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MARÍA BRITO

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FOREWORD

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All the world's a stage,
and all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
and one man in his time plays many parts.

—Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

María Brito has played many parts in her lifetime, some written by social convention, cultural heritage, or political circumstance, and others discovered over time, through trial and error, serendipity, and what author Juan Martínez calls her “appropriation of past art and a will to allegory.” Brito’s art draws upon premodern and modern references, from the baroque to surrealism, while it also gives unique form to the political ruptures that have been at the center of her life. Brito was born in Cuba in 1947, and her parents sent her and her brother to the United States in 1961 through Operation Pedro Pan, the largest exodus of unaccompanied minors in the history of the Americas. In some ways her art has addressed this rupture, albeit outside political and cultural frameworks. Thus, even with Brito’s inclusion in the definitive “multicultural” exhibition *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s* (1990), not to mention the major art exhibitions on the Cuban diaspora, her artwork resists the very same identity and political categories that it evokes.

In her assemblages and interiors, Brito constructs fragments of domestic space in a way that engages associations not only with the family and home but also with the unconscious, the nation, and—in the case of *El Patio de Mi Casa* (1991)—the lasting legacy of the conquest of the Americas. If, as Martínez argues, her work represents “a will to allegory,” such allegory is marked by a central paradox: while each component within an artwork has an easily deciphered symbolism, often within an autobiographical register, the larger meaning is ambiguous, offering no easy correlation to social, cultural, political, spiritual, or moral meaning. Instead, we are left with unresolved contradictions and ruptures that reside within interiors, whether that interior is understood as the psyche (oscillating between memory and dream) or a domestic space (as

María Brito, *Merely a Player* (detail), 1993. Mixed-media installation, 102 × 180 × 204 inches.



metaphor for the self or metonym of the social). Brito's artistic project is to instantiate an "identity in the making," as Martínez argues, wherein the component parts necessarily "exist in tight but uneasy accommodation," resulting in "anxious interiors." Brito's anxious interiors reveal that what is most private about the domestic is also most public, making the woman's body, sense of self, and state-sanctioned sexuality into a complex metaphor that straddles the private and public spheres as well as competing nations (here, Cuba and the United States represent an extreme mapping of ideologies and socioeconomic structures vis-à-vis public and private ownership).

If in her early work Brito inverted and exposed domestic spaces, in *Merely a Player* (1993) she created her first enclosed installation, turning the home into an autobiographical labyrinth. From outside the installation one sees an exposed living room area that marks the exit and entrance to the labyrinth, which has walls but



María Brito, *Merely a Player* (details), 1993. Mixed-media installation, 102 × 180 × 204 inches.

no ceiling. Entering the labyrinth, one first encounters something on the order of a locker room for removing and storing all one's identity markers. Here there are clothes, wallet, keys, wedding ring, and even a diary (which is written in Spanish and rolled up in a tube; inside one can read references to the author's wedding and father). There are facial masks in two medium-sized slots, and above them is a small mirror, so one can glimpse one's unmasked self before proceeding through the rest of the interior. The installation includes several rooms that are evocative of a bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom, connected by a hallway that leads back to the exposed living room. In moving from room to hallway to room, one also moves through a further autobiographical unmasking, encountering Brito's family photographs, clay strips of the artist's face, and, through a peephole in the hallway, a film loop of a small girl in another hallway who is unable to open the door to any of the rooms. Throughout, there are recurring objects (dolls and

doll parts) and colors (blue), but also disturbing visual tropes for collecting the artifacts of personal memory: plastic bags, glass jars, metal buckets. Here we have memory as an accretion, lacking any order other than that of being contained and set aside. In one room, above a faucet and sink, a bar of Ivory soap is displayed within a picture frame ringed by small outreaching hands, almost as if it were the Host prior to the Fraction, or breaking of bread, and receiving of Communion. This offering also conjures up a visual pun with the phrase “cleanliness is next to godliness.” But elsewhere we find dirty washcloths, as well as black dirt creeping into the interior, not quite held back by a broom.

Merely a Player subsumes its viewers, taking them through an installation that is coded as autobiographical on the artist’s part but that also relies on the viewer’s embodied experience with the work in space and time. In fact, because the installation is temporary (it has been exhibited twice), the viewer’s experience *is* the work, and its tight quarters make impossible the illusion of photographic documentation as a “realistic” surrogate since the space must be shot in wide angle and as details. When *Merely a Player* first exhibited in 1993 (I was co-curator for this commissioned work), it represented a shift in Brito’s anxious interiors, from opened to enclosed, from proscenium style to immersive, from poetic to narrative. One can understand the piece as a dismantling of the domestic space that provides the basis for a stable and coherent figure of speech with which to describe the self (metaphor), the social (metonymy), or, as narrated through marriage, social existence and spiritual meaning (allegory). There is simply too much “dirt” that builds up within any home and that must be scrubbed clean, stored away, or swept back in order to maintain these figures of speech and the sense of social order they articulate among the self, family, community, and nation. Within such a structure, to unmask is to find another mask; there is no end point, essential and unchanging, but instead a continuous process of “identity in the making.”

The title’s reference to Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* offers its own clues and insights. In this play, marriage is the end point, the resolution that restores order, but it is also an artifice. The two main characters, Rosalind and Celia, secure their future husbands’ love while they are in disguise: Rosalind as a young man, and Celia as another woman. Here, the female characters are “merely” players in three senses of the word: they are playing

social roles (both received and assumed), playing a situation (otherwise outside their control), and being played by young men (in the tradition of Elizabethan theater). Shakespeare's gender reversals create a dramatic irony that opens up an ambiguous social space for Rosalind and Celia, one that informs Brito's approach to the domestic interior, where "all the men and women . . . / They have their exits and their entrances."

On the last day of the 1993 installation, I attempted my own exit, walking through *Merely a Player* one more time with a tape recorder, hoping to capture something about this profoundly powerful piece. I spoke at length and in detail, and afterwards I sat on the sofa in the living room area, looking out at the other installations in the main gallery. I could not let go, and I walked back inside the installation, eventually crouching down in one of the small rooms, silently attentive to the space. It happened here, a clock embedded in the floor marking the exact moment. No one could see from outside the walls, and most likely no one cared. Even so, in this closed space the memories were gathered up and stored in containers, framed and displayed on shelves, or even hung on the walls, each like a fish on a hook. The other visible clues were repeatedly washed away into social graces. One must go back into this anxious interior, peel away the masks, sit with the things that go unsaid, that remain inside, and then—as time grows short and the gallery lights flicker, signaling imminent closure—return to the space of the living, still merely a player.

In her recent work, Brito has articulated this social vision through art history. In *Party at Goya's (First Arrivals)* (2006), Brito arranges sculptural forms based on several characters from Francisco de Goya's *Los Caprichos* (1799), a set of aquatint prints. Brito had already created a number of such sculptures based on Goya's prints, calling the series *Las Goyescas*. But here she also inserts both herself and Goya at the edge of the scene, seated on a bench and talking to each other. Neither Brito nor Goya exists outside his or her own social critique and caricature, for their works speak to the human condition and not just to the foibles of others (as seen from outside). Brito often mobilizes self-portraiture across the various modes within which she works (assemblage, painting, sculpture), just as Goya famously included his own image among *Los Caprichos*. While neither artist claims to step outside their social and historical moment, they can nevertheless sit to the side and have a private conversation about art, politics, and everyday life.



María Brito, *Party at Goya's (First Arrivals)*, 2006.
Polymer clay, 13 ½ × 24 × 30 inches. In the foreground the artist depicts herself talking with Goya.
Photograph by Juan Martínez.

One imagines this conversation ending with “universal laughter,” as does the conversation about marriage at the end of George Bernard Shaw’s *Man and Superman* (1903). Here, as with Goya and Shakespeare, we have a satire and social critique that suggests a comedy of manners. The laughter produced is “universal,” not because the universe (or the *Übermensch*, to which Shaw also refers) is laughing at us, but because we have acquired a sense of dramatic irony about ourselves. The laughter is ours, because through the artwork we can observe something in ourselves about which we are otherwise unaware or less conscious. In *Party at Goya's*, Brito places her work within this artistic tradition, but she also complicates the gendered critique that it has made of manners, marriage, and women. Here Brito is the artist and the subject; she has something to say about social relations, and she is an object on display. Her predecessor is throwing a party, and some two hundred years later Brito is among the first arrivals. Now she is the one who has Goya’s ear. One imagines that she has much to say, and that she is laughing.