

The Two Passions of Ellen Spijkstra

by José Manuel Noceda Fernández

In September 2010, visitors to the 1st International Triennial Art of the Caribbean at the Museum of Modern Art of Santo Domingo (MAM), Dominican Republic, had access to a reliable representation of the visual production of the Wider Caribbean.

It was an ideal time to consider the progress made in time by Ellen Spijkstra. For the scholars from that country and those who frequently visit the MAM (renowned as the regular meeting place of the Biennial of Painting from the Caribbean and Central America from 1992 until 2003), the display of her work *La teoría del Chaos* (The Theory of Chaos) on the wall as a ceramic mural among the works from Curaçao should not have been a surprise. Endorsed by a rich curriculum that places her among the most experienced in art in that territory, and her participation in national and regional exhibitions since her first participation in a relevant group exhibition of artists from the Dutch Caribbean at the Stedelijk Museum Schiedam in 1988 (*Bida y Koló*), she has had a frequent presence in the Dominican Republic itself, in *Gala di Arte*, at the World Trade Center of Curaçao (1991), the World Triennial Exhibition of Small Ceramics in Zagreb, Croatia, the 7th Havana Biennial (2000), the 1st International Biennial of Contemporary Mosaics in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and in the Tropisch Koninkrijk - a carefully curated show of artists from Aruba, Curaçao, St. Martin, Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius, in the Museum de Fundatie (2012) and in the 8th Gyeonggi International Biennial in South Korea, April-May, 2015, where she received an Honorable Mention.

Born in Holland, she has lived and dreamt since 1980 in the small island of Curaçao, one of the enclaves of the Leeward Islands, once a part of the Netherlands Antilles. The impact of that environment was sufficiently impressive to seduce her to try her luck in its territories. But unlike those traveling artists who once touched Caribbean ports or lands, Spijkstra is not in transit, but rather appropriated this place as her own. Drawn to that global whirl of travel, displacements, and new territories to explore, after completing her academic studies at the Minerva Academy of Fine Arts (Groningen, Holland) and the Rochester Institute of Technology (USA), in 1986, she definitely settled in that crossroads of peoples, cultures and civilizations called the Caribbean.

She commented to me that when she first visited the island, she was impressed by the whimsical shapes and the suggestive colors of corals. That confirms one of my impressions upon contemplating her works for the first time in the 1990s - Spijkstra is a continuator of the

landscape, considering it from the progressive extensions of the genre. And like many others, she became a fervent admirer of the natural spatial dimension of the Caribbean, succumbing to the charm of a semi-arid and slightly fertile landscape of rough texture and huge contrasts, where the earth faces the constant swaying and “unfair” competition of the immense surrounding sea.

Working there, she avoids clichés and pigeonholing, without pretending to be connected to the conceptual lines most deeply rooted in Caribbean visual scenes or with the dominant orientation in the region, aimed at the deconstruction of historical alibis and post-colonial approaches. Instead, following the dictates of a total freedom of expression, unhurried and smooth, she lays the solid foundations of a style that is much more interested in the language, the practice of the disciplines and the construction of forms – two equally valid ways of conceiving and understanding art.

Her visual production converges in a fruitful and happy intersection. It is as if she were struggling between two waters or between insoluble passions, such distinct methods take two apparently disconnected roads with proven uniqueness inside all her poetics. This did not crystallize overnight. Although she became known as a ceramist, she was to reveal her passion for photography sometime later. Those were the two media chosen to transfer to her art the wealth of impressions unleashed by that fortunate discovery.

There is no better place to become acquainted with her ceramic universe than her home, her studio. There, in her garden or its immediate surroundings, the evidence and vestiges of her creativity flourish everywhere. Like a demiurge, in an almost alchemic reaction, Spijkstra interacts with materials that are intrinsically related to the existence of man, with the forces that emerge from the combination of the four cardinal elements (earth, fire, water and air) in perpetuation of the cycles of creation, erosion, transformation and regeneration.

But it is not conventional ceramics. The traditional techniques and forms derived from them were not sufficient to explore the potential of ceramics or to transmit the spiritual and human values she desired to express. With a background of basic research, she drew from sources of the Caribbean, rich in archaeological sediments. When experimenting with the expansions of the ceramic field, she ensured a greater solvency of three-dimensional art. By mixing techniques like glazed pottery, raku, porcelain or ceramic materials with concrete, wood, metal and fossil fragments, she blew up the watertight compartments, the borders, the closed delimitations of conventional ceramics.

Far from the well-known pots and dishes, when embracing sculptural ceramics – following a practice endorsed by carving masters of the height of Jaime Suárez (Puerto Rico) or Alfredo Sosabravo (Cuba) – she directed her work toward a greater expressive load and symbolical strength. The progression is noticeable at first sight when contrasting simpler and less ambitious pieces like *Caribari* (1985), *Gemini* (1987), and *Totem* (1988), with works from later periods such as *De totem van de leguaan* (1998), *Introspection* (1999), *Connections* (1999), and *Tera Kòrá* (2003).

She constructs a repertoire of images based on the canons of representation, simulating parts or rhizomes of an imaginary and at the same time probable island geography. Her main pieces and sculptures are conceived to rest on the floor, to be mounted on walls – excellent examples are the piece exhibited at the Triennial of Santo Domingo; *Gateway to a Gateway*, 2011, commissioned for the new venue of Maduro & Curiels Bank in Curaçao and conceived as intervention inside a building; *101+*, 2015; and *Cas Abou*, 2013, also selected for the GIC Biennial, a competitive event with emphasis on the renewal of the traditional values of ceramics beyond the conventional dichotomy of that art form as “design” and “art”, a concept that suits very well Spijkstra’s practice –, to produce mimesis with the natural environments, such as *Meandrites* (2005), *Coralinus* (2006), and *Venustus* (2007), or combined with the archaeological cabinet or museum, as she suggests in *Floating Islands* (2003), *Presenting the Stone I and II* (2003), *Two of a Kind* (2004), or *A Cloudy Day* (2005).

Among all of them, the totems or the small columns stand out for their verticality in the style of Brancusi: *De Baracuda Vangst*, (1998), *Totem of the Secret Messages* (1999), the *Totem of Confusions* created during the 7th Havana Biennial (2000), or *Tera Kòrá* (2003). Governed by the norms of modeling, assembling and juxtaposition, they highlight for the ordering and organic will the search for balance based on simple forms in constant display; capturing the natural with an abstract perspective suggested by the geometry of the compositional molds, and the much more open surfaces of forms and textures unquestionably linked to the environment.

I would say that the photography shows a much more intimate inclination. It may seem a hobby or minor practice if weighed within her entire visual universe, predominantly of ceramics, but it turns out to be completely the opposite. It contributes other experiences. Spijkstra follows the leading role adopted by the contemporary photographic medium by incorporating the photographic image to her work. I don’t think she considers herself a photographer; on the contrary, more than mastering photography, she appropriates its

methodologies, its expressive possibilities, as another tool at the service of her search into diverse realities.

Interested in episodes and accidents beyond ceramics, she moves her attention from the natural-archaeological-landscapist environment to that created by man, and the notion of progress inherited from modernity. With a glance, as silent as daring, that misses nothing, the lens increasingly discovers neglected views and fragments. The images, sceneries and locations are carefully selected. The motivations are diverse. Sometimes she documents recognizable places of human experience, colonial Curaçao architecture or popular dwellings. They stop before segments of old walls, in front of walls, windows and doors whose well-worn and battered surfaces bear the strange beauty caused by abandonment and desolation, to be appreciated in *Scharloo* (1999), *Otrobanda* (1987), *Kòrá Kòrá* (1987), *Kas t ayora* (1988), and *IJzersteeg* (1990). In a few of them, as in *Mikachó* (1992), the human presence in those sites becomes visible.

In the revealing series about Afro-Caribbean hairstyles – *Resusitá* (*Haar no. 1-12*) (2003) – she offers a glimpse of a certain sociological breath in her discreet and subtle collection of perspective views of heads with traditional braid hairdos. Beyond the formal approach, she presents early her discourse about contemporary debate on ethnicity and culture of people of African descent and their bodily conceptions of beauty.

But, the strongest and best realized essay on the ships anchored in the port of Curaçao deserves special mention: *Curaçao Harbor Tour: Watercolors* (1997), *Curaçao Harbor Tour 3* (2000), *Curaçao Harbor Tour 5* (2001), *Curaçao Harbor Tour 11* (2002), and *Curaçao Harbor Tour 30* (2001). The port is essential for the economy of Curaçao, with its infrastructure of ship repair and duty-free trade zones, and with a marine accident facility and oil refinery located in the surrounding areas. The series has its continuity in *Caribbean Harbor Tour* with the snapshots from the ports of Sint Maarten, Saba, Sint Eustatius, Aruba and Bonaire during 2014.

The ambiguity resulting from all these views is a gesture of de-contextualization, since the glance does not stop on the surrounding landscape but on fragments of ships, bows, metallic structures with their rivets, often hardly identifiable. These images of minimalist charm vindicate the capacity of photography described by Roland Barthes in *The Lucid Camera* to mold an autonomous writing, as well as the certainty of José Luis Brea (in "The Optical Unconscious and the Second Shutter. Photography in the Computer Era") that "...the image is not of the world: the world is not represented in them, only an event is present.", because they involve an action that is not only representational but also idiomatic-discursive, oriented at questioning

the credibility of the medium. They are an efficient instrument to reveal the complex network between reality and its representation, and beyond their alleged reflection of the real world, contribute poetic, plastic, cognitive and temporary values to help understand the photographic medium in relation with the elements of photography and not with a context of an outsider.

At the same time, less subject to the specificities of photography, the title of the series and emphasis on watercolors, the use she makes of them enables us to take that production into consideration because of the formal and esthetic contributions that may derive from the veiled surfaces, from their colors, the rusty textures, the contrasts between the metal and the oily waters where the ships rest, as well as for maintaining a certain link with the artistic tradition as to the values of "uniqueness, artistry and authorship", and above all, challenging the purist notion existing in the medium of its possible overlapping with other disciplines such as drawing and painting.

Her work does not cease during the five-year period. As a result of the activity shared with Ciro Abath, Aruba, she conceives and produces *Transitie*, a 3-meter high sculpture in the Museum de Fundatie in The Netherlands, 2013. In 2014 she takes part in the exhibition *Art in the Elit-Tile*, in Santo Domingo, where she obtains the prize to the best work; while in March, 2015 she exhibits photographs and ceramics at the Open Atelier Route, Curaçao. She also collaborates with two centers of alternative pedagogy: the Ateliers '89, Aruba, 2012, and two projects with the Instituto Buena Vista of Curaçao, 2012 and 2014, first transmitting experiences to the students and later with patients from the Capriles Clinic.

Seen in perspective, the obsession with the deep roots of the temporary, for aesthetics registered in the memory of the materials is present in the periods of her already solid repertoire, the disciplines at stake, the diverse supports she uses or the trends that make up her iconography. The lucidness employed in constructing the artistic object focuses that seemingly naïve production toward the complete opposite, driving without artifice or false sophistication, and in it lie the key and one of its contributions to one of the dearest dilemmas of contemporariness, i.e., the nonsense, the unresolved contradictions in the human being's relation to his natural environment, of civilization with progress and modernity.

The ceramic sculptures and photographs are then like parts of a whole. Fruit of a long process of research on Antillean soil, of exhibition and synthesis, communicating vessels emerge between one and the other. Paraphrasing Man Ray ("I photograph what I do not wish to paint and paint what I cannot photograph."), I could summarize that Ellen Spijkstra photographs what she does not wish

to sculpt in ceramics and creates in ceramics what she cannot photograph. In the end, these two creative moments evidence her poetic reasons and reveal her as an explorer of constantly redeveloping secrets.