



From the Inside Out

Two Views on
the Creation and
Experience of
Cristina Cordova's
Clay Sculptures

*Articles by Katey Schultz
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*Ilusion Noctambula. Ceramic, mixed
media. 80 x 52 x 15 cm.*

1. ARTICLE BY KATEY SCHULTZ

IN 15TH CENTURY EUROPE, IT WAS NOT UNCOMMON FOR towns to drive madmen outside their limits, expelling them to roam in vacant fields or set sail on aimless ships. In his investigation of the metaphysics of this banishment, Michel Foucault purports in *Madness and Civilisation* that this set the stage for the madman's paradoxical existence, which later became a subconscious symbol of "a great disquiet, suddenly dawning on the horizon of European culture at the end of the Middle Ages".¹

A madman cruising on a ship of fools is at once free and shackled. The vessels, set atop water, a symbol for purification, are relentlessly pushed and pulled in unknown directions, trapping the madmen in eternal passage. It has more recently been observed that by our nature, we cannot embark on a journey and return to our homeland as the same as when we started. By extension, we never again return to the 'same' homeland, as we once knew it. A madman trapped in passage does not have the luxury of landing and therefore, the luxury of measuring himself against any known quantities. He is forever in between, a "prisoner of his own departure".²

Cristina Cordova's clay sculptures capture the upheaval of similar journeys, as evidenced in *La huida*, which was shown in May 2005 at the Ann Nathan Gallery in Chicago. "My work is meant to address people that thrive in environments of emotional density. People who are used to walking through moments of intensity can relate to my work because I think the symbolism that I use is generated from these places," she says.

The emotional density of the madman's psychological endeavour rubs completely raw on his journey, which is why he can appear both vulnerable and completely mysterious to an outsider. The fact of his banished existence pushes our conception of him to the outer limits of our minds, but his presence is still felt in this geo-psychic parallel. Like the echoes of an unsettling dream upon waking, we cannot fully remember but we never fully forget. Foucault's analysis could serve us well: What beasts of our selves ride the Ship of Fools in our own minds? For what reasons were they banished and to what end can we serve them now?

"We physically witness the journey of these madmen," Cordova explains, "but not the journey they have on the inside." The inside, however, is precisely what she is speaking to through her work. "There's something gratifying about finding something outside yourself, that allows access to something inside. Something that maybe was undetermined or undefined or inaccessible before."

For Cordova, who relates to Foucault's text, the boats have a place in her history as well. "Even

though the boats are about a mental space and things than stimulate search, they are also a common image in island life. In the past 10 years there has been a huge diaspora of Dominicans to Puerto Rico. They come in the boats through a narrow deep passage called el pasaje la Mona. People have died along the way. Many who make it move to the cities and they build their lives there. When I was 12 a woman came to my house from one of those boats. It was such a brave journey."

Originally from Puerto Rico, Cordova moved to the US in 1999 to attend Alfred University, in order to continue her own journey. She emerged with a distinct haunting sculptural style that is the offspring of slab building techniques. The slab is pushed, pulled and added to in order to articulate features. Less than three years after completion of her MFA. from Alfred, Cordova's work sells out regularly to collectors at SOFA Chicago, SOFA New York, Ann Nathan Gallery and Pamil Fine Art.

Standing face to face with Cordova, who appears paradoxically vibrant and uplifted by her human and animal sculptures, one cannot help but wonder where the source for her work originates. "I think there's an embedded historical device in my work but I am not drawing from it consciously." Earlier sculptures, such as *El regalo* (2003) and *De amores y dolores* (2003), invoke the Crucifixion. Feet dangle and slump in the air, figures are pinned or entangled, and hands are pegged. While Cordova acknowledges the likeness, it is clearly other-directed. "To me the spiritual and the emotional are related so I am attracted to that type of positioning. It is designed to suggest something beyond physicality, a psycho-emotional space my audience can relate to."

Cordova has explicitly stated that her sculptures are not characters nor are they objects, because they do not exist as concepts in and of themselves. Without a viewer, they are without essence. The physical form of her work simply serves as a container for abstract concepts. These concepts, Cordova explains, do not come to life until the viewer engages with the sculpture, whereupon he or she could become entrenched in the emotional density of the piece. At this juncture, the creative process extends from the piece into the personal experience of the viewer, and the two momentarily haunt and fill each other.

Cordova's work is unfailing because this process, which brings her work to full fruition, parallels the process by which the forms come to her in the first place. "It is mental. I have a vague image that creates a jolt of excitement at the prospect of that image becoming part of this world, becoming something material," she explains. Additionally, these images are often accompanied by faint colours that Cordova harkens back to for glazing. At this stage, Cordova says, "It's almost like acting. I feel the



La huida. Ceramic, mixed media. 28 x 71 x 16.5 cm.

sculptures through myself. I stage a situation and then I fill it with myself."

La gran corrida, also featured at Ann Nathan, writhes with potential. It appears both airy and weighed down, frozen and moving. "If you're addressing emotion, you need to have a sense of what unifies it. I think emotion is just an energy. If you can bring some of that energy into a physical shape, then you are setting the stage for a recognition of that emotion," Cordova says.

Recognition, it turns out, is not at all what the madmen of old Europe were given. And the recognition of the dark lunatic caverns in our own minds is not explored in modern society, either. Perhaps this is why, centuries later, echoes of the madman's inner journey can resonate with us. Cordova's sculptures appear timeless, yet they hinge on profoundly deep places inside the modern viewer; it is as if one experiences them in a cloud of nutrimental dust from past lives. That which is not given its due, will make its own in time.

References:

1. Foucault, Michael. *Madness and Civilisation*. New York: Vintage Books, 1965
2. *Ibid.*



La gran corrida.