

Review of “Liliana Porter: Línea de Tiempo” (Line of Time)

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Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo, Mexico City

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The recent exhibition of Argentine-born, New York-based artist Liliana Porter (b. Buenos Aires, 1941) at the Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo examines the relationship of the artist’s body of work to the concept of the timeline. Organized by curator Tobias Ostrander, the show presents thirty-eight drawings, prints, photographs, small-scale installations, and videos executed over the last forty years. Despite the chronological breadth of the works included, the show is surprisingly concise in its attempts to demonstrate Porter’s long-term probing of time and reality. Porter’s works are heavily influenced by various artistic and literary sources—from René Magritte to José Luis Borges—for their insight into the possibility of multiple realities. Porter owes much to these precedents, particularly the Surrealists, as she continually empowers the viewer to question what he or she is experiencing through visual juxtapositions of the everyday and the extraordinary.

Ostrander’s use of the timeline as an organizing principle for the exhibition is simultaneously successful and contradictory in its emphasis on the significance of time in Porter’s work, as the artist’s use of temporal fluidity is often noted. The works assembled for “Línea de Tiempo” do not represent a linear progression as the title suggests, but rather expose a deep exploration of time’s impact on our individual and collective realities. Ostrander explains in his statement for the exhibition that it “does not follow a historical progression, but rather highlights repetitions; specific formal and conceptual interests that have reoccurred at various times throughout the forty-years of her production.”¹ So while the timeline visually illustrates the linear unfolding of time, the works displayed at the Tamayo directly challenge this concept.

Porter’s investment in repetition demonstrates a keen awareness of the

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problematic tradition of simulacra in art. A prime example of this (among many) is *Wrinkle* (1968), a series of ten photoengravings that chronicle the crumpling of a blank piece of paper. As the series progresses, each print depicts an illusionistically rendered sheet of white paper that becomes increasingly wrinkled by an invisible force. This series is one of Porter's more well-known early works and for good reason. Along with other prints and drawings presented in the first gallery, *Wrinkle* makes evident the artist's career-long interest in the use of simulacrum to invite meditations on the connections and disconnections between the object and its artistic representation.

While the visual games generated by Porter's illusionism are nothing new to the history of art, Porter surprises our expectations by imbuing the tension between the rendered and the real by injecting an emotional charge into the situations faced by the mass-produced toys and figurines she collects. A cast of kitschy, flea-market finds—dolls, wind-up toys, salt shakers, figurines, etc.—are featured throughout Porter's oeuvre and have become her signature.

The best example of this may be seen in *Reconstruction (Penguin)* from 2007, which is comprised of a toy penguin standing on a small white shelf with a photograph of the same penguin broken into pieces serving as a backdrop. The intact penguin seems unaware or perhaps surprised by the destruction that has occurred in the background. We are painfully aware of the bird's fate, yet we are also powerless to change the course of time or even to communicate a warning to the little toy. This tension is only heightened by the lack of any explanation of the scene we are witnessing. What this work and others in the show provoke is an uncanny and slightly disturbing interaction between object and representation, and, subsequently, a shared tension felt between the art object and the viewer. Through the penguin, the viewer is able to confront his or her own mortality.

Porter's videos *For You*, 1999; *Drum Solo*, 2000; and *Fox in the Mirror*, 2007, are the most successful works in the exhibition, though they do not express the theme of the line as didactically as other works in the show. The video *For You* is a prime example of the artist's questioning of a single shared reality. She presents her found trinkets performing their intended functions, but in strange situations that simultaneously delight and disturb. More often than not, the vignettes that comprise the larger videos feature the interactions of unexpected pairings of toys. In one of the vignettes from *For You*, a little blonde doll dressed in a light blue dress and white petticoat faces off against a small toy frog. As the camera closely examines the doll, we are quickly disrupted by the jabbing tongue of the frog as it aggressively laps at the hem of the doll's skirt. While at first it seems that the two figures have surreptitiously encountered one another in space, we are suddenly reminded of the

characters' connection to the here and now.

In her videos Porter is quick to emphasize the latent meanings hidden within the banality of her everyday objects. We are asked to abandon the reality of our world and consider alternative ways of thinking and being. Porter's toys cannot act on their own. They require the intervention of the artist and the viewer to provide meaning and context. In many ways, the figurines function as "stand-ins" for our own feelings and experiences, in favor of what Porter really does best—subvert, disturb, and confound our expectations.

Many of the drawings and photographs included in the exhibition are clearly and directly related to their accompanying video pieces. However when they are treated as autonomous works, as this show does, they fall flat, as is the case for *Black Thread* (2000), in which an anonymous force tugs at a black string connected to a Mickey Mouse figurine. This seemingly innocuous scene is disturbed by the fact that Mickey has lost his head. Without the activation of Mickey's beheading that may only be seen in the accompanying video, the tension between reality and fiction is not as strongly felt.

Overall "Línea de Tiempo" succeeds in identifying and closely examining an important theme in Porter's work. What is made evident by this meditation on the timeline is that Porter's work is anything but an illustration of linear events. Rather, Porter constantly doubles-back and revisits her diverse and complex assortment of visual symbols, squeezing them for all they are worth. The juxtapositions ask many questions that are never answered, but this is the fun of stepping into the alternative world the artist creates. Porter has explained, "All the work is an awareness of the fact that there is something we didn't get...then the suspicion arises that the explanation is in a different order. As though we were missing our glasses."² By drawing a thematic line through this artist's forty-year career, the exhibition invites us to question the lenses through which we experience the world. But in Porter's world we get the feeling that we might all benefit from taking our glasses off from time to time, in order to see something we otherwise could never imagine.

1 Tobias Ostrander, "Liliana Porter: Line of Time," curatorial statement, Museo Tamayo Arte Contemporáneo (2009), accessed online, <http://www.museotamayo.org/porter/eng.htm>.

² José Luis Blondet, "A Conversation with Liliana Porter and a Honey Jar," *Art Nexus* Vol. 5, No. 60 (March-May 2006): 64.