

CONNIE ARISMENDI

PASAJERO



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

APRIL 7 - MAY 12, 2001

AUSTIN, TEXAS

CONNIE ARISMENDI

SOLACE

Pasajero, taken from the Spanish word for “transient” or “fleeting,” reflects my interest in the inexorable passage of time and the transitory nature of life.

In works of art that offer the viewer a privileged access to personal feelings filtered through memory, Arismendi offers solace in a world where such access is rare. The installations in this exhibition examine the themes of memory, forgiveness, and the inevitability of death. Looming large over the exhibition is the death of a parent. Such a death, after all, is the foreshadowing of our own death. And it is death and the awareness of its inevitability that impels Arismendi’s art—sometimes allusively, sometimes explicitly.

In *El Arbol de Mi Vida* (*The Tree of My Life*), time is arrested in the images of family members that Arismendi has drawn on fabric and then imbedded beneath the surfaces of candles. Here, technique has meaning—doesn’t it always? These are *relicuarios* of childhood, of moments in a life that has now moved on. These images resonate with familiarity: is that a brother or cousin or her father as a young man? They are sealed under a layer of wax, in a past that we cannot measure.

And, the images are on candles. This metaphor for the ephemeral is lifted above the ordinary by scale, and by the requirement that we arch our necks to see the images. Interpreting what we can see, we thus construct personal narratives with our own imaginations. The images are above eye level, raised on the colossal armature of what symbolically represents the tree of life.

The tree is also a candelabrum. Arismendi speaks of having seen the oversized candelabrum in the cathedral of Milan, and how she found it—and finds it—grotesque in its scale. She felt compelled to return to Milan to draw it and engage it. She captures in the sculpture of the tree/candelabrum the feeling of arms outreaching, conveying a sense of both embrace and threat. Looking at the iron branches, one is reminded of the outstretched arms of Matthias Grünewald’s *Isenheim Altarpiece* and the clawed hands of the dying Christ.

The tree has yet another symbolic meaning—that of rebirth. The tree loses its leaves, but the leaves return, reborn in the spring. So, with the images of family members, the tree reminds us that while death is inevitable, it engenders rebirth and that families go on, as does life itself. While this is a significant part of the poetic vocabulary, it is something we can easily overlook in the face of loss. Arismendi offers us the reminder as reassurance. It is quiet, as is all of her work, but what it has to say is profound.

The tree form is placed on a bed of turquoise stones interspersed with golden seeds. This conjunction of inert and live forms reinforces the meaning of the sculptural elements. It also adds to our awareness of another articulation of solace that Arismendi offers. Her work is a sort of defiance of entropy. She suggests that fate cannot be controlled, but how we see it can. And ultimately, the art process and the responsibility of the artist can be viewed as that of



El Arbol de mi Vida. The Tree of My Life, 2000.
Wax, steel, stone, pencil. 9 1/2' x 6' diameter

ameliorating, even offering a bulwark against, the inevitability of entropy, of which death is only one manifestation. Art, after all, lasts—not forever, but a long time, and longer than we will—if it is crafted well. Arismendi’s meticulous hand is not just the indulgence of an artist with skill. It is a statement of faith.

In her prints, Arismendi uses the imagery of textiles that we often see in interiors, draped over windows or covering armchairs and sofas. This association with the domestic also introduces a mediated version of nature. Fish against waves, flowers against the filigree of branches,

all in repeated patterns, are a ground upon which Arismendi places the particular. Growing up with such images printed on the wallpaper of my parents' house, I am carried back to my own childhood when viewing these works. I am sure that these images may link many of us to familiar environments. Now, of course, as Tolstoy suggests, not all family associations are happy ones, but they are undeniable. Arismendi uses these patterned backgrounds to evoke the past, over which she layers two other recurring symbolic images—a flamed mirror and a bird—to collapse them as memory and association.

In *La Voz del Pajarito: Recuerda* (*The Voice of the Bird: Remember*), the artist creates a shadow image of a songbird, sitting on a tree branch at twilight. Delicate vellum star cutouts are pinned to the wall and illuminated with soft light that, in turn, casts pale shadows of the fragile stars. Here, the positive and negative are paired. This installation also reflects a recurring aspect of Arismendi's art-making process: making many small units by hand that are then lavished upon the work. On the floor Arismendi has placed a small, non-reflective mirror on a mound of sand. The letters spelling "Remember" and "Recuerda" are placed in a spiral that converges upon itself until the words become jumbled and unreadable. In its haunting evocation of time and memory, the piece alludes to both the need to remember and the difficulty of doing so.

The title alone of *Clemencia* (*Mercy*) reinforces Arismendi's offer of solace. In a world in which vengeance is common—if not valorized—forgiveness is a scarce commodity. Incorporating hundreds of tear-shaped forms, pinned on the wall as falling droplets, she again uses repeated

elements to create a rhythm and a sense of motion. Arismendi can convey purity, as she does so exquisitely here. The installation incorporates a basin of water mounted on top of sand. The word "Forgive" floats in the water as a reminder of the sacrament of baptism that removes sin and thus admonishes us to forgive others.

In *La Vida en el Espejo* (*Life in the Mirror*), I am immediately reminded of the images of *las animas*, souls in the flames of purgatory. The diaphanous curtain—a device Arismendi has used effectively to convey simultaneous layers of being or time or experience—moves as the viewer nears it; it reacts to a breeze or a draft or a hand that brushes by it. It animates the image. At the same time, the mirror captures the moving figure of the viewer and reflects the environment, functioning in the same way that it does in the *locus classicus* of this device, *Las Meninas* by Velasquez. The piece can never be the same twice. It is about the inevitability of death, but it is also about constant flux. And it reminds us of the preciousness of every moment since each is absolutely unique.

The sense of the ephemeral is reiterated in the many ceramic roses that outline the mirror. Metaphorically, these will wilt and fade, and the petals will drop, just as the candles of the Tree of Life will consume themselves.

The references to time in Arismendi's work are subtle, but ever-present. I am always impressed with what I might call the dignity of the pace of Arismendi's work: she manages to focus and deepen the meaning of the work by slowing it down, and by slowing us down. We wait for the change in *La Vida en el Espejo*, and are reminded of the great artistic

tradition that it evokes. The *memento mori* has a long history in art and Arismendi sees its relevance in our own time.

In addition to beauty in abundance and a dignified pace, the meticulously crafted work is quiet. And what a gift of solace that is. Arismendi offers an alternative to the breakneck velocity of the postmodern sense of time. More and more, that seems like a treasure: to experience something without glancing over it, to immerse in the moment, and to feel it as well as record it. It is feeling that this work is about, informed by artistic tradition and the artist's own experiences. And, she offers us the privilege of joining her.

Marilyn A. Zeitlin
Director, Arizona State University
Art Museum
Tempe, Arizona
May 2001

CONNIE ARISMENDI

Resides in Austin, Texas

EDUCATION

- 1986 M.F.A. The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
1982 B.F.A. University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2001 *Pasajero*, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX.
1999 *The Ascent of Memory*, Galeria Sin Fronteras, Austin, TX.
1997 *Dark Field/Dark Heart*, Gallery 210, University of Missouri, St. Louis, MO.
1996 *The Leaf & The Flame*, Guadalupe Cultural Arts Center Annex, San Antonio, TX.
The Garden Path, Center for Hispanic Art, Corpus Christi, TX.
1993 *Sighs of Angels*, Lynn Goode Gallery, Houston, TX. Curated by Benito Huerta.
1991 *Signs & Symbols*, Galeria Sin Fronteras, Austin, TX.

SELECTED TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

- 1998 *Kathy Vargas/Connie Arismendi*, CRCA The Gallery at UTA, University of Texas at Arlington, TX. (*Brochure*)
1995 *Tina Fuentes & Connie Arismendi*, J.Cacciola Galleries, New York, NY.
1993 *Sin Ti/Without You*, an installation commemorating World AIDS Day in collaboration with Benito Huerta, Laguna Gloria Art Museum, Austin, TX.

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2000 *Gardens of Pleasure*, John Michael Kohler Art Center, Sheboygan, WI.
No Absolutes, ASU Art Museum, Arizona State University, Tempe Arizona. (*Catalogue*)
Houston Sculpture 2000, 18th International Sculpture Conference, Houston, TX.
1999 *Imagenes/Historias: Chicana Inspired Altars*, organized by Tufts University and Santa Clara University. National touring schedule. (*Catalogue*)
Groundswell: Artists and the Earth, Austin Museum of Art at Laguna Gloria, Austin, TX. Curated by Katie Hernandez-Coles.

- 1999 *A Fresh look at Texas Art*, The McKinney Avenue Contemporary, Dallas, TX. Juried by Terrie Sultan.
1998 *Contemporary Texas Artists: Connie Arismendi, James Cobb, Melissa Miller, and Kathy Vargas*, Weil Gallery, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi, TX. (*Brochure*)
1997 *The Art Ball Year One*, Austin Museum of Art Auction, Austin, TX.
Tres Proyectos Latinos: Re-Collections, Memory Frames, Layer Upon Layer, Austin Museum of Art at Laguna Gloria, Austin, TX.
Fresh Ink: Austin Print Workshops, Austin Museum of Art Downtown, Austin, TX. (*Catalogue*)
1996 *de Mujer a Mujer: A Celebration of Latinas by Latina Artists*, Austin Museum of Art Downtown, Austin, TX. Curated by Amelia Malagamba.
1995 *Latinos Tejanos*, Guadalupe Cultural Art Center, San Antonio, TX.
1994 *The Mystical in Art - Chicano/Latino Painting*, Carnegie Art Museum, Oxnard, CA. Curated by Frank Romero.
Collector's Choice: Living with Art, Austin Museum of Art at Laguna Gloria, Austin, TX.
1993 *Taller de Monotipia: Identidades Fronterizas*, organized by Galeria Sin Fronteras, Austin, TX. Mexican touring schedule: Centro Cultura, Tijuana; Museo de la Ex-Aduana, Ciudad Juarez; Casa de la Cultura, Nuevo Laredo.
1993 *Texas Biennial, DARE*, Dallas, TX. (*Catalogue*)
Intimate Lives, Women & Their Work, Austin, TX. Curated by Kathy Vargas. (*Catalogue*)
1992 *Experiencias En Un Nuevo Orden Mundial (Experiences in a New World Order)*, Centro Colombo Americano, Medellin, Colombia. Columbian tour included Cali and Bogota. (*Catalogue*)
1991 *Contemporary Hispanic Women Artists of Texas*, Curated by Benito Huerta. Texas touring schedule. (*Catalogue*)
1989 *Taller de Monotipia*, Museo Nacional de la Estampa, Mexico City, Mexico.

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, TX
El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Tijuana, Mexico
Hispanic Research Center, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona

La Voz del Pajarito: Recuerda.

The Voice of the Bird: Remember, 2001. (Detail)
Polymer clay, sand, mirror, shadow projection.





Cover Panel: *La Vida en al Espejo. Life in the mirror*, 2001. Polymer clay on wood, mirror, pencil on fabric. 7' 6" x 3' 6"
This Panel: *La Voz del Pajarito: Recuerda. The Voice of the Bird: Remember*, 2001. Polymer clay, sand, mirror, shadow projection. Variable dimensions.
Back Panel: *Clemencia. Mercy*, 2001. Polymer clay, sand, glass, water, mylar. 7' 11" x 34"



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

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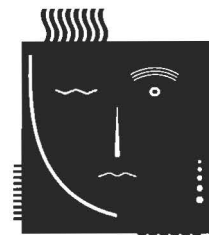
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Now celebrating its 23rd anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,632 artists in 200 visual art exhibitions, 100 music, dance, and theater events, 12 film festivals, 19 literary readings, and 190 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and National Public Radio and

was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



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