

MARÍA
BUENO

Wheat and Loaf

An Art Project for
Bread & Puppet Theatre, USA

**My mother bathed her
cardboard dolls in the river
and wept when she saw them
to fall apart.**

**Now she sews me rag dolls
that I catch in my drawings.**

María Bueno is a Spanish artist born in Malaga, raised between Morocco and Andalusia. With studies in Philosophy and Fine Arts by the Universities of La Laguna (Canary Islands, Spain), Alameda College (California, USA) and L'École des Beaux-Arts (Toulouse, France) respectively.

Bueno's artistic practice arose over a career spanning twenty years in which she explores painting and drawing through individual and collective exhibitions, collaborations, book publications, curatorships and educational projects. Through these formats, the artist establishes a conscious and committed practice that deals with individual and collective memory.

Since the beginning of her career, María Bueno has placed a resilient and creative energy at the center of her work, linked to environments and communities. Hence the importance of weaving alliances and support, under the premise of making this world a better place. Her commitment has been picked up in the New York Times.



MEYKEN BARRETO

Travelling with María

Home; that affective space, social and mental axis of the individual, origin of everything we are and think, is a symbolic and cultural enclave to which we frequently return mentally on a journey that is made, on many occasions, through of the senses: the smells of coffee and bread, grandmother's perfume, the flavors of Sunday meals, vacation breakfasts in the country house, intense colors of candies... the memories of all those sensations reactivate memory, nostalgia, and awareness of the continuity of family dynamics, traditions, values, domestic practices. This return ultimately sheds light on family and social history, cultural oppressions and power dynamics, among other social mechanisms.

That is why when I come across María Bueno's artwork, it happens that I begin to feel smells, flavors, sensations that recreate that intimate, domestic, familiar and endearing environment where we always go to understand everything. But these trips with María are different: unique, sinuous, labyrinthine precisely because of their crossed, collaborative, absolutely unprejudiced condition, diverse in their references, substantial in their concepts and, of course, multiple in their messages and meanings, in their function and commitment.

Wheat and Loaf/Trigo y Hogaza exhibition does not escape this logic. This title, which in itself outlines a process, from the raw material to the final result, also alludes to what this daily practice, apparently simple, implies in historical, social, and cultural terms. In an organic, natural way, the categories of the individual and the social are diluted and blurred, while

the concepts of “fine arts” and everyday life merge into a work that disrupts or ignores the meaning of what we understand as transcendent/intranscendent.

Drawings and Maria-netas¹ make up this exhibition by Bueno in collaboration with her mother, Ángeles Castellano. The artwork in this series recreate the artist’s own imaginary cosmos, full of fantastic creatures –sometimes winged or marine– and human and hybrid figures (mostly female). These beings frequently multiply, relate and merge in a universe that evidences an introspection and reflection of the experience of the world from the feminine perspective. In this environment we recognize domestic spaces such as a bedroom in which a peculiar “annunciation” occurs, the bathroom that seems to offer the intimate space necessary to review some family memory, or the showcase that remains in order, hanging from an animated hair held, how family and social roots are sustained in our imaginary, even in the face of the angry seas of the creatures of boredom, power, the sometimes crooked human relationships and all the harshness of everyday life. With a firm, vigorous stroke, black is the protagonist in these compositions where color appears to illuminate and emphasize the magical nature of scenes in which we see multiple influences: Bosch, Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington, Wilfredo Lam, Pablo Picasso, Amy Butler, all of them passed through my mind as possible ancestors of this new plethora of fabrications that Bueno displays on paper.

The series of Maria-netas, then, is perfectly coherent, to complement this sample being the environment in which they are exhibited, headquarters of the famous puppet company *Bread and Puppet*. These pieces are based on textile elements that mimic aprons, dresses, pajamas –most outlined with a

feminine silhouette– and where other fabrics are incorporated, as well as paper with drawings.

The Maria-netas are characters with diverse faces, made up of collages which always exhibit drawings on their bodies that illustrate their identities and their possible mental disquisitions, which seem to flow between fantasy, overwhelm, memories, pressures of what is socially accepted and other psychological drifts. Among the fabrics used and the added elements there is a motif that is repeated and I think it is necessary to mention: the flowers. They probably mimic the fashion of grandmothers, mothers, aunts.... in the domestic space, but they could also allude to the historical symbolism of this motif that has been so used in art to indicate the finitude of existence.

Between her María-netas and drawings, Bueno makes us travel through the intimacy of those homes/cosmos that are as fabled as they are real, as candid as they are dramatic, as anecdotal as they are paradigmatic, as much theirs as ours. Her process of collaboration, review and ultimately healing range from the personal to the collective, interweaving in a fluid, organic, brilliant way, that much-mentioned binomial of art and life.

¹ Combination made by the artist with her own name and the word “marioneta” (puppet).



SUSANA BLAS

“Mother dough”

**Notes inspired by the doing
and undoing of e María Bueno**

On each finger my mother has a bed.
Since there was nothing to eat, my mother cooked them,
throwing each one into the pot.
She fed us, but we had nowhere to sleep.

Ángeles Castellano

María Bueno works patiently, but without pause. She knows that everything she wants to tell us is in the “flour” of her works, that there is no need to add leaven. In plain flour there are enough bacterias to leaven your bread.

María has been collaborating with her mother, Ángeles Castellano, for decades, because including her in her work is incorporating the wisdom of the ancestors. In Bueno’s exhibitions, it is usual for them to offer the public homemade bread and cookies. Because not only do men and women live from art, but also from bread.

Since we quote biblical episodes, one among the ones that move me the most is the *Bread of Life Discourse*, which appears in the *Gospel of John*. And, specifically, the moment that follows the miraculous feeding of the crowd with five loaves and two fishes, after which Jesus crosses the lake walking through the water. Also then Jesus accompanied his performance with abundant food for the group. And it is said that, when everyone was satisfied, Christ said: “Collect the leftovers, so that nothing

is wasted”; and twelve baskets of leftovers were collected. I admit that this detail is my favorite. Mother dough bread tastes more sour, but it’s also more nutritious.

It is common for some male creators to allude to the genealogy that their father represents in an illustrious trade that is inherited. It is normal to know about the artists’ parents’ painters, writers, architects or even sculptors. María, paying homage to her working-class mother, crumbles and betrays the patriarchal heritage with a stroke of the pen. Faced with the continuity of the androcentric and classist lineage, María enthrones our mothers in aprons.

Bueno’s referents are others. They are the forgotten visionary Surrealist artists, of course..., but they are also the workers of the land, the maids, the cooks and the bakers... and all the women who wear checkered gowns.

Like the sourdough that must be cared for in order to conserve all life, María feeds her works with the energetic vestiges of the past, with “leftovers” full of life, affective capacities (old clothing, intimate drawings, letters, curious objects) that, after passing through her hands, mutate into objects and installations with a timeless air and strange delicacy, made in so many occasions, with humble and ephemeral materials

A dream come true

The artist has theorized about “dispossession” via Vishmidt and Ouali¹, and has assumed her own condition of “dispossessed” as the transforming engine of the system.

We know that seeds are sometimes waste, but we agree with Vandana Shiva that “preserving seeds is the greatest revolutionary act”, which is why preserving knowledge and voices is essential.

For María Bueno, collaborating with Bread and Puppet Theater is a dream come true. With them she shares a way of understanding art that is committed to the street, to humble people and in a continuous search for social justice.

She also distributes bread and knows well that making food and sharing it will always be revolutionary.

In the days before the French Revolution, starving people looted bakeries. The night before July 14th, the customs posts were set on fire to allow the raw material for bread to arrive.

There are countless riots and revolutions that the lack of bread has caused, and today, in 2022, we may be on the verge of new revolts if the lack of cereal continues to increase in the most depressed territories on the planet.

¹ Nouria Ouali has inspired María Bueno through her interview collected in the book written by Luis Martínez Andrade, *Feminismos a la contra, Entre- vistas al Sur Global*. La vorágine, 2019.

Ragdolls

At Christmas, as children, we asked the Three Wise Men for elaborate toys, but they always brought us ragdolls. Over time, we discovered that those humble figures were made by our mothers at night, when we went to bed, because they did not have money to buy us the industrial ones.

As we grew up we understood two things: that we were poorer than we thought and that mom's ragdolls were powerful.

Dolls made of papyrus, linen and ivory have been found in Egypt, Rome and Greece, along with statuettes that were used both for playing and for magic. In the Louvre Museum I saw a voodoo doll. Undoubtedly, rag dolls are used both to fantasize and to cast spells.

Gowns and aprons

Many of the pieces that are presented in this exhibition have been made with recycled old fabrics: old aprons, cloths and work clothes. My grandmothers wore colorful work smocks. My grandmothers could not study. Since I could, I decided to wear my own gown to prepare for the exams. It always gave me luck.

The female work gowns is a bittersweet symbol: of care and submission, of struggle and renunciation, of love and pain.

We are links in a timeless chain

All the paintings finished, a year ago or five hundred years ago, are prophecies, received from the past, about what the viewer is seeing, painted on the canvas, at the present moment. Sometimes the prophecy runs out quickly and the painting loses its direction; others, it remains true for a long time.

John Berger²

I have theorized in different writings about the artistic practice of María Bueno and, although I follow her career closely, I still have a long way to go to understand a body of work that in recent times has been extended to the theoretical plane³, contributing fundamental texts and interviews to question the ethnocentric and patriarchal gaze that continues to predominate in Spanish art critic.

Beneath the apparent simplicity of her paintings, sculptures, drawings, writings and actions, "mother dynamite" is camouflaged to be used little by little. In fact, a phenomenon occurs with the works of María Bueno that I invite you to check out. It happens that her artwork is capable of hoarding old collective collections while anticipating her present. Take the test: review today some of the drawings from her early period and see how the meanings they give us have increased, how they speak to us about current issues and how we intuit that they will speak to the future.

María and I share the oldest struggle: the one of disinherited women; the cigar makers, witches, slaves and maids...; that of the illiterate, exiled, farmers and cooks. To all of them, we shake hands hoping that this chain will not be broken.

² John Berger, *Y nuestros rostros, mi vida, breves como fotos*, Madrid: Editorial Nórdica, 2017, p. 59.

³ You can check out the articles and interviews by María Bueno in platforms like M-Arte and Radio África Magazine through her website: <https://mariabueno.es/news-press-notes/>



MARTA MANTECÓN

My drawings have grown ears...

The wheat is ripe; the bread is distributed. But sweetly distributed?

It is important to know.

(...) Being born is like this:

Sunflowers slowly turn their corollas towards the sun.

Bread is eaten sweetly.

My impulse links me to that of the roots of the trees.

Clarice Lispector¹

To say wheat is to think of the long history of humanity. For thousands of years, life in much of the Earth has been organized around this seed, from the Fertile Crescent to Abya Yala. The mixture of biota and the transplantation of species has been one of the most widespread practices throughout the planet, giving rise to a transcontinental movement of exchanges that, particularly since colonization, ended up transforming cereals into merchandise and, far from aspiring to eradicate hunger and extreme poverty, it contributed to sustaining the capitalist economy with its sexual division of labor, class, race and ability privileges, as well as its utter lack of respect for our natural environment. Some histories of art have given an account of these abuses and proposed alternatives, making visible what the dominant narrative insisted on hiding. Take, for example, these three periods of time:

1936. *Wheat surprise*. Maruja Mallo paints this work for a series entitled *The Religion of Work*. We observe the hieratic face of a woman who shows us three small spikes in the palm of her

¹ Clarice Lispector: *Agua viva*. Siruela, Madrid, 2008. p. 46.

right hand and three shoots that have germinated in the fingers of her left hand. Regardless of its mathematical or theosophical connotations (I am referring to its relationship with *The Secret Doctrine* of Helena Blavatsky), this figure has been interpreted as an Iberian offering lady and even as an incarnation of Mother Earth in the form of Demeter/Ceres. However, these readings omit the most obvious: the work of women and other groups on which capitalism has built its exploitation devices. The artist herself recounted that this work was conceived, shortly before her exile, during a May Day demonstration in Madrid, when she encountered a group raising a loaf. They asked for bread. Silvia Federici picks up this same issue explicitly: “Good workers make bread from wheat but never eat it”².

1982. *Wheatfield: A Confrontation*. Agnes Denes planted a two-acre wheat field on a piece of land in lower Manhattan, New York, at the foot of the World Trade Center, near Wall Street, and across from the Statue of Liberty. The artist had 200 trucks of soil brought in, cleared the land, dug 285 furrows, planted by hand and installed an irrigation system. Maintenance work was carried out for four months and, finally, more than 450 kilos of “golden and healthy” grain were harvested. All this to draw attention to our priorities.

2021. *Wheat and Loaf/ Trigo y Hogaza*. María Bueno weaves seed-drawings with remnants and writes: “My mother braids the bread dough resting on her legs. Spike bread. My daughter combs grandma’s hair, sitting on my lap. I lovingly knead and separate her hair into three. Wheat braid”.

² Norman Cohn’ quote at Silvia Federici: *Calibán y la bruja. Mujeres, cuerpo y acumulación originaria*. Traficantes de Sueños, Madrid, 2010. p. 70.

The transfer of knowledge and actions between women is part of feminist learning. María Bueno builds her imaginary in relation to others, expanding her affective network and her healing power. She likes to mix processes, weave complicity, do in common and integrate what is foreign, but also what is his own. All her artistic practice shows that the forms of knowledge that are transmitted from generation to generation and cannot be quantified, weighed or measured, nor are they governed by the logic of immediate benefit, are the most valuable legacy. Our heritage is made from memory.

Her drawings, charismatic and evocative, have an apparently spontaneous but firm and, above all, free stroke. They contain an iconographic repertoire of mutant beings that inhabit a fantastic world, close to the dreamlike and the surreal. María not only invokes in them her family lineage, but also the artistic one, presided over by Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo and a whole groups of creators almost always located on the margins of the great story that has dominated the History of Art. The characters she imagines, with chimerical physiognomy, have a hybrid nature, migrant, in permanent metamorphosis between the human, the animal and the vegetable. Perhaps they are the product of an alliance between species, since they take care of each other. They seem to be part of a pre-capitalist society, where living beings thought they had the power to fly, had extrasensory experiences, communicated body to body and maintained direct contact with nature, their main source of knowledge³. Their nomadic condition has allowed them to abdicate the heavy burden of a monolithic identity, invariably based on the same subject (male, white, heterosexual, healthy,

³ Extract by Silvia Federici: “In Praise of the Dancing Body”, in *A site of beautiful resistance*, 2016. Available online: <https://abeautifulresistance.org/site/2016/08/22/in-praise-of-the-dancing-body> [última consulta: 07-07-2022].

prosperous and ultra-skilled), the same one who is always on the same side of the border and remains safe within its confines. The monster, argues Paul B. Preciado, lives in transition; it is “the one whose face, whose body, whose practices and languages cannot yet be considered as true in a determined regime of knowledge and power”⁴. María Bueno builds small narratives with which to express her insurgent feeling regarding any fixation in space and time. Create as an act of resistance against any hegemonic and excluding vision of subjectivity.

2000. *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*. Agnès Varda makes a beautiful film-essay where she addresses the importance of gleaning, that is, collecting what remains after the harvest so as not to waste. The French filmmaker starts the close-ups of The Gleaners immortalized by Millet in the famous painting at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, since this little-valued work, and, of course, carried out by women, was done collectively. Collecting what is leftover is putting in crisis an economic model based on unbridled consumption, the unlimited exploitation of finite resources and contempt for care work.

Colonial dynamics have always asserted themselves on the disposable. María Bueno, as an artist-gleaner that she is, works with textile fragments that refer to that domestic knowledge practiced by women that has been systematically undervalued and made invisible. When Anni Albers arrived at the Bauhaus, she was surprised to find that if a work was made with thread it was considered craft, but if it was made on paper, then it was art⁵. This project, carried out together with his mother, Ángeles Castellano, connects both practices, so that the drawings are assembled with

scraps until they form anthropomorphic beings, such as rag dolls or small totems, which merge fiction and reality, the imagined and the lived, articulating a poetics of dispossession that recognizes its predecessors and, like them, links with its origins to recover the wisdom of our ancestors. The remains, the same as residues or stubble, have an infinite diversity that invites us to think about the gaps, the absences, the silences and, incidentally, delve into the epistemic wound that shapes us. Dwell from the crack. Working together, in community, from that same fracture (it is curious, but “wheat”, etymologically, means “broken”).

María Bueno sews drawings, cooks sculptures, makes containers, writes stories, compiles recipes, formulates rituals. His actions involve contexts and situated knowledge, claiming another way of narrating with which to feel the body, celebrate touch and create a micropolitics of affection, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui says, that fertilizes our thinking. Art as seed. The seed as legacy. The legacy as food. Food as loaf. The loaf as a meeting space.

Ana Mendieta used to tell a story she had read in Octavio Paz’s *Labyrinth of Solitude* about Kimberley natives looking for wives outside their village. The women carry with them a sack of earth from their place of origin and eat a little each night. The earth will help them make the transition between the space they came from and their new home. This story has to do with the need to connect with the “personal memory of the land” and assume our status as itinerants, since, like Rosi Braidotti’s *nomadic subject*, who lives in transitions (without “predetermined destinations” or “land of lost origin”) and embraces cyclical time, the task is to collect, harvest and exchange, but not to exploit the land⁶.

4 Paul B. Preciado: *Yo soy el monstruo que os habla*. Anagrama, Barcelona, 2020. p. 4

5 Mercedes Valdivieso Rodrigo: “Retrato de un grupo con una dama: el papel de la mujer en la Bauhaus”, en *Ensayos: Historia y Teoría del Arte*, n° 6, 2000-2001. p. 68.

2021. *Tea Ritual (and stew broth)*. María Bueno shares this writing: “When my mother got married and left the countryside, in the suitcase that accompanied her, she carried her belongings and the seeds that her grandmother gave her to plant in the city. —*Make it close to your house so that the crops, the stream and the dry firewood will always be with you. Pamper the land where you throw the seeds and you will see the fruit grow*—. This is how I grew up lowering jugs of water from the fourth floor to the lot that was in front of the house, without really understanding what purpose I was helping my mother with. (...) I am the daughter of peasants raised in the city. Not understanding life away from the countryside and sensing crops that sprout inside me without knowing why, connects me naturally with a “personal memory of the land”, which I try to connect with other (memories) of places I pass through”⁷.

Branches always grow in María Bueno's drawings. The germination process from seed to ear generates an infinite braid, as it constitutes a legacy that passes from grandmothers to mothers, from mothers to daughters, from each of them to new relatives... and so on. The important thing is the memory that we share, the invisible heritage that we receive and pass on to others. We are, constitutively, companion species that, as Donna J. Haraway so beautifully puts it, despite our specific differences, “represent in the flesh a loathsome evolutionary infection called love”⁸.

Wheat and Loaf



















