

REVIEWS

Teresa Burga

ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES

Teresa Burga, who is based in Lima, Peru, has been making art for more than fifty years. Yet it was hardly evident in the drawings and sculptures that comprised this, her first gallery show in the US, where she is barely known. Youthful energy was showcased in several series of densely rendered mixed-media works on paper featuring, variously, cute girls in folkloric fashions (“*Niñas peruanas Cusqueñas*” [Peruvian Girls from Cusco], 2019), and the flamboyant figures of the Carnival of



View of Teresa Burga, 2019

Venice that pop in and out of patterned backdrops (“*Acqua Alta*” [High Water], 2019–). The drawings might have been mistaken as illustrations for children’s books, or even fanciful works imaginatively created by a budding artist, were it not for the “production notes” that accompanied each piece and record the date and times of the artist’s labor. Was this child’s play as subterfuge? The question persisted in a pair of welded steel sculptures from 2019, an extension of her series “*Máquinas inútiles*” (Inutile Machines), 1972–74. Roughly six feet tall and sprouting garlands of flowers and leaves, they virtually swayed with decorative energy. Whimsy was pronounced but, yet again, tempered by more notational information.

Four drawings featured diagrams for these works, such as *Florero* (Flower Vase) and *Lampara* (Lamp), both 1974, as well as designs for a go—cart and an airplane. Start matching the dates of these drawings with the circumstances that prevailed in Peru in those years, under General Juan Velasco Alvarado’s repressive regime (which lasted from 1968 until 1975) and the official dictates about what acceptable artistic production was (art had to look traditional, “Peruvian”) and Burga’s refusal to accede to censorship begins to come into view. Her dilemma: how to be free artistically and yet not draw the ire of the state—which brings us back to child’s play as subterfuge, and the irony that now she produces art that “looks Peruvian,” but in a style of de-skilling that would certainly have been deemed subversive long ago.

Another series of small drawings, in production from the ’70s until quite recently, consisted of what might be construed as colorful, intricate pattern doodles. Improvisational and cleverly varied, like organic growth charts—bursting, twisting, spiraling—they connote a seemingly happy continuum of carefree mindlessness (as in automatic drawing), that belies the actual circumstances of their production. These “*Insomnia Drawings*,” 1974–2004, reflect what might be seen as the ethos of Burga’s art—no peace or rest, but persisting and working as one must. As if freed from the tiny scraps of paper upon which they were made, one of the images, *Insomnia (10)*, 1989/2019, was blown up as a large-scale wall drawing in graphite and colored pencil.

Burga graduated from the Art Institute of Chicago with her MFA in 1970. She was already accomplished as an artist and founding member, in 1966, of the Grupo Arte Nuevo, a Lima-based collective of avant-garde artists enthused about the possibilities of new art—such as Pop, Happenings, and installation art. Burga left for Chicago on a Fulbright scholarship in 1968, the year of Peru’s military coup. Needless to say, the collective was shut down by the dictatorship when artistic production began to be monitored by the government.

Although Burga might not have anticipated emancipation during Alvarado’s rule, she found ways to flex her feminist concerns and to make art in ways that were disarmingly simple yet intellectually charged. What was so radical in her work was not just her gravitation to the most radical forms of that time, but her desire to combine these idioms of practice: her propensity is to sample assorted styles—from socialist realism to Conceptualism—with the ultimate goal of serving socio-feminist matters.

Burga is an artist who has long been dismissed for being female, for not making the right kind of art. She is recuperated, and her practice, it turns out, is vital to our understanding not only of the past but of our diverse present. Given the brevity of this exhibition, which tended to strip her art of its historical context, a full appreciation of how deeply resistance and political intent underwrite her practice was difficult. The show sufficed, nonetheless, to whet our appetite for more.

—Jan Avgikos