

Catalina Parra in Retrospect

A stitch in time

Village voice

February 11, 1992

Arlene Raven

The Good Queen is as always at home, sitting inside her winter window sewing, when the story of Snow White unfolds. The needle pierces her finger, the wound bleeds, and she knows she will give birth to the daughter who embodies her physical labor and social location. Snow White will be (according to Grimm) “as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame.” Catalina Parra grew up in Chile in a distinguished literary family and was trained exclusively in the domestic arts. In his catalogue essay, Ronald Christ recalls a Sunday afternoon at the house of Parra’s father eminent political poet Nicanor Parra (I have missed mention of Parra’s mother). The elder Parra had retired for a nap, while Catalina collected the many papers containing Nicanor’s poems and drawings left scattered on the lawn. When Christ offered to help her, Parra replied with a smile:” It’s O.K. I’ve been doing this since I was a little girl.”

Twice a wife and three times a mother, Parra once devoted herself to the everyday labors of the house. Especially skilled at sewing she made her own clothing. But for more than 20 years she has also fashioned artworks at home, using her household heritage (including Nicanor’s texts) to stitch up the bloodstained fragments of current events in print to generate political yet politic mixed-media works.

“Catalina Parra in retrospect” at Lehman College Art Gallery, the artist’s first survey in the U.S. is modest and consistent. Many of the small glued and stitched torn paper collages and enlarged grainy photographs of public record are quiet enough in composition and commonplace with imagery in the recall of most people to be overlooked by viewers ceaselessly bombarded with more attention-grabbing propagandistic messages.

But “lookiloos” will miss an oeuvre that captivates with a visual and verbal articulation that is both high-strung and repressed. Parra’s ordinary materials are employed in the service of communication over design. She compresses her experience on the page and then an observer’s with an aesthetic that is refined through consideration, and is never deliberately elegant.

The earlier collages, among Parra's first self-consciously political artworks, are in notebooks and date from 1973, the year a military coup put Pinochet in power in Chile. Those on the walls began in 1977 and were seen then in "*Imbunches*" Parra's debut exhibition in Santiago.

Diariamente (1977) is black and white and, like the daily newspaper pages of *El Mercurio* from which it is composed, can be read all over. Newsprint images in the shape of a loaf of bread are cut, scored and incised by two blurred faded figures in the upper reaches of Parra's page.

In the collective shape of a sharp-edged chevron, these two nearly invisible people (representing those disappearing *diariamente*) peer through a diagonal grid of rough rope that prevents the message of "daily bread" media intelligence from preserving its seemingly seamless narrative. Listing of local obituaries stitched on with small, sweeping strokes occupy the bottom sector, captioning the shattering and slicing of papers above.

Parra treads the precarious line between adaptation and transformation of imagery and content. Initially inspired by Berlin Dada when living in Germany between 1968 and 1972, Parra chose non-traditional materials specifically to challenge social traditions. The formal elements of her work are manipulated even less than the spare black, white and red compositions using found printed images by John Heartfield, Raoul Hausmann, or Hanna Hoch. Parra's sleight of hand gives up authorship by means of signature forms in favor of identity through process. Black, white and red are not only the colors of international rebellion but also of the physical person of Snow White.

Parra masks her political message by expressing her protest in the mute language of materials rather than through straightforward analogical representations and words. And she metaphorically muffles this formal discourse in homely media and the female art. In the spirit of Mme Defarge, who plots a revolution with coded stitches as she sits knitting, Parra's Chilean work needles while dodging the censorship of the Pinochet dictatorship. When Christ questioned the artist then as to whether it were possible to introduce "unofficial" art in Pinochet's Chile, Parra responded: "What's for them to censor or shut down? You can't object to gauze or thread."

Emily Dickinson, an accomplished seamstress, thought of the stitch as a healing bridge and sewing as a metaphor for mending fragmentation. In a poem as sprinkled with her famous dashes as Parra's images are populated with stitches,

Dickinson declared, "I'll do seams-a Queen endeavor." She actually bound her poems into sewn packets, fascicles that became a form of self-publication that brought her work to her audience.

With the financial assistance of a Guggenheim Fellowship, Parra moved to New York in 1980. Her work changed here, although not in a more overt direction under U.S. democracy." From her Upper West Side apartment, she addressed child abuse, AIDS, the environment, and American hostages, in what she calls "reconstructions." The contents of Parra's entire body of works are commentary on social issues peculiar to the contemporary human condition. But reconstruction is the method and philosophy that guides her sensibility as well as describes the character of her objects.

Reconstruction is local (because re-created as an installation) and national (in subject) in the "American Blues" series. Its parts form a unity comparable to the integration of seceded Southern states tacked back into the national fabric with connecting constitutional words in the post-Civil War era.

Parra presents 10 framed pieces, five butted together on each side of a corridor, that feature oncoming cars of our own era, grills front, and the advertising slogan "Exceptional Performance Doesn't Just Happen". Each element displaced and reconstituted here, becomes ironic in its new setting. The furled roof of the portable hallway is colored to approach a great enveloping American flag.

We're Not Afraid to Say It like *Diariamente* is divided into two zones. The sky is highly colored by lush of exotic foods shot close up for a commercial. The earth below the flat horizon line, in contrast, is stark white. Four emaciated monochrome figures, African mothers and children are separated from one another by a deep vertical gash in the sand/paper that has been hand-sutured with large black basting stitches. Famine is rendered through the deliberate visual poverty of the ground and its contrast with the intense Chroma of upper regions. The injury of hunger is bared by its ligature.

Reconstruction demands a reconstitution of society from its foundations, and a renovation of the human heart and mind. Appropriately, Parra often uses X-rays to include the internal development she wants to see. Parra's reconstructions give evidence of a revisionary process that is an act of survival forged both within and against the terms of her socialization. Everything is there- wounds, stitches, and scars.