

## Alexandra Domínguez: A Journey to Mythical Spaces

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“Song” by William Carlos Williams

beauty is a shell  
from the sea  
where she rules triumphant  
till love has had its way with her

scallops and  
lion’s paws  
sculptured to the  
tune of retreating waves

undying accents  
repeated till  
the ear and the eye lie  
down together in the same bed

In the preface to their study of interartistic approaches to modern Spanish and Spanish American texts, *Painting on the Page: Interartistic Approaches to Modern Hispanic Texts* (SUNY Press, 1995), Rosemary Geisdorfer Feal and Carlos Feal state, “Criticism in the poststructural and postmodern veins has been working toward a fuller integration of literature and other fields, especially the visual arts. Disciplinary boundaries are being crossed—and crossed out—as quickly as the cultural maps are redrawn.

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Those fields of representation grouped under “literature” and “the visual arts” are currently being studied in conjunction with major theoretical and methodological issues, and we are particularly invested in finding appropriate critical strategies that combine psychoanalysis, feminism, semiotics, and philosophy as they may be applied to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Spanish and Spanish American literature in relation to painting and to larger questions of art history” (xiii).

The floodgates were thus opened for further study of the relationships between the verbal and plastic arts, and since then we have seen a surge in interdisciplinary studies of literary and visual media. One prominent example is Lois Parkinson Zamora’s article of 1999 in *Modern Language Notes*, “Interartistic Approaches to Contemporary Latin American Literature,” which outlines “four theoretical questions inherent in all interartistic response,” but then asks why, at the turn of the XXI century, “does interartistic analysis need to be specified rather than simply assumed?” (390-391). Professor Zamora goes on to reference the division of literature and the other arts into separate departments in the 1930’s. From this vantage point, scholars have attempted to bridge the divides created by this separation in order to provide what Baudelaire suggested the arts aspire to do, i.e., “if not to take one another’s place, at least reciprocally to lend one another new powers” (quoted in Zamora’s article, p. 389).

The visual art and poetry of Alexandra Domínguez (Concepción, Chile) present themselves as fully open to ekphrastic and *ut pictura poesis* studies, clearly lending each other new powers. Her poetry has been presented on pages facing her corresponding art—aquatints, oil paintings, etchings, wax and mineral colors on wood, and mixed media (Alexandra Domínguez, p. 48). When asked if, for her, there is a significant difference between poetry and visual art, she states, “There is no difference. The two are of a single poetic sensitivity—whether with words or with paint” (Interview with Dean-Thacker, Madrid, March 13, 2014). During interviews from June 30-July 3, 2014 with Girard in her Madrid home studio, she reveals telling sources for both her imagery and her construction process. Cherishing her Chilean heritage and frequently referencing it in her visual works, her repeated use of forms, compositional structures, and colorations speak directly to South American traditions. In this sense, her artworks differ somewhat from her poetry, although both rely on personal and cultural history. The aquatint “Cartografía de lo desconocido” (Alexandra Domínguez, p. 29) is a prime example of this allusion in that subdued earth tones and layered fields of graphics bring to mind remnants of Pre-Columbian fabrics or clothing that have survived to the present.



### **Cartografía de lo Desconocido**

The flattened, loosely gridded space tends to read like cryptic glyphs, insisting on a closer, more studied interpretation. The repeated configurations of organic and geometric shapes provide something of a false pattern, and, at times, look to be based on ancient statuary. The bold viridian shapes seem to intersect with an equally disordered substructure before dissolving into a second under-layer of soft yellow ochre forms. The combined two layers are reminiscent of old city plats, as though a new architecture has been built on top of some lost city without full awareness of what has passed before. In this way, the geometrics tend to take on an organic vitality.

Dominquez's use of irregular—almost organic—geometric shapes, coupled with a surface that struggles for order, closely aligns the image with a distinctively human experience. The aquatint could easily hang alongside any number of displays in Madrid's Museum of the Americas, or the broader Archaeological Museum, two distinct sources for both her inspiration and reflection.

Domínguez characterizes herself as a devout abstractionist and speaks passionately about the ambiguities of form and meaning in her work. She is ever-aware of the fact that this ambiguity might provide the viewer with any number of interpretations, and revels in the possibilities. Consistent with this notion of ambiguity, Domínguez works intuitively, allowing for the interplay of both her conscious and subconscious states. She asserts that a work can drive itself without the presence of a heavy hand or predisposed composition. For her, the artist must be willing to interact spontaneously with the work while it is becoming. For many artists, this approach presents too great a risk and does not allow for adequate control of outcomes; the likelihood of losing a work is too great a possibility. But Domínguez is prolific in her process and her production, and she is driven by her curiosity for what lies ahead, whether prints, paintings, poetry, text translations, or simply learning a new language. She has little time or patience for worrying about risks. At the same time, she proudly displays her mother's violin in her studio and speaks to the concrete narrative that serves both the print "Cartografía de lo desconocido" and her poem "El violín de Aida," which appears on the page facing the print in her book *Alexandra Domínguez*.

### **El violín de Aída**

Mi madre tocaba el violín junto a la ventana los días de lluvia.  
Con mirada atenta calculaba la mecanografía secreta del grillo  
que hace sonar las cuerdas bajo el arco de crin.  
El profesor de música la contemplaba en silencio,  
hacía de pronto un gesto brusco con la mano  
y ella se detenía y él le indicaba cómo debía repetir otra vez la pieza.  
El invierno era largo, todas las tardes durante una hora  
mi madre tomaba clases de violín. El violín de mi madre  
era un Schuster & Co. que tengo yo ahora en mi casa.  
A eso de las cuatro subía por la cuesta el maestro de música,  
con parsimonia y paciencia se disponía a enseñarle la lección del día,

las mariposas negras del pentagrama, las estrellas de la partitura.  
El invierno era largo, durante una hora mi madre tocaba el violín, llovía.  
A eso de las cinco el profesor daba por concluida la batalla,  
cerraba su carpeta, cogía su abrigo, intentaba encontrar la puerta.  
Yo lo veía desde la ventana bajar por la cuesta como si se fuese abrumado  
hasta que se perdía entre los árboles su lenta figura vestida de negro.  
El invierno era largo, a eso de las seis mi madre abría de nuevo el estuche,  
sacaba su violín, comenzaba a hacer sus deberes de música, llovía.  
Algo ocurría entonces que no debe ser comprendido,  
algo que jamás debiera ser explicado,  
la música del cielo, el canon de la lluvia hecho luz en sus manos.

[My mother would play the violin next to the window on rainy days.  
Her gaze attentive, she would calculate the secret typing of the cricket that makes  
the strings sound under the horsehair bow.  
The music professor would watch her in silence,  
would make a sudden gesture with his hand,  
she would stop and he would show her how to play the piece again.  
The winter was long, every afternoon for an hour  
my mother took violin classes. My mother's violin  
was a Schuster & Co., which I now have in my house.  
Around four the music teacher would walk up the hill,  
slowly and patiently he would prepare to teach her the lesson of the day,  
the black butterflies of the staff, the stars of the musical score.  
The winter was long, for an hour my mother would play the violin, it would rain.  
Around five the professor would consider the battle over,  
would close his folder, pick up his coat, try to find the door.  
I would watch him descend the hill as if he were overwhelmed  
until his slow figure would disappear in the trees.  
The winter was long, around six my mother would reopen the case,  
take out the violin, begin to practice, it would rain.

And then something would happen that must never be understood,  
something that should never be explained,  
the music of the heavens, the canon of rain made light in her hands.

Both the print and the poem are about time, whether reflections on childhood memories or the fleeting time-based nature of music itself. A concurrent interpretation of the poem and the aquatint would suggest that the individualized shapes of the print read like notes played into a musical passage laid over larger structures that reference the concrete form of the violin—bow and strings, neck, frets, and tuning keys—along with the structural lines of sheet music. The lack of regular pattern is reminiscent of a real violin lesson during which a student might practice smaller passages before taking on a complete score—the parts suggestive of how we humans tend to retrieve piecemeal recollections. The muted earth tone palette roots the work firmly in nature, the geometric forms now reading more like a rural, pastoral landscape, where buildings tend to rise in a more organic fashion. The irregular arrangement of forms conjures up soft pastoral sounds, devoid of the regular sounds of an industrialized city. At the same time, the lack of a clear focal point in the work could be interpreted as a renewing condition.

Largely an asymmetrical composition, the aquatint appears to have been developed over a stable, passive, symmetrical substructure. The resulting tension between the two compositional structures, combined with elements and layers that cluster into fleeting passages, provide the work a quiet but active movement—an ‘ebb and flow’ between the symmetrical understructure and the dynamics of an asymmetrical composition. In this light, the print is constantly reforming itself, providing the viewer with a vital, renewing visual experience that parallels the day-to-day industry of a small rural community.

Turning briefly from the visual to the literary page, for Domínguez the poetic is the simple, the uncomplicated; it is the awareness of feeling. It is the sense of one’s connectedness to the universe—physical, imaginary and mythical. She considers herself to be in a Chilean poetic tradition similar to that of Violeta Parra who, she says, “rescues the human being and poeticizes him or her” (interview with Dean-Thacker, March 13, 2014). Domínguez’ own idea of rescuing includes sharing her journey, illustrating the limitlessness of human capability, elevating the simple to the sublime, and approaching the unknown. Her poetry incorporates irony and laughter which, she says, are fundamental traits of the Chilean psychological makeup. She is always in the real world but leaning into the mythical; things are open to interpretation, to another look, another humanity.

One prominent aspect of Domínguez' poetry and art is her use of anthropological subjects—native populations and symbols, mythical realms, connection to the past, language and naming. Her American roots run deep, as she continues to be concerned with the plight of the native populations of Chile, particularly the Mapuche ("the people of the earth"), who have struggled to retain their native lands.

In the poem "El violín de Aída," Domínguez offers a clear example of the powerful results that can arise from blending art and poetry. While the poem illustrates a diligent mother practicing as she takes violin lessons, the corresponding art depicts the stringent, disciplined nature of music lessons. Shapes subsume other shapes, which gives the painting both texture and a layering effect. Partially concealed elements of the painting lend both mystery and whimsy, as the viewer realizes that the whole of the work is a representation of sheet music. But stepping back, one notices the allusion to construction, to composition, to arranging elements in a certain order, to harmony. Returning to the poem, one finds that its structure reveals a lack of rhythm and rhyme, except in the four central lines (10-13) where the rhyme is assonant. Here, the narrator writes that she observes the violin instructor ascend the hill to the home of his student, the poet's mother, and slowly and patiently prepare to give her the music lesson of the day which includes "the black butterflies of the staff" and "the stars of the musical score." The reader may see the butterflies as the bass clef and treble clef, and the stars as the musical notes themselves. The narrator adds that her mother plays the violin for an hour during the lesson. An hour after the lesson ends and the teacher leaves, she resumes her practice of the instrument.

The language of the poem is unadorned, and the emphasis appears to be on the striking contrast between the technique which is taught and the art which is created. The monotony of repetition during the lessons given by an unenthusiastic, perhaps weary violin instructor during a dreary, rainy winter, contrasts with the sublime, ineffable, powerful art that the mother produces in the absence of the instructor. The narrator insists that this magical occurrence "must not be understood, should never be explained," referring to it as "the music of the heavens, the canon of the rain made light" in her mother's hands. The reader senses the power of the music to lift the darkness, heaviness, and perhaps sadness not only from the room, but from the season. The poet senses that to try to understand how this happens would forever nullify the attraction to the mystery that she witnesses.

In "Cartografía de lo desconocido" it appears that the ineffable quality of the mother's music is portrayed by the musical score which defies elucidation. Both the painting and the music are greater than the sum of their components, as they produce a mysterious, genuinely aesthetic composition. The interartistic play is ever more evident as the reader understands that two artistic media, poetry and visual art, are featuring yet a third artistic medium, music. The similarity of the three arts in question is highlighted, as all are capable of causing the reader/listener/spectator to enter the realm of the unknown. A visual poem. A poetic painting. A musical inspiration.

The second pair of Domínguez' paintings and poems that we will discuss includes a colorful acrylic entitled "Limbo de Rimbaud" and the poem "Balada del bandolero."



**Limbo de Rimbaud**



**“Balada del bandolero”**

- 1 No es fácil encontrarse con un hombre que sea como Búfalo Bill  
pero que no sea Búfalo Bill.  
Que sea el hombre más fuerte de todo el estado de Michigan  
pero que no viva en Michigan.
- 5 Que sea el más veloz de los vaqueros desenfundando su revólver  
pero que no tenga balas en el revólver.  
Que venga cabalgando desde las praderas y no tenga caballo,  
entre en una cantina y no tenga sed,  
pero que tenga piedad si alguien desenfunda
- 10 sin más derecho que el de caer fulminado.  
Ciertamente no es fácil conocer a un hombre que sea como Búfalo Bill  
pero que no sea Búfalo Bill.  
Que sea respetado por los jefes sioux  
como aún se respeta en las montañas al águila blanca.
- 15 Que sea el más hermoso de los amantes de todo el estado de Michigan,  
desde Minessota al Nuevo México,  
desde la hebilla de plata de su pantalón  
a las Montañas Rocosas de los predicadores del estado de Utah.  
Quiero decir que no es fácil enamorarse de un hombre
- 20 que persiga cuatrerros,  
que no es fácil acostarse con él y dormir en sus brazos  
y soñar con bisontes,  
que tenga una mirada salvaje  
pero que no sea un salvaje.
- 25 Un hombre en los alrededores de Búfalo Bill  
que no sea un viejo chacal olvidado bajo la placa de un sheriff,  
que asalte almacenes  
y compre flores los sábados con dinero robado.  
Un hombre que llame a la derrota derrota
- 30 y al fracaso le llame fracaso.  
Quiero decir, eso quiero decir, que no es fácil.

The painting depicts a mythical vision of the Old West; most notable is its allusion to Native American and western icons which are suggested but not prescribed.

While the large central figure in the work might represent a highly stylized and interpretive head of a Native American man, for example, its lack of specificity and amorphous quality lead the viewer's eye slightly to the right where two totemic features and a medicine wheel pay homage to Native American culture. The four elements of classical western culture—earth, air, fire and water—are also implied in this piece, as well as other organic elements. Upon closer inspection, one notes that nothing in "Limbo de Rimbaud" is firmly rooted, rather it all seems to be in a state of flux. Even the totems could be floating through a magical landscape or an underwater aquarium scene. The title of the piece, "Rimbaud's Limbo," recalls the young French poet, Arthur Rimbaud, who spent his adolescence writing poetry which would cast him as a founder of French symbolism—a late eighteenth century movement characterized by a rejection of rigid forms, synesthesia, and an emphasis on suggestion, mood, and the personal.

The setting of Domínguez's poem "Balada del Bandolero," is the mythical American West where the poet has fallen in love with a man whose character defies classification. Her colorful and playful depiction of the rare breed of men who possess stereotypical but nuanced characteristics of manhood would lead the reader to focus on the object of her affection. However, this is not the point, as the reader will discover.

The first two lines of the poem, "It is not easy to find oneself with a man who might be like Buffalo Bill / but probably isn't Buffalo Bill" evoke the iconic and colorful figure of the nineteenth century Indian fighter, buffalo killer, and showman. In the original Spanish, the use of the subjunctive verb *sea* (in English, "might be," "could be" ) and *no sea* ("might not be," "probably is not") leaves uncertain the identity of the man in question, but clearly purports to assign him in some way qualities associated with the famous icon of Old West manhood. These lines reveal that the narrator is taking stock of her situation as it relates to the unidentified man she is with, likely an intense, talented, somewhat unpredictable person who, she suspects, possesses immense power under the surface and who is a mystery to her. He remains on the fringes of society because he lives by his own "code," following the stereotype.

Lines 3-10: "Who might be the strongest man in the whole state of Michigan / but may not live in Michigan. / Who could be the fastest of cowboys drawing his revolver / but may not have bullets in his revolver. / Who might ride along on

horseback from the meadows yet might not have a horse, / enter a cantina but not be thirsty / yet could be merciful if someone draws his gun / with no more right than to be struck down." The man in question is the ideal—not the stereotypical Marlboro Man, but rather one who has the strength of character and courage to acknowledge his vulnerability. The bullets missing from the gun could be symbolic of a different kind of weapon, perhaps the pen or the paintbrush, and Domínguez is implying that while he may be the greatest talent of his kind, he is out to do no harm. Rather, he sees himself in the failings of others, which further humanizes him.

Lines 11-14: "It certainly is not easy to know a man who might be like Buffalo Bill / but probably is not Buffalo Bill. / Who is likely respected by the Sioux chiefs / as even today the white eagle is respected in the mountains." The repetition of this initial idea, now emphasized by "certainly," places the narrator in the foreground. She has moved from "finding herself" with the man to "knowing" him, while the emphasis on the difficulty she experiences contrasts with the more imperturbable description of the man, carried out entirely with the use of subjunctive verbs. Though the reader will recall that Sitting Bull was both a Sioux chief and, for a time, a member of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, the emphasis here is on the respect that the man is capable of eliciting from the most respected members of a society.

Lines 15-18: "Who may be the most handsome of lovers of the whole state of Michigan, / from Minnesota to New Mexico, / from the silver buckle on his pants / to the rocky mountains of Utah's preachers." The reader perceives the narrator's growing obsession with the man who, for her, represents an irresistible attraction. The emphasis is on the narrator herself, who is assessing his appearance. She is the one who, in the next lines, claims that it is indeed difficult to be her.

Lines 19-31: "I mean that it is not easy to fall in love with a man / who hunts down rustlers. / It is not easy to go to bed with him and sleep in his arms / and dream about buffalo, / a man who might have a savage look / but not be a savage.

/ A man in the vicinity of Buffalo Bill / who may not be an old obsolete buzzard under a sheriff's badge / but might hold up country stores / and buy flowers on Saturdays with stolen money. / A man who could call defeat defeat / and failure, failure. / I mean, that is what I mean, that it is not easy."

The allusion to breaking the law—he is a bandolero—and buying flowers with stolen money gives the man a romantic air, and ethical lines become blurred. The poet is painting with words, and the work is highly impressionistic. Whatever he is, she is attracted to him, and the attraction is both difficult and unstoppable. The poet has advanced from “knowing” the man (line 11) to falling in love with him, going to bed with him, and sleeping with him, i.e., her relationship with him has changed from attraction to intimacy. What has not changed is that this relationship is not easy for her. While she does not find fault with him, she stresses the difficulty his enigmatic persona presents for her, and the reader empathizes with her as she feels at once awestruck and overshadowed—even diminished—by him. However, as the poem progresses, he becomes less elusive, more realistic and willing to reveal his vulnerability. He has perhaps faced and dealt with failure.

Returning to the painting, the totems represent the narrator and her lover. They appear to be wrapped with leather or cloth, share similar color and pattern construction, and allude to a distinctive male and female presence. The close proximity and figurative size differences recall the poetry, in that the narrator perceives both a distance between herself and the lover, and her diminished stature. There is a pre-Colombian sensibility in the work, and the Southwest is suggested by the dried-clay orange at the center of the work. Like the painting, the poem’s most salient quality is allusion. The narrator purports to feature a larger-than-life cowboy/bandit/lover/ who is a magnet for her, but she begins and ends the poem with the words, “it is not easy,” focusing on her amorphous self the way the allusion to the Native American head occupies the center of the painting. Because she intentionally blurs the focus of her work, the reader and spectator will overlook it while seeing the more obvious, identifiable elements. But, as Domínguez says, “we think we know what we see, but there is always more there than we see” (interview with Dean-Thacker, June 25, 2014).

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