

An overview

Josely Carvalho refers to her body of work as a Diary of Images, the visual counterpart of the literary genre of diary or journal. The diary consists of many separate but interrelated series of images, which she calls chapters, each of which explores specific theme. The artist's work belongs to a long tradition of art in which social and political concerns are central to creative expression. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, much of Carvalho's work was community-oriented. During those activist years, Carvalho organized several community art projects. Those experiences have shaped her work with the result that an engagement with social and political issues is the matrix for her artistic production.

In this country Carvalho first began working with community groups in 1975-76 as an artist-in-residence in an Arlington, Virginia, county program. In an effort to make printmaking accessible to a broad community of teenagers, adults, and senior citizens who had had no previous art experience, Carvalho developed easy and inexpensive silkscreen techniques.¹

The following year, the artist took her ideas for community art to New York, where she began working as artist-in-residence at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery. There she conceived and developed the Silkscreen Project (1976-88), which aimed to teach collective silkscreen printing to diverse community and political groups so that they could make banners, posters, and murals for their political rallies and demonstrations.² By using an uncomplicated silkscreening process, the groups could make several banners in a two- to three- hour workshop.³ The project soon became a printing resource center for the communities' political activities. For important demonstrations, such as the Nuclear Disarmament March (June 1982), more than a hundred different groups gathered to silkscreen some four hundred banners during a two-month period. The tee-shirts, posters, flyers, or "walking" murals were produced collectively and then identified by the name, the Silkscreen Project. Due to the collective nature of the enterprise, the artist seldom made her own objects for these events. One exception, however, was a banner the artist made for the Nuclear Disarmament March. Unfortunately, there is very little visual documentation of either the workshops or the group events for which

¹ The Arlington Community Artist-in Residence program was funded through the Department of Environmental Affairs and by a pilot project grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. Carvalho developed outdoor programs in collective silkscreening that included "Silkscreen Your Business Hour" and "Silkscreen a Mural."

² The Silkscreen Project, which was one of six art projects at St. Marks in the Bowery, made banners for the Disarmament March, Riverside Church Nuclear Disarmament Program, International Women's Day, and the May Day Parade, among others.

³ Carvalho has described the collective process of banner-making as involving a group of five to ten people who worked together toward a common objective. Once the group discussed the purpose of the banner, it would then create a story to represent their idea. The group would then cut paper stencil images based on the story and silkscreen them onto large muslin banners of approximately 4 by 10 feet. This process lasted two to four hours and was as important as the finished product. The small stencils were used to create different stories on a large number of different banners.

the objects were made. Considered ephemeral, they were generally discarded after they were used.

By early 1980, Carvalho's activities at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery had attracted attention among politically concerned professionals. In recognition of her leadership role in public arts projects, Carvalho was invited to participate in the U.N. Mid-Decade Conference for Women, held in Copenhagen.⁴ The conference was conceived as a response to problems of discrimination facing women artists as well as out of recognition that the political, social, and economic survival of women artists is integral to the survival of all women in all cultures. Carvalho participated in a panel discussion and led a workshop demonstrating the silkscreen methods she had developed at St. Mark's Church. The subject of the two-day workshop "focused on the survival of creative women and the growth of their art as vision of the politics of world feminism"⁵. In the workshop session, a group collectively silkscreened several large banners that were used in a demonstration protesting a recent coup in Bolivia. At that conference, Carvalho had her first opportunity to exchange views with Brazilian feminists -- an exchange the artist subsequently built upon in significant ways.

In late 1981 the artist was invited to her native São Paulo to teach the leaders of Comunidades Eclesiásticas de Base and the Workers Party to make silkscreen banners for their political actions. Once the political leaders had learned the process, they were able to teach their own communities the medium's empowering possibilities as agitprop art.⁶

It was through that experience that Carvalho realized she needed to find ways to be actively involved with political and cultural communities in Brazil and, simultaneously, give more time to her own individual works. After the Nuclear Disarmament March of 1982, Carvalho felt burned out. As a kind of antidote, she began redirecting her efforts toward her own work in the studio. The most productive period of *Shape of a woman* [1970-1986] dates from this time. The chapter, a term Carvalho uses for a series of images, which explore a specific theme, consists of some forty to sixty silkscreen and mixed-media works on paper. The subjects address a broad range of women's issues, including pregnancy, birth, abortion, choice, children, war, men, women and men, old-age, rape, pleasure, women at work, and activism. Parts of this series were exhibited in the artist's first solo show in New York, "Diary of Images: Women 1980-81," at the Central Hall Gallery in 1982. The exhibition catalogue included the first examples of her poetry, which became a central feature of her artistic production. The poetic verses, interspersed with illustrations of her silkscreened and painted images, provided additional

⁴ For discussion of this historic conference, see Eleanor Johnson and Beatrice Kreloff, "Survival for Women Artists," in *Women Artists of the World* (New York: Midmarch Associates, 1984): 35-39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁶ Catherine Tinker, "A Portrait of Two Latin American Women Artists in New York: Josely Carvalho and Catalina Parra," *Women Artists News* (March 1984): 7.

layers of meaning. For example, under the image *María in exile* – a work that alludes to the themes of pregnancy and birth – Carvalho wrote:

Smell of fish,
I, you, we
all
women that fish,
that sew, that farm,
that nourish, that fight,
that cry that lose
that dream, that ignore,
you, lost women in an unknown world.
you, jailed woman by the jails of our daily life.
You, mummy-bride,
Why do you marry?

The poem celebrates women's roles and accomplishments while it critiques the restrictions imposed on them.

The Central Hall Gallery became a focal point of Carvalho's feminist activism, providing a new opportunity for her to interface with other women artists on professional as well as nonartistic issues. Central Hall also afforded Carvalho the opportunity to bring Latin American women artists' works to the attention of North Americans, who, at the time, were generally unfamiliar with their work. Carvalho started the series Latin American Women Artists. Over the next five years, from 1983 to 1987, Latin American women artists from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds participated in exhibitions, gave poetry readings, and showed their films and videos. One of the first programs in this series was the exhibition "Latin American Women Artists Living in New York" (1983). Co-curated by Carvalho, Katie Seiden, and Majorie Apper-McKevitt, fifteen women from seven countries in the Americas who were living in New York exhibited one work each. Among other considerations, the show called attention to the fact that both the North American and Latin American women artists who chose to exhibit together based their decision on recognizing gender as a legitimate theme for an exhibition.⁷ In retrospect that exhibition also stands out as one of the first successful attempts to introduce change into exhibition practices that had been previously characterized by isolating artists from other regions outside the mainstream.

During that same year, Carvalho exhibited *From the memory books of underdevelopment* (1983), a provocative, but delicate work commissioned by Franklin Furnace for its show of artists' books. The three-dimensional work, which expanded upon the traditional format of a book, consisted of eight panels constructed in the form of large pockets, which were suspended from the ceiling. The images were silkscreened on the exterior of each "pocket"

⁷ In the critical reviews of that time, Eva Cockcroft ("Latin American Women Artists at Central Hall Artists," *Art News* [October 1983]: 183) wrote: "This exhibition was part of the current tendency to group artists by qualities extrinsic to their art -- for example, by gender, national or racial origin, or even by sexual preference."

panel. The artist's poetic text, shown in its entirety on one of the panels, was divided into stanzas and inserted in the pockets. In criticizing the excesses of poverty and plenty, the artist wrote:

The markets are full of pineapples bananas incense pig's ears hunger papayas
and bare feet amoebic dysentery thrived on future dreams while tourists click
their cameras to preserve poverty.

have you ever eaten canned malnutrition? if you wish to you can find it
in *From the memory books of underdevelopment*.

In 1983 the United States' involvement in Central America was an issue that divided conservative and liberal opinion in this country. The liberal arts community here protested our military involvement in Central America. In an unusual show of solidarity, a group of concerned people in the arts community in New York formed Artists Call, a steering committee that organized a nationwide mobilization of people from all the arts. The protest became known as Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America. Beginning in January 1984, some eleven hundred artists participated in exhibitions and events in New York City alone. Thousands more participated in cities throughout the United States and Canada. Carvalho, who was part of that committee from its inception, organized two exhibitions, "Rape and Intervention" at the Yvonne Seguy Gallery (February 1984) and "Latin American Solidarity Art by Mail" at Judson Memorial Church. "Rape and Intervention" was organized in the spirit of collaboration, which was becoming a more common strategy among activist artists. In this instance, Carvalho asked Nancy Spero to participate; she in turn invited Paulette Nenner, and Carvalho invited Catalina Parra. The four collaborated on a window installation and individually exhibited a work on the subject of rape and intervention. Carvalho's work, *Craters of Blood*, of 1984, which contained the same poetry as was used in *From the memory books of Underdevelopment*, captures the vulnerability of life in a war zone through different representations of female subjects.⁸ Most of the photographs used in this work were taken by the artist in Northeast Brazil; others were taken in Peru; and still others document soldiers in El Salvador. One of the images is from a family heirloom picture. The deft interweaving of public and private imagery characterizes the artist's layering process on both conceptual and formal levels. "Latin American Solidarity Art by Mail" was co-organized with Fatima Bertch out of recognition of the need to include Latin American artists in the mobilization effort.

Toward the end of 1984 and continuing into 1986, Carvalho produced the chapter "Smell of Fish." This body of multimedia works is based upon the prejudices and false myths

⁸ The installation was part of Carvalho's larger chapter/series also titled "Rape and Intervention" that included a number of works on paper.

that are culturally imposed upon women.⁹ The title of the series, for example, refers to one such prejudice that still lingers in the artist's memory. During childhood Carvalho's grandmother's used to say: "Go take your bath if you don't want to smell of codfish."¹⁰ By interweaving image and text, the artist alludes to false myths that have entrapped women, childhood memories, and sexual fantasies. Attempting to counter the negative images of women as idealized representations for man's delectation, Carvalho has re-presented the female nude as active, procreative, and self-empowered in *Hallelujah*, among other examples.

The second half of the 1980s proved to be as intensely active as the first half in terms of work inside as well as outside the studio. A number of major projects were initiated in Central Hall Gallery. For example, Carvalho co-organized the exhibition "Choice" (1985), which addressed the subject of abortion. Thirty women artists of diverse backgrounds participated.¹¹ The *Conexus/Connections*, another monumental event, got underway that same year and lasted until 1987. Carvalho and Sabra Moore began planning for a collaborative exhibition involving a hundred and fifty women artists from Brazil and the United States. The subjects explored were birth, food, body, shelter, war and death, environment, race, and spirit. The exhibition displayed 150 works – each of which was the size of a page – which were then produced as an artist's book.¹² In addition there were thirty two large-format works by thirty-two artists, films, and video viewings.

She is visited by birds and turtles, dating from 1987-88, is the next chapter in Carvalho's Diary of Images. Explored from a feminine viewpoint, the themes deal with questions of bicultural identity. They embrace the conflicting notions of simultaneously belonging and not belonging to any one country (Brazil and the United States), of having dual nationalities. In expressing her own hybrid state, the artist has adopted the motifs of the bird and the turtle. The bird, a creature of flight, suggests the notion of journey. The turtle, an animal adapted to living on both land and water, carries its home on its back. The bird and turtle emblemize the artist's concept of her hybrid identity as one that changes, one that adapts, and, finally, one that is carried within her. Carvalho expressed the notion in the following way: "We hold our ground and at the same time we fly". The recurring image of a woman reaching upward suggests the possibility of flying, of realizing the potential of one's own power. From her archive of images, the artist adopts the image of the female nude to create landscapes in which memory is resuscitated and creation and survival are affirmed. Images of fragments of

⁹ The components in this series include works on paper, paintings, three installations, video, performance, and an artist's book. Carvalho used several of these media for the first time.

¹⁰ From the narrative written for "My Body Is My Country" (1991), p. 8.

¹¹ All of the women who participated supported Roe vs. Wade. Carvalho exhibited *Hallelujah*.

¹² In the planning stages, one hundred and fifty women were asked to detail those issues that were most important to them. A bilingual edition of six hundred xeroxed and silkscreened books were printed from the exhibit. The exhibition opened at the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art in New York and then traveled to the Southeastern Massachusetts University in Amherst and the Museum of Contemporary Art in São Paulo.

the female body express the parts that make up women's lives. References to ceremony appear in such titles as the *Sacrifice as a Tool of Meditation* and those to re-creation in *Rebirth: She Is Visited by Birds and Turtles*, and *She Stops The Act of Corrosion by Burning her Parts*. In addition to the works on paper, paintings, and an installation, this series also includes a work on the spectacular board in Times Square, the thirty-second computerlight animation, *Turtle News*, which was played every eleven minutes during the month of November 1988. The animation consisted of three connected segments that merged the autobiographical, concerns for the environment, and a critique of the North and South American debt.

As noted in the above discussion, the image of the female (and, sometimes, a surrogate, the turtle) has been the principal vehicle Carvalho uses to "speak to" personal fantasies, recall memories, and confront political issues such as rape, prejudice, war, and environmental destruction.

There is an organic relationship between the issues explored in the chapters "She Is Visited by Birds and Turtles" and the following one "My body is my country" (1990-1991) It seems that once Carvalho accepted her own hybrid identity, she was free to continue exploring the many dichotomies arising out of adapting to dual citizenship and living in the interstices of borders defined by oneself. Concerning that view, Carvalho wrote:

My body is my country
a resilient mass that stretches to embrace my territory
a land of iron, memories and resistance.

This series comprises paintings, an artists' book, and an installation also entitled *My Body Is My Country*. It powerfully explores the problems of having to choose one country over another, having to conform to categories of expectations imposed by two different cultures, and having to adhere to the citizenship laws of individual nations. The installation consists of a large, open window; a column supporting a container of blood; a text; the Brazilian and American flags placed on the floor in front of these elements; and images reproduced from the media. Carvalho has chosen a group of objects whose connotations unite private as well as public issues. Some of these have appeared in previous works, thereby carrying forward former significations, while the appropriations from the communications industry provide contemporary references. For example, the central pane in the window features a woman whose mouth is agape. That now-familiar figure (illustrated here) was formerly employed to illustrate the subject of rape in the series *In the shape of a woman*; the same figure was also used in the *Rape and Revenge of Gaia* (1988), a work addressing the destruction of nature. The left pane of the window shows images of hungry children and the destruction of the trees in the Amazons, two problems presently plaguing Brazil. The right pane presents images of racism, police

brutality, and homelessness -- conditions disturbing American society today. In an attempt to provide a critical framework within a poetic resolution the artist wrote an inventive text (a self-styled Constitution) that claims the passport's function to be poetic, the flag's to be aesthetic. It goes on to say that the individual may not be denigrated, raped, tortured, starved, or censored and that nature's flora and fauna should be valued as human life.

The chapter "My Body Is My Country" was temporarily interrupted in the early winter of 1991, when the United States led an allied military offensive against Iraq in the Persian Gulf. The artist's response to that particular war motivated what became the chapter "It's Still Time to Mourn" (1991-on going). Carvalho read a newspaper article that reported the remains of an Iraqi soldier's diary. The soldier's diary became the cornerstone for a beautiful body of works that consist of four installations and an artist's book. The first two installations were constructed around a core of images of the Gulf War that came from the mass media. The artist's book expands upon the original concept of her diary of images by reconstructing the Iraqi soldier's diary and inserting it into hers. In acknowledging this, the artist wrote:

Aboud,
I insert your diary in my diary
My diary becomes your diary
Josely

The artist designed her book entitled *Diary of Images: It's Still Time to Mourn* in the form of a prayer book so as to retain the highly personal and meditative nature of the soldier's journal. The book was made in the intimate size (7¹/₄ x 4⁵/₈ in.) and features the motif of a mihrab on both the front and back covers. Found in Islamic temples, the mihrab is a prayer niche that indicates the direction of Mecca. One of several striking images in the book is that of an Iraqi soldier kneeling and praying in front of his tank. Another is the use of Arabic script taken from the Koran, which is superimposed over images of the protagonists, many of whom believed they were fighting and dying in a holy war. Script from the Koran further enhances the religious nature of the diary at the same time that it places the visual images in a specific cultural context.

The transformation of the mihrab motif from its miniature size in the artist's book to a monumental size in the installations entitled *It's Still Time to Mourn: Dia Mater I* and *It's Still Time to Mourn: Dia Mater II* added new layers of meaning as well as new visual dimensions to the original theme of the evils of war. The title of the installations, *Dia Mater* alludes to the Babylonian creation epic "Enuma Elish," which relates the brutal description of how the mother goddess Tiamat was killed by her great, great, great, grandson Marduk. *It's Still Time to Mourn:*

Dia Mater I was composed of five mihrab-shaped windows inserted into a long wall.¹³ Each of these windows was constructed of three layers: two of Lucite, and one of paper, which bore silkscreened images. In looking into these mihrab windows, the viewer had an experience similar to looking into the light box/coffins of the earlier installations, where the images of pain and suffering from the war scenes have the reality of the actual world. In *It's Still Time to Mourn: Dia Mater II*, the artist silkscreened doors in the form of large-scale mihrabs on the wall leading to the area where a memorial tent was placed.¹⁴ The memorial tent took the form of a Bedouin tent made of camouflage netting used in the Vietnam War. Two low benches were placed around a light box/coffin so that the viewer could sit and ponder the human suffering exacted on the battlefield. In the light box/coffin, one of the entries conveying the Iraqi soldier's anguish appeared:

Baghdad,
 the city of my family,
 why are you sad?
 Your morning
 became dark,
 and your wailing
 increased nightly.
 No moon.
 No stars,
 to lighten up your skies.
 And the birds of our love,
 who used to bring beauty,
 are crying.

In this overview, one of the central objectives has been to provide a critical framework within which one can further appreciate the artist's sustained engagement with the social and political issues that are interwoven with an autobiographical narrative. Carvalho's project from the mid-1970s has centered on her involvement with diverse political and cultural communities both in this country and Brazil. *Ciranda I*, the installation that is presently exhibited in Intar Gallery, focuses upon the devastating violence wrought on the street children in Brazil. In preparing this installation, the artist returned once again to Brazil to do the first phase of

¹³ The installation was exhibited in Art in General in New York in January 1993.

¹⁴ The installation was exhibited in the Museu de Arte (MASP) in São Paulo in February 1993.

fieldwork with sociologists and street educators who work with children and adolescents. The visual documentation in this installation is constructed around a core of images, some of which are new, others of which were appropriated from the artist's previous pieces. The photographs of the street children come from Brazilian specialists who collaborated with the artist on this project; other photographs depicting the artist as a child are from the family album; still others are of children whom Carvalho photographed over the years. These are united around the imposing image in *The Scream*, which, as is noted above, connotes rape or violence.

Carvalho's aim has been to create a moving silkscreen, which is technically executed through a video installation. To do this, the photographs were transformed into half tone film and then shot with a video camera. As part of the larger silkscreen project, this work also deals with different forms of violence, resistance, and memory.