

Julie Lluch: The Woman as Artist

ANA P. LABRADOR



Julie Lluch has helped to greatly advance the feminist cause in the Philippines, particularly among women artists. In 1983, with other women writers and intellectuals, she helped to form the feminist group KALAYAAN (short for Katipunan ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan). In 1986, while serving at the Women's Desk of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines, she helped to mount the first simultaneous women artists exhibitions at four Manila art galleries. In 1990, she co-founded KASIBULAN, an organization of women visual artists. Lluch presently serves at the Philippine Artists Collective, with a special interest in promoting women's arts and rights.

What brought her to stand up for women's rights were the threats to basic civil liberties that, following the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983, were posed by the Marcos regime. Her desire to help make society better continues to this day, as she strives to strike a balance between her engagement with the world and the work she does to open up spaces for contemplation. Indeed, her striving to establish that balance supplies the creative tension, the energy behind her achievements as one of the Philippines' leading clay sculptors.

Read during the Ellen F. Fajardo Annual Lectures/Exhibit in Honor of Filipino Women in the Visual Arts, 22 January 2001, Ateneo Art Gallery, Quezon City.



Julie Lluch's use of clay in her art, like her feminist advocacy work, registers the resistance she would like to put up against high art. She began using clay in the early '70s, much taken by its durability. Her relationship with clay derives from her intuitions as a sculptor rather than as a ceramist (who would be better acquainted with its chemical properties). In practice, her process of creating artworks involves using a buff-colored, groggy clay-mixture, which she manipulates with her hands. After the figure has been modeled, it is fired low until it hardens. This is then sanded smooth, painted or tinted and then waxed till it shines. Operating consistently this way, she has developed a feel for the good mixture, for the flesh-like textures that go so well with her sculpture portraits. As a "medium," clay, Lluch observes, is universal because it practically covers the earth.

Her respect for clay stands in contrast to how others take it for granted, seeing it as "provincial, backward, craft, folk"—a common material associated with the traditional household cooking pot or the *palayok*. Whereas stone, marble and brass are considered better because they are hard and provide more permanent materials for sculpture, they also bear properties associated with men. Clay, on the other hand, is identified with women. In art history, for example, women's work in clay has only recently come to wider attention; hither to these had been at best taken merely to be crafts, not art.

To Lluch, clay is a sensuous medium—"soft, obedient and pleasurable to the touch"—leaving the artist free to work directly with her hands. This process of creating her sculptures reminds Lluch of playing with dirt as a child; she finds that it tends to revive old instincts. Lluch's sculptures bear the marks of the use of her hands, namely, her finger marks, which leave her unique stamp on them much better than if she had affixed a signature on them.

Lluch believes that her work, taken retrospectively, tells the story of her life. Her later sculptures, as such, are "an allegory of one person's unregenerate search for meaning."

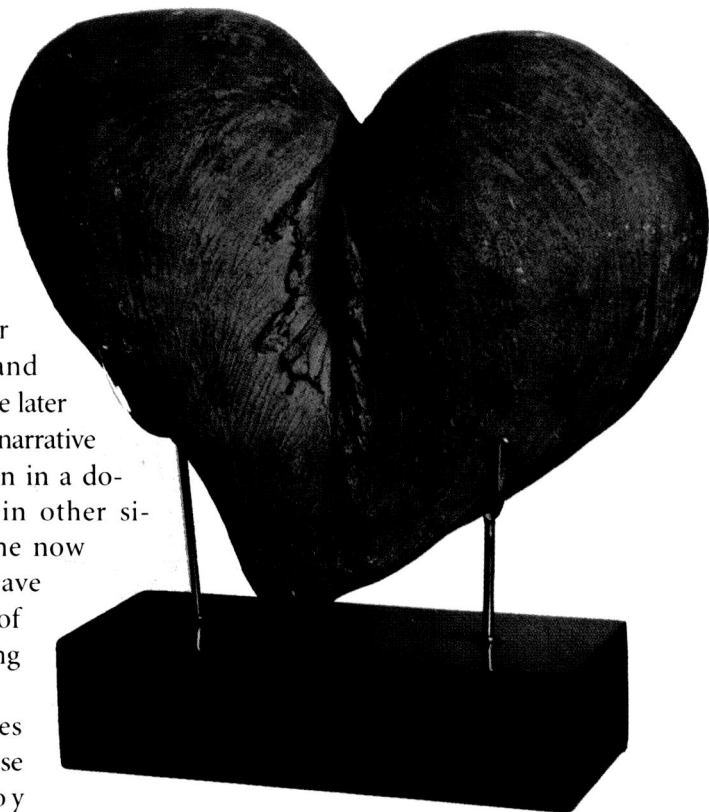
Lluch speaks of three phases in the development of her work. The early period consists of "innocuous affirmations of life," such as nudes and landscapes. It was during this time that she made those life-sized sculpture portraits of friends, poets, artist and family members. The middle period consisted of enlarged and eroticized cacti and hearts, "playfully celebrating love and sexuality." One critic writes that these

pieces represent a “new direction” in her art as she steadily defined herself independently of her then artist-husband Danilo Dalena. The later period consist of “narrative tableaux of women in a domestic locus or in other situations,” that she now understands to have been projections of her then increasing anxieties and fears.

Two sculptures represent this phase of her life, “Picasso y Yo” and “Philippine Gothic II.” According to her, these works are reflective “ultimately of my fear of death and annihilation,” when living and breathing art became artless. Yet there is something about the life-sized, half figures of famous artists in tableaux and about those scenes from her domestic life that speak to her viewers of her will to survive a maddening life. The tableaux of terra cotta sculptures are satirical but witty, a means of poking fun at life while helping her to process her feelings at that time. They may have also brought about catharsis to help her move on with her life.

Move on she did, upon discovering that she could save herself through art. In 1993, she created what she considers a “turning point” piece of artwork. “Doxology” consists of two life-size works representing the two selves of the same woman. One is sprawled on the ground, cold and lifeless. The other is alive with arms outstretched as she looks up to the heavens.

From the moment that she became a Christian, Lluch began to view these pieces as a trite attempt to translate her feelings at that time.



THE BLEEDING HEART

undated

Terra cotta

Dimensions unknown

Collection of the artist



PICASSO Y YO

1985

Terra cotta and acrylic

Variable dimensions

Collection of Hilda Cordero Fernando Collection



PHILIPPINE GOTHIC

1985

Terra cotta and acrylic

Variable dimensions

Collection of the artist

“Doxology,” nevertheless, had to be made if only so she could put away the clay woman representative of herself and her angst-ridden persona.

In her present, Christian state of being, Lluch finds in the women around her a source of inspiration for her terra cotta figures. She arranges them in dramatic poses that, whether on their own or in a group, make them appear to be telling stories. Indeed, Lluch’s sculptures are best appreciated when seen in tableau formation. The tableau formation underscores the relational quality of her work.

If there is one important element that ties her work together, it would be her ability to be on her own and yet relate well with others. This informs many of her sculptures. Presently working in Iligan City where her family owns a charcoal business, Lluch is able to do as much firing as she wants in their kiln for her clay sculptures. She looks after her elderly parents, sharing precious time with them, enjoying their company. But it is her daughters who provide the greatest influence on her spiritual life. This shift in Lluch’s life informs her creativity.

As a committed feminist in the 1980’s, her strivings were on behalf of humanity, not just equality, a practice of humanity whereby men and women could work together to make this a better world. That, more than anything else, has led to her conversion to faith. Her embrace of a practice of devout Christianity represents something of a logical step in her life. It is part of her coming of age.

For Lluch, the question of who owns women’s bodies goes beyond the issue of ownership. She believes the body has to be yielded to the highest cause, that is, to the righteousness of God. In the past, she believed the system owned women’s bodies insofar as it appeared to overpower the body. Now, from her Christian point of view, relating to the righteousness of God and only of God, her art can be intense but at the same time dispense with the competition and angst characteristic of her earlier work.

A discovery of identity unfolds in the sculpture “A House on Fire,” which she has presented to the Ateneo Art Gallery as a gift. Lluch created a terra cotta house that is burning with a female figure in it screaming for help. The sculpture was completed in 1991, a phase in her life when she decided she must move on. The work can be read on different levels but I will cite only two, which relate to her life experience and to the way in which her art provides a rich ground for catharsis. The tall, two-level house represents the duality of her existence at that time.



A HOUSE ON FIRE

1991

Terra cotta and acrylic

101.6 x 73.6 x 121.9 cm

Collection of the Ateneo Art Gallery

On the ground level surrounding the house are features of domestic bliss, such as a cat curled on a window sill or the roots of a large tree encompassing the back of the house. But upstairs everything has gone awry. The fire, represented here as thick flames blowing out in the direction of the panic stricken woman, engulfs nearly everything. The woman seems to be trapped and is screaming to be rescued while those below appear to be looking on unperturbed. The sculpture requires us to go around it. Its tactile quality is further enhanced by her choice to adopt a monochromatic fleshy tone for the entire work. It is colorless, to heighten the drama. In addition, the size of the work of this magnificent three-dimensional piece of art entices us to draw near, piquing our interest to examine it. Embodying this dualism, the artist translated symbolically the contrast of panic and calm, as well as control and fury, of a house on fire. For Lluch, the sculpture is a parable about women's lives and identity, which are inscrutable, even when tied up with the home. Two years after the completion of this work, she created "Doxology", composed of two distinct but related life-sized figures, representative of the need to distinguish between aspects of her life.

Lluch does not have easy answers to questions that accompany her art and its process. The redeeming value of destruction and of the call for help suggests that in the midst of conflagrations, women are seeking redemption to continually reconstruct their identities. ➤