

# Elba Bairon

## *Sin título*

By Martín Craciun

*Sin Título* (Untitled) by Elba Bairon (La Paz, 1947) is presented as a project conceived especially for room three at W-Galería; it is an architecture that unfolds inside the space, inviting us to wander through it. The artist has decided to construct an interior space inside an interior space, although this interior space is, at the same time an exterior space. I'll try to be more explicit: a wall contains a space in which a sculpture of a bird rests, but this space is simultaneously an exterior and an interior, given that the architecture indicates as much to us. The space spreads out and unfolds in a simple act, like when we turn an orange inside out and the pulp winds up outside and the peel winds up inside. This way, container, content and form all intertwine in an enjoyable exercise of experience.

Elba Bairon plans her art in space and, as she customarily does in her work, she once again brings our attention to questions that have to do with constructing imaginaries and possible narratives with regard to the canon. There is an aesthetic dimension to her work that connects her directly to contemporary discussions. Her sculptures are white and pursue an extreme of perfection; her surfaces have been polished, their edges softened. They are pure forms that reflect light and project an unsettling calm to us. This may be because the link with the past that her works make evident is formalized through a reading, or—even better—a historicist canon, constructed on the basis of premises that have been discussed and questioned at length by academics and specialists.

Classical sculpture is perceived as white, largely due to the loss of its original colors over time, with later cultural and ideological interpretations favoring a dominant monochromatic aesthetic. This idea that classical sculptures were white, and as such should be white, impacted art in various significant ways by creating aesthetic ideals and shaping aesthetic preferences in Western art over the course of centuries. This led to the *purity* of white marble being revered, and to a bias against sculpture that moved away from that canon. This perpetuated the myth and established a tradition of colorless sculpture in Western art that brought cultural and racial implications along with it, given that the idealization of white marble sculptures contributed to erroneous ideas about the diversity of the ancient world and to reinforcing

notions of *whiteness* and purity associated with classical civilizations, coopted to provide grounds for some supremacist racial ideologies.

The sculptures and characters that Elba Bairon creates are situated at the center of current debates. Their exacerbated purity overwhelms us and reminds us that ideals exist only in thought: "The cathedrals were white because they were new. The cities were new; they were constructed all at once, in an orderly way, regular, geometric, in accordance with plans".<sup>1</sup>

Bairon produces bas-reliefs as a way of strengthening her work in a modular fashion. She does so systematically, in a variety of forms, consistent with her characteristic formal tenets. Her bas-relief is carried out in negative, that is, the figures are cut out of the material and function visually by way of absence. Their shape and thickness vary, along with how they are mounted. The human figure is an absence in this exhibition; birds and amphoras dominate in the bas-reliefs. Made of straight lines, the impression is one of having resulted from a negative extrusion process.

Personally, I am fascinated by people who tell stories, particularly when the boundary between truth and fiction is blurred or fades away. Some of us have the tendency to create versions of reality that align with how we would like things to be, rather than how they really are. This self-deception often occurs unconsciously, when we justify, rationalize and selectively interpret events to make them fit into our desired narrative. Narration can become a powerful tool for comprehending the world and ourselves. Similarly, if we closely examine how people construct and tell their stories—as much for themselves as for others—we may be able to obtain deep knowledge on the human condition and the nature of the truth itself. All this is only if we really do agree with putting things in that place.

The installation occurs as we search for the meaning of a story that never does present itself clearly. The fact is that here, the artist has left an arrangement of elements of a story for which it will be difficult for us to work out an explanation. For this very reason, they function in their best way possible. It is not a case of illustrating a fable, or of inventing a new one here; what Bairon proposes to us is the power of mystery in its broadest sense.

Here is a tragedy—perhaps that of life itself—or with any luck, a tragedy; we do not know. The artist has decided not to advance any further;

she is not interested in representing a story, but in providing us with elements so that it can be born within us. It is just as simple, potent and ambitious as that: *Sin Título*. The thing is that her installation can also function as a film set, as a controlled fiction in which we are invited to participate. These questions have no set limits, and it's good that it be that way.

Mystery represents the inexplicable and the unknown. It presents us with a continual challenge as viewers, to keep working and exploring; it is a state of knowledge that we can actively utilize to enrich and contextualize our rational condition. It proposes to us a way of maintaining uncertainty and unpredictability in art, something that is vital to keep art connected with live experience. These issues tend to generate more interesting questions, instead of eliminating uncertainty and ambiguity. Far from being foreseeable or certain, *Sin Título* does not propose to be a collection of *dead icons*, but rather a vital exercise that invites those who visit it to submerge themselves in the world of a creator of stories, whose vision is at the same time singular and universal. Her art avoids moving away from lived experience; it needs to be a tool for exploring the unknown and the unpredictable, without necessarily reaching a conclusion or closure.

"Here we have a perfect reflection of this entire trial: everything is true and nothing is true!"»<sup>2</sup>

1 Le Corbusier (1936). *Cuando las catedrales eran blancas. Viaje al país de los tímidos* (1st reprinting, November 1999). Barcelona: Apóstrofe.

2 Camus, Albert (1942/1971), *El Extranjero*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial.

