually a plug. And, before getting to the bottom of the mystery, without realising, he will get trapped in the embrace of those legs, in the fatal grip of tightening pincers. Yet he will still have time to notice a puff of breath on his crown, the palpitation of some contractions and the sharp tips of some teeth...

The first paragraph might seem out of place in an exhibition leaflet, but in the case of Amèlia Riera (1928-2019) it was nothing unusual. Many of the approaches taken to her work have resorted to fiction in an attempt to address it, almost certainly due in part to the artist's refusal to explain anything.

In a leaflet from 1975, we can find the only text that Amèlia wrote "by way of confession": "I find explaining my own work, self-defining myself, stating the intentionality of my attitude or my gesture so complicated and so unattractive, a bit like filling in an official form in triplicate and attaching the corresponding policies and tax revenue stamps. [...] Yours truly has no words to talk about either the tremendous literary charge you'll discover in the work or the potential shock, trauma and conflict that its inspiration was drawn from."

A small collective composition by the *Ciclo de Arte de Hoy* group, which was included as an artistic manifesto in the first issue of the journals published in 1964, is more revealing. In this work, each of the six members of the group chose a quote by another artist. Amèlia chose one by Picasso: "Painting is an offensive and defensive instrument of war against the enemy." A declaration against fascism that she adopted as a motto and, by repeating it, gradually honed into the succinct: "Art is a fight against this and that."

While her work ranges from paintings and installations, with drawing, graphic work and even the creation of her own character in between, it is in her intervention in objects that this fight becomes

more evident. The objects are a front-on attack, nearly always against other objectives. This was how she (herself, finally) expressed it in her last interview: "To begin with, I didn't pay much attention to the objects. I started manipulating them for fun; they were amusements. The way I thought about them was different to that of paintings because I wasn't seeking the same thing; the intention was more direct, sharper. In the object, it's the intention that counts more, whereas in paintings, everything is more intellectual, more sensitive. Objects are a direct protest; I wanted to inflict hurt, to provoke."

There is also a highly rebellious period, spanning from the mid 1960s—after the abandonment of Informalism—to the late 1970s, in which denunciation impregnated all facets of her work. This period coincided with the late Francoist years and Spain's transition towards democracy, which meant that although her criticism was not solely levelled against Francoism, this has nevertheless been the only reading of it.

In this sense (that of fighting constantly and against everything, with its two-fold effort of resisting and attacking), this exhibition takes a fresh look at two of the main series she created over those years, which were key to her trajectory and earned her fame—or infamy—as a necrophile and sadist: the *Ex-voto* and the *Serie Sade* (Sade Series) ones where the funerary theme bursts forth, a proliferation of recessed tombs and coffins that would be followed by all sorts of electric chairs laid out in a way that was typical of rooms in middle-class homes. And, around them, "cruel objects", walk-through paintings, engravings, photographs and documents that enable new readings, as of now, that demonstrate their continued relevance. To that end, this leaflet contains a few clues that should help to see beyond what is there, without wishing to stifle the imagination because, as Amèlia once said, the eye of the onlooker will always see things in her works that are even crueller and more twisted.

The first room is dedicated to some of the main archetypes used to represent women and their sexuality: the treacherous woman, the man-eater, the witch. All these figures pose a threat to masculinity and Amèlia plays with them either by interpreting the roles or by presenting them in a perverted way. If archetypes regulate sexuality, she blows them out of the water; she is amused by the perverse image of women and the power granted to them by desire. She advocates eroticism, a *Mundus eroticus* where the game of seduction rules, the irresistible temptation that leads a man to his ruin, to death.

In the *Eroticonas* (Seductresses) series, which she began in 1968 and exhibited for the first time in 1975, Amèlia subverts the typical Spanish souvenir by turning the popular flamenco dolls into femmes fatales, *Mistresses of Pleasure*, dominatrices dispensing exquisite torture (we always talk about sadism, never about masochism). This can be seen as criticism of Franco's dictatorship and its opening-up policy, and of the tourism that gave it legitimacy and helped to prolong its survival. It also contains an attack on the stereotype, on the representation of the image of the Spanish woman, that of passive beauty. As noted by Noemi de Haro García, with Amèlia's *performance en petit comité*, where she named these women one after the other, their fate "is defined and constructed by their names": Angustias (Anguish), Martirio (Martyr), Dolores (Sorrow), Regla (Rule/Menstruation), Soledad (Solitude), Virtudes (Virtue), Perfecta (Perfect), Librada (Liberated/Parturient), Cesàrea (Caesarean), Socorro (Help), Pura (Pure), Perpetua (Perpetual) and Amparo (Protection).

If that were not enough, in 1977, Amèlia turned the screw a little further by presenting one of these *Eroticonas* in a chapel set aside for religious images. The title she gave to this saint/slut, "modest/horny" dichotomy was *Capella ardent* (Chapelle Ardente), and it was her contribution to the International Museum of Resistance Salvador Allende.

In the *Electrotérmicas* (Electrothermics) series, which she began in 1972, Amèlia intervenes in the torso of dummies with electrical material, passementerie, stickers, X-rays, nails, etc. They are the amputated female body, violated by Surrealists, which is fighting against reification, against the servitude of the woman-object, and becomes empowered through the magic of fetishes and ancient idols.

Cruzado óptico triple mágico (Magical Triple Optical Cross your Heart, 1972) is a work that places emphasis on these themes. Although the title is a play on the name of a Playtex bra that caused a sensation in the 1970s, the dummy is wearing a kind of cilice as a corset, possibly to evoke the Mortification of the Flesh in which garments like these are used. On her shoulders, two shanks of her stilettos open up like the elytra of an insect, a kind of praying mantis. There is a mirror in her navel where the onlooker can see himself reflected, where he can lose himself, more or less like the paella in *Eroticonas hambrienta*.



Frívola (Frisivolous), 2007



Electrotérmica n. 2 (Electrothermic no 2), ca. 1978



Dona radiografiada (X-rayed Woman), ca. 1998



Eroticona n. 4 (Dolores) and n. 2 (Pura), ca. 1968

Electrotérmica triple (Triple Electrothermic, ca. 1978), with its totemic air in the original configuration, and its illuminated bellies with X-rays of skulls, bones and teeth, alert us to the same thing: they are destructive, man-eating deities.

Lastly, we have Amèlia the witch, the most dreaded of all archetypes, the anti-woman: independent, single, child-free, sexually active, not afraid of getting old. The character is so well-defined, so internalised, that other people are the ones who actually recognise her as such. Paul Dahlquist, for example, intuitively manipulated one of Amèlia's portraits (1986) to achieve her transmutation into a cat, a symbol of femininity and also the metamorphosis particular to witches. Leopold Samsó photographed her with her eyes closed (1992), like the photo-booth Surrealists, linking Amèlia to the visionary artist, to the medium.

The second room addresses the lack of communication between men and women, and it does so by means of two installations. The first is *Erotic NO/ON* (2000), a walk-through painting accessible from the street, a portrait of a heterosexual couple that once again refers to the treacherous woman, in this case to Eve. Man and woman condemned to forever repeat the same scene of temptation (resisting and attacking) that preceded the original sin, woman's submission to man. The laid table, awaiting the different earthly pleasures, connects with the *La Grande Bouffe* by Marco Ferreri, from whom Amèlia borrows the title for one of her series of large triptychs.

The other installation is activated by recollections of guided tours that Amèlia used to give in her home, leading guests through the different rooms until reaching the bathroom, illuminated only by candlelight, where the *Dona silenciosa* (Silent Woman, ca. 1998) was sitting on the bidet waiting. A full-body dummy, a half-naked woman, with suspenders, a stocking, a cloth in her mouth, a number tattooed on her forehead, her arms tied, mutilated, a *belle captive* that has been interpreted as denunciation of abuse, subjugation and silencing. But Amèlia's visit would end when the bath curtain was drawn back, revealing a man's decapitated head surrounded by petals. If the image did not speak for itself, the photos of the first exhibition in which *Dona silenciosa* appeared show that she has two blades on her stumps, like scissors. Again, this evokes the idea of the praying mantis, of the diabolical woman, but also of the warrior or revolutionary. It is hard not to think about the wife drowning her husband in the tub in *Les Diaboliques* by Henri-Georges Clouzot, another film

that Amèlia liked, or about *The Death of Marat* by Jacques-Louis David (another of her obsessions), bleeding to death in the bath after being stabbed by Charlotte Corday. Amèlia used this head on several other occasions, playing at being Judith or Salome, as an offering on the dining table in her home or, in its current configuration, reinterpreting Tomyris, satiating him with eggs (presumably the decapitated man's own testicles) and chips, sublimating the idea of decapitation as castration.

The third—and possibly densest—room addresses disciplining and power relations. The central piece is a Sade chair in every way: the electric chair entitled *Li van portar enganyat* (He Was Duped into Being Taken There, 1971), a powerful denunciation of capital punishment since it is a manipulated gynaecological examination chair that in itself resembles a piece of torture apparatus. It is also evident that it contains criticism of what we now call obstetric violence. And, in the case of Amèlia, who had to have a hysterectomy in the early 1960s and a mastectomy in the early 1990s, it cries out about the medical violence of the expropriation of health and the body.

Dona radiografiada (X-rayed Woman, ca. 1998) is also about these themes and is reminiscent of the physical torture of mammography, of the body subjugated by the machine. But, the third eye looking up seems to evoke the internal gaze, that of the sorceress, the healer who guards the secret of a less aggressive remedy, a natural alternative to invasive medicine that mutilates.

Another example of bodily disciplining, albeit voluntary, is *Miss Universo* (Miss Universe, ca. 1973), the woman who submits to the violence of moulding her body according to the aesthetic canons in force.

The painting *Serie Sillón Sade* (Sade Armchair Series, 1971) also belongs to the *Serie Sade*, which is characterised by laying out, in fine or middle-class rooms, electrified furniture that is controlled by power or holders of such power: chairs, armchairs, sofas, beds and even a kneeler (perhaps the best example of how the body is governed and subjugated). Some of these pieces of furniture are interconnected and allow us to glimpse the power relation that joins us together like, for example, the family structure with the father or mother figure as its head. The power that disciplines, that subjugates, flows through these electric cables. With the same control and surveillance intention,

Amèlia transfers this idea to the design of the set of the play *Dones i Catalunya* (Women and Catalonia, 1982), a feminist theatre endeavour directed by Ricard Salvat.

Theatricality is an essential part of Amèlia's work. Her paintings are stagings that seek to incorporate the onlooker, the installations are her walk-through paintings, and objects enable the alterity of the puppet, of Edward Gordon Craig's *Über-Marionette*, or the effigies in Tadeusz Kantor's *The Theatre of Death*. The wax dolls in Kantor's *The Dead Class*, for example, dialogue directly with the girl or the boy of *La noche de los muertos vivientes* (Night of the Living Dead, ca. 1984); the school keeps watch over them and punishes them, and subjects them to homogenising discipline. But Amèlia also warns about those boys and girls capacity to harm, who end up reproducing the roles of their parents.

The *Regència* (Regency, 1972) series prepares for the death of the dictator Franco, for the vacant, empty throne awaiting the arrival of a new figure of authority. At the same time it underscores the absence of freedom of action and decision-making while under 18 years of age, with the government of one's own body and life remaining in the hands of another.

The last room centres on *memento mori* and *vanitas*, and it does so through the *Ex-votos* series (1965–1970) and the work that we can consider to be her culmination, *Bagul de quarta* (Casket of Small Order), a full-size coffin that was in fact exhibited at La Virreina in 1970. All that is left of this work, which has presumably been destroyed, is a photo in a *Tele/èXpres* article. It was also the central piece of an exhibition being prepared in 2019, which could not be seen because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As it was practically impossible to replicate the coffin, Amèlia decided to create another completely different one: *Vist i no vist* (Now You See It, Now You Don't, 2019), a kind of instrument of torture, an iron maiden, a living entity that, like *Eroticona hambrienta*, traps you and swallows if you get too close. It is accompanied by a video that is reminiscent of the dance that Amèlia and her friends used to do around the coffin in her studio, a macabre dance that exorcised the present and bad luck to the beat of an "alarmist" kind of music, *Rebelde radioactivo* (Radioactive Rebel) by Los Sinners, which Luis Buñuel renamed in *Simón del desierto* (Simon of the Desert) as *Carne radioactiva* (Radioactive Flesh), "the last dance, the ultimate dance".

If, in the late 1960s, the proliferation of recessed tombs and coffins denounced Franco's dictatorship, more than 50 years later, all of this funerary iconography is a set of symbols relating to the *memento mori*, and they cry out about the fleetingness of life, the rapid passing of time, and the "funereal vertigo" noted by Alexandre Cirici.

This vertigo is present to a very considerable extent in the drawings *Ex-voto 1001, 1002 and 1003* (1966), which are surprising because of their wrested strokes, an impetus that seems to materialise in the swirling gusts that run across them. They make us think about the automatic drawings that Amèlia would have done while in a trance-like state, at the mercy of that very same internal whirlwind; an existentialism that was at the heart of her work from the very outset, including the figurative works that she burnt before venturing into Informalism.

Finally, also hung up as *vanitas* are the portraits that Daniel Riera did of Amèlia a few days before she died; a few photos in which she did not want to hide her wrinkles or her extreme and almost skeletal thinness, where she can be seen playing with a fine black veil that she pierces with her gaze.

Next to it, the allusion in *Cama* (*Leg/Bed*, 1972)—another game (a play on words since "cama" in Catalan and Spanish respectively means "leg" and "bed" in English)—is to a foot in another world, indicating the exit.

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