

literal

Latin American Voices

G r a c i e l a L i m ó n

Storytelling With Intellectual Honesty

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Painting: Liliana Porter • Exhibition: The Art of the War • Photography: María Martínez-Cañas

Alberto Ruy Sánchez: La imaginación erótica / Erotic Imagination

Adolfo Castañón: Introducción al método de Salvador Elizondo

Sealtiel Alatríste • Gabriela Baeza Ventura • Jorge Brash • Fernando R. Casas • Fernando Castro • Malva Flores
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l i l i a n a p o r t e r



▲ for instance III / por ejemplo III
2005, archival digital prints mounted on aluminum & laminated

THE GARDEN OF FIRE

▶ ALBERTO RUY SÁNCHEZ

TRANSLATED TO ENGLISH BY RHONDA DAHL BUCHANAN

• From *The Secret Gardens of Mogador: Voices of the Earth*.
2006 NEA Translation Project

It smells of smoke and its pleasure has no bounds, as if it were the perfume of a rare flower, new to his garden, obtained with infinite patience. Many years ago, during a forest fire, this gardener discovered that roots continue burning beneath the ground long after the fire has supposedly been extinguished. It was then he decided to cultivate a garden of highly flammable roots, controlling their subterranean fire beds with buried channels of water in such a way that the flames sprout to the surface like bouquets of fire flowers igniting the thicket or trees he designates.

He walks in his garden of underground fires, sensing through his skin the heat that flows slowly beneath the ground. He designs routes and controls them, irrigating here and there the contours of his channels. And when at last the blazing flower opens where he wished, he recognizes in the burning plant the ephemeral perfumed blossom of his ardent fancy.

The network of roots, which he cannot see, contributes a great number of unforeseen fires to his harvest. Heat runs through unsuspected beds, surprising him when it breaks out where he least expects it. Then the beauty of his flowers becomes convulsive, brutal. A sudden elation comes over the gardener at that moment and the gleam of the flames in his eyes is kindled by the combustion in his mind.

When the sun kisses the horizon, the gardener sometimes imagines he planted that fire in the sky, that an unforeseen and invisible aerial root guides his fire to the clouds, converting them into flickers, embers, and finally charcoal.

He discovered that the night is actually endless coal and that the stars are tiny souvenirs of fire imbedded in the great carbon vault. Fossilized flowers. Then it occurs to him that it takes millions of years and millions of gardeners to tend his garden so that his blazing flowers may shine each night on their own. Meanwhile, when darkness falls over the garden, its master draws a celestial map with his radiant flowers, a geometry of shooting stars. At first he wanted to mirror the sky exactly, but later he was moved to sketch his own constellations.

Some come at night to read their destiny or that of their loved ones in the stellar drawing of this fiery field. And the curator of the Great Underground Library of Mogador proposes that more than a few revolutions, what he calls "fire in the human mind," began as one of the glimmering flow-

ers in this garden, and likewise, the roots of uprisings in China, Iran, or Patagonia extend back to this place.

Whenever the gardener sows, waters, and illuminates, he knows he is planting an unexpected spark in the world, that the beauty of his garden shakes empires, perhaps even burns stars in the firmament, dries rivers on other continents, demolishes skyscrapers in flames, and beheads kings.

There are also those who believe that each sudden blaze in this garden corresponds to a tragic passion. That neither Romeo nor Juliet, neither Abelard nor Heloise escaped the power of these roots that in a mysterious but sure manner reach all the way to the heart of certain people.

The other day the gardener was walking down the street and noticed two strangers, a man and a woman, staring at each other with desiring eyes. There were simultaneous sparks in their pupils, and judging from their intensity, the gardener knew in what part of his garden that fiery passion had originated because not all plants burn the same. So he ran to the southern orchard of dry palm trees to observe from his terrace the splendor of that spontaneous blossoming. And watching his garden, he knew in what moment the desire between that couple overflowed, how long they made love, and when their passion extinguished.

I think about this garden when I feel on your skin the warmth surging through your veins, when you slowly cross, intently, the few inches that separate us, as if you came from very far away. When your entire body guides me to the most intense heat within you, which little by little consumes me between your legs, those two great flames that, like an uncontrollable fire kindled by the wind, seize me, binding me to you.

I think about the happiness of this gardener when time and time again the joy of mutual possession burns in your eyes, when your mouth barely emits a crackle, the sound of a sudden flare. When you embrace me and you are embers, when you kiss me and you are that one who lets your entire body be filled with roots of fire, keeping alive forever the promise of a shining flower that ignites us.

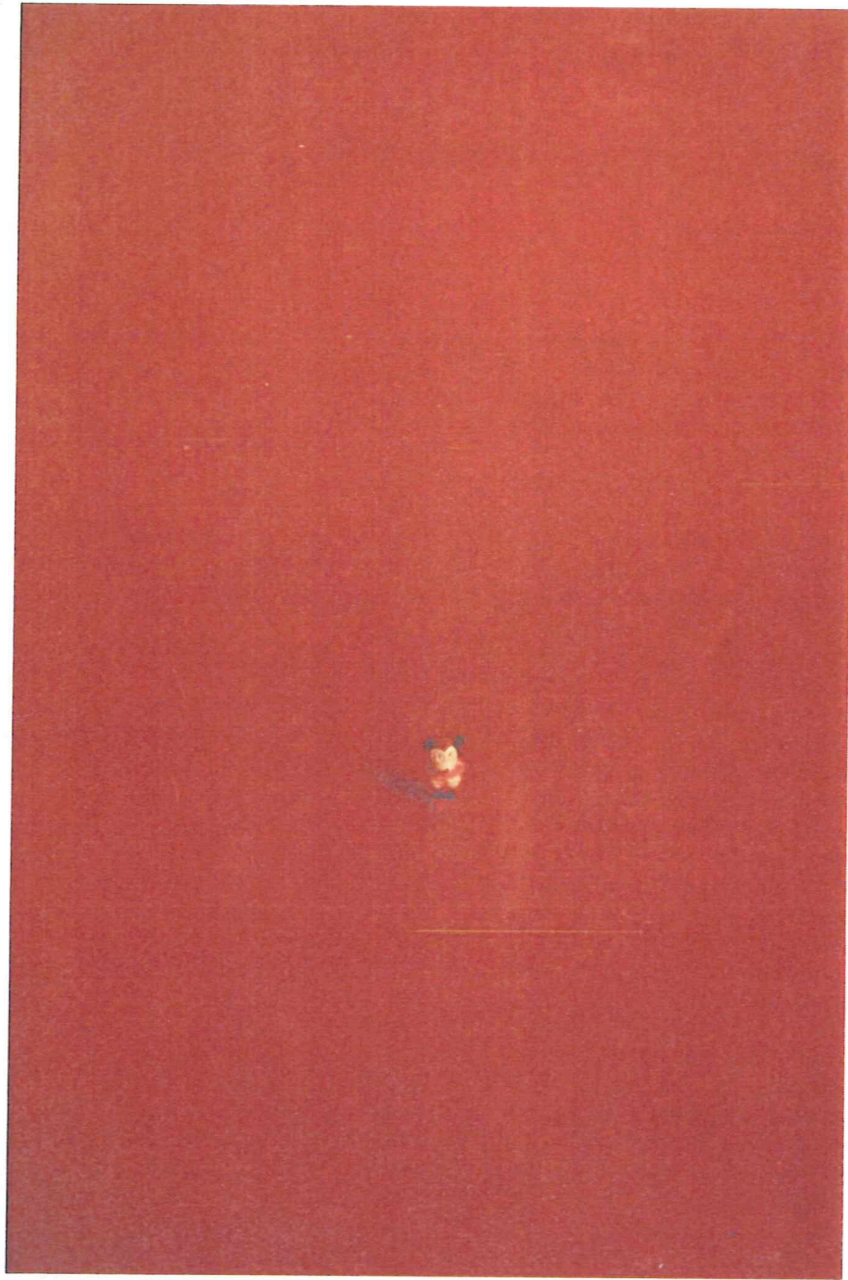


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Photography courtesy of Sicardi Gallery of Houston



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▲ minnie
1995, cibachrome

THE QUOTED “WOR(L)D” OF LILIANA PORTER / EL “MU(N)DO”

CITADO POR LILIANA PORTER

► FERNANDO CASTRO

One of the most curious and paradoxical facts about Liliana Porter’s seemingly infantile *oeuvre* is the often complicated and obscure language that many critics use in order to discuss it. On the one hand, this peculiarity reflects the current state of critical language; but on the other hand, it also evidences the challenge of providing a serious interpretation for an *oeuvre* that at times appears to amount to nothing more than playing with dolls, while at others it poses true intellectual riddles.

Photography has been the central vehicle of Liliana Porter’s work since the seventies. Since the nineties the objects she photographs are plastic or porcelain figurines of political or religious personalities or part of the inventory of children’s toys and/or comic-book literature. On occasion the figurines are paired so that the viewer is enticed to imagine a dialogue between them. A seminal piece is *Diálogo* (1996) in which Pinocchio (the deceitful wooden marionette who—after making amends—“becomes” a “real” boy) engages in an imaginary conversation with Gregorio Hernández, the Venezuelan “physician of the poor,” who came to be regarded as a popular saint. Who is lying to whom? Some find a resemblance between the latter and Charlie Chan, the Chinese character of detective movies. Porter herself likens him to the self-portraits of René Magritte, the Belgian Surrealist painter—master of the visual lie—. In works such as *The Explanation* (1991) she has used Gregorio Hernández qua Magritte, but in *To Go Back* (2001) it would seem that the figurine has to be Charlie Chan returning to China and to a flat world. The representational lie is a constant in Porter’s *oeuvre*.

Two important critics, Gerardo Mosquera and Luis Camnitzer, have interpreted Liliana Porter’s photographic work by alluding to Jorge Luis Borges’s literature and René Magritte’s paintings.

UNO DE LOS HECHOS MÁS CURIOSOS Y PARADÓJICOS ACERCA de la obra aparentemente infantil de Liliana Porter es el complicado y oscuro lenguaje que muchos de sus críticos emplean para discutirla. Por un lado, esta peculiaridad refleja las tendencias actuales del lenguaje crítico; por otro, evidencia también el desafío de proveer una interpretación seria a una obra que a veces parece sólo un juego de muñecos mientras que otras veces plantea verdaderos retos intelectuales.

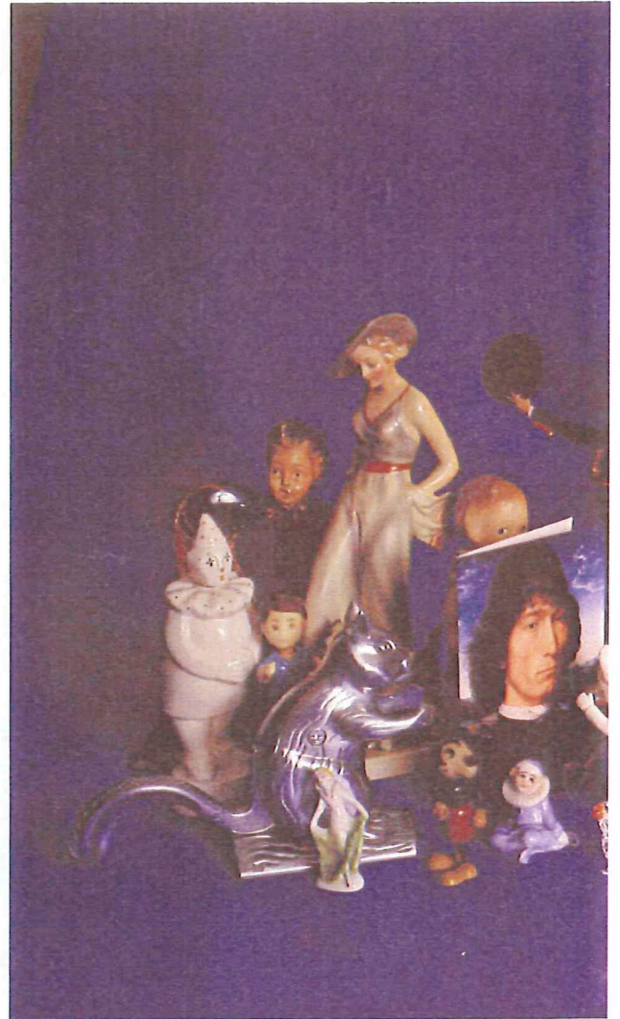
Desde los años setenta la fotografía ha sido el vehículo principal de la obra de Porter. Desde los noventa los objetos que fotografía son figuritas de plástico o porcelana que representan personajes religiosos, políticos, o parte del inventario de juguetes infantiles o de las tiras cómicas. En ocasiones Porter aparea las figuritas para que el espectador se imagine un diálogo entre ellas. Un caso ejemplar es *Diálogo* (1996) en el que aparece Pinocho (la marioneta mentirosa quien—al enmendarse—“llegó a ser” un niño “real”) en una imaginaria conversación con Gregorio Hernández, el “médico de los pobres” quien es considerado santo popular en Venezuela. ¿Quién le miente a quién? Hay quienes encuentran un parecido de este último con Charlie Chan, el personaje chino de películas de detectives. La propia Porter lo asemeja a los autorretratos de René Magritte, el pintor surrealista belga —maestro del engaño visual—. En obras como *La explicación* (1991) ella ha usado a Gregorio Hernández o a Magritte, pero en *Regresar* (2001) la figurita tiene que ser Charlie Chan en su camino de vuelta a China y a un mundo plano. La mentira en la representación es una constante en la obra de Porter.

Dos críticos importantes, Gerardo Mosquera y Luis Camnitzer, han interpretado la obra de Liliana Porter aludiendo a la literatura de Jorge Luis Borges y a la pintura de René Magritte. El interés de Porter por Magritte tiene un largo historial; lo

Porter's interest in Magritte has a long history; she has quoted him in works like *Magritte's 16th of September* (1975), *The Great War* (1975), *La Luna* (1977) and more recently, in *La Clairvoyance* (1999). As far as the relationship of Porter's work with Borges' literature, it cannot be visual but conceptual. Although in 1983 Porter produced the work *Fragments with Borges' Book* depicting a sample of a book is not tantamount to representing the literary work in the book, whereas depicting a painting is to somehow represent its contents. In spite of the clues in Porter's works that sustain the interpretations of Mosquera and Camnitzer, it seems counterintuitive that her photographs of kitschy porcelain figurines could fit in the aesthetic horizon of Borges' cerebral *oeuvre* or even in Magritte's Surrealism. Mosquera himself readily recognizes that "Porter has put Lichtenstein's comics or Haring's Mickey next to the 'real' Mickey." The task at hand is therefore to understand how Porter's *oeuvre*, whose visual antecedents coincide with Pop Art, somehow manages to subvert it.

A work like *Dressed Penguin* (1996)—which depicts an imagined dialogue between the photographic image of a clay figurine of a humanized penguin and the real figurine of a yellow bird sitting on a little stool—hides subversive traits in its innocent appearance. Porter subverts the genres of representation. Her figurines are already representations, her photographs are representations of representations, and her assemblages are a symbiosis of the former and the latter which forms a set as arbitrary as Borges' category of animals that "can be drawn with a fine brush."

Camnitzer's use of Borges for interpreting Porter's *oeuvre* seems more tangential and reflects his own view of Magritte's work. Camnitzer writes that "Porter decided to confront reality more directly, either by using the objects themselves or through photography as a means to document them." In this process, "what was refined was the quality of the dialogue of her objects. It was literally a question of establishing what things one object had to say to another and/or to the viewer." Camnitzer's main analogy of Porter's works with Magritte's *oeuvre* is that the dialogue between her figurines is reflected in Magritte's works as "one image turns into the context for the other." Although Camnitzer does not mention specific works by Magritte, one could propose the paradoxical *Ceci n'est pas une pomme* (1964), where the text in the painting truthfully denies what the picture verily depicts. Moreover, there are Porter works



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ha citado en obras como *El 16 de septiembre de Magritte* (1975), *La gran guerra* (1975), *La luna* (1977) y más recientemente, en *La clairvoyance* (1999). En cuanto a la relación de la obra de Porter con la obra literaria de Borges, ésta no puede ser visual sino conceptual. Si bien es cierto que en 1983 Porter produjo la obra *Fragments con libro de Borges*, representar un ejemplar de un libro no es lo mismo que representar la obra literaria en el libro; mientras que representar una obra pictórica sí es representar su contenido. No obstante las evidencias en las obras de Porter que sostienen las interpretaciones de Camnitzer y Mosquera, *prima facie* pareciera improbable que sus fotografías de figuritas kitsch de porcelana calzaran en el horizonte estético de la cerebral obra de Borges o incluso del surrealismo de Magritte. El propio



por favor no se muevan ▲
2005, duraflex

like *Untitled with Fire* (1989) that seem to follow Magritte's surrealist agenda.

According to Camnitzer, for Magritte as well as for Porter, "it does matter who the characters are. (...) Porter's art does not work with just any object. Her selection is careful and reflects not only the world delineated by Borges, by *Alice in Wonderland*, and by Magritte, but also by her very personal blend of astonishment, childishness, and humorous distancing." Camnitzer only mentions two items from Borges' literary repertoire, and it is not clear how they are reflected in Porter's selection of figurines. One of the items is the aleph, the extraordinary sphere containing all other points in the universe; and the other is one of the protagonists of the story *El Aleph*, Carlos Argentino Daneri, who sets out to write a poem

Mosquera admite que "Porter ha puesto los *comics* de Lichtenstein o el Mickey de Haring junto al Mickey 'real'. El desafío es entonces entender cómo la obra de Porter, cuyos antecedentes visuales coinciden con el arte Pop, de alguna manera lo subvierte.

Una obra como *Pingüino vestido* (1996)—que representa un diálogo imaginado entre la imagen fotográfica de una figurita de cerámica de un pingüino humanizado y la figurita real de un pájaro amarillo posado sobre un banquito— esconde rasgos subversivos en su aparente inocencia. Porter subvierte los géneros de representación. Sus figuritas ya son representaciones, sus fotografías son representaciones de representaciones, y sus ensamblajes son una simbiosis de las primeras con las últimas que forman un conjunto tan arbitrario como la categoría borgesiana de animales que "pueden ser dibujados con un pincel fino".

El uso que Camnitzer hace de Borges para interpretar la obra de Porter pareciera más tangencial y refleja su propia visión de la obra de Magritte. Camnitzer escribe: "Porter decidió enfrentarse a la realidad más directamente, usando ya sea los mismos objetos o a través de la fotografía como medio para documentarlos". En este proceso, "lo que se refinó fue la calidad del diálogo de sus objetos. Era literalmente cuestión de establecer qué cosas podía un objeto decirle a otro o a un espectador". La analogía principal de las obras de Porter a la obra de Magritte es que el diálogo entre sus figuritas refleja la manera como en las obras de Magritte, "una imagen se convierte en el contexto para otra". Aunque Camnitzer no menciona obras específicas de Magritte, uno podría proponer la paradójica "*Ceci n'est pas une pomme*" (1964), donde el texto de la obra verdaderamente niega lo que la pintura verosímelmente representa. Es más, hay obras de Porter como *Sin título con fuego* (1989) que parecieran seguir la propia agenda surrealista de Magritte.

De acuerdo a Camnitzer, para Magritte tanto como para Porter, "importa quiénes son los personajes.(...) El arte de Porter no funciona con cualquier objeto. Su elección es cuidadosa y refleja ya no sólo el mundo delineado por Borges, por *Alicia en el país de las maravillas* y por Magritte, sino también su mezcla muy personal de asombro, añanamiento y distanciamiento humorístico". Camnitzer menciona sólo dos casos en el repertorio literario de Borges, y no queda claro cómo se reflejan en la elección de figuritas de Porter. Uno de los casos es el Aleph, la extraordinaria esfera que contiene todos los puntos en el universo; y el otro es uno de los protagonistas del cuento de *El Aleph*, Carlos Argentino Daneri, quien se propone

about every place on this planet. Nothing of the sort appears in Porter's work—not even by analogy. Giving Camnitzer massive amounts of foreign aid, one might point out that the split between Borges the author and Borges the character in his dialogue with Carlos Argentino in some relevant way resembles those imagined dialogues between Porter's figurines. That suggestion may be interesting enough, but how can a written dialogue resemble an imagined one? My question is not rhetorical but sincere.

Mosquera's use of Magritte in interpreting Porter's work is more radical. He considers Porter as "Magritte's natural continuator." According to Mosquera, Porter "plays with the irony that the work of the Belgian artist goes on to be part of the reality that he is questioning." However, "there is a typical tone in her work that mixes humor and cynicism with loving warmth." In *La Clairvoyance* (1999), she depicts an actual stone and a postcard of one of the Belgian artist's paintings in which he paints an egg as a bird. The work insinuates that Porter has represented (if the act may be thus called) the potentially airborne postcard as an egg-like stone, or vice versa. Such are the ways of symbolization, as arbitrary as Borges' animal classification in his Chinese Encyclopedia.

In spite of the parallels to Borges and Magritte pointed out by Camnitzer and Mosquera, Porter may be doing something that is simultaneously simpler and perhaps more interesting. She is letting her characters have the life that their iconic personalities have determined for them. This strategy may lead to all sorts of results depending on the figurine and the mix of representational media. In works where there are mixed media (photography/assembly) the dialogue between two characters might be imagined to be about their ontological predicaments; like the Square talking to the Sphere about their kinds of existence in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland*. This diversity in ways of existing is even impacting, as in the case of *Stone* (2000), or intriguing as in *To Go Back* (2001). In works where there is only one figurine and one dimension like in *Minnie* (1995), the represented space induces the viewer to feel the *angst* of a graphic and iconic existence.

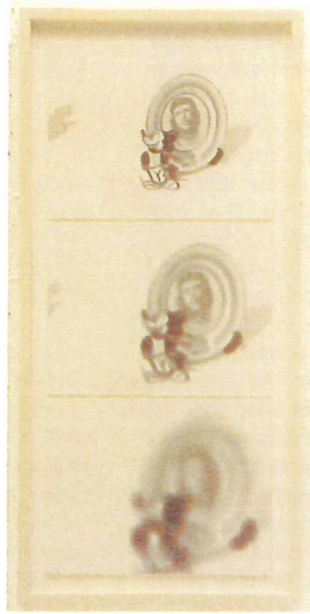
Porter's triptych *Untitled Out of Focus Che* (1991-1995) has received surprisingly little attention by the above-mentioned critics. The work shows a plate with Alberto Korda's famous image of Che Guevara, the Communist revolutionist, and a figurine of Mickey Mouse. What could they talk about? In the early seventies, a

escribir un poema sobre cada lugar del planeta. Nada similar aparece en la obra de Porter—ni siquiera por analogía—. Dándole a Camnitzer cantidades masivas de ayuda extranjera, uno podría argüir que el cisma entre Borges el autor y Borges el personaje en su diálogo con Carlos Argentino muestra una similitud relevante a los diálogos imaginados entre las figuritas de Porter. Esta sugerencia es bastante interesante, pero ¿cómo puede parecerse un diálogo escrito a un diálogo imaginado? Mi pregunta no es retórica sino sincera.

El uso que Mosquera hace de Magritte para interpretar la obra de Porter es más radical. Considera a Porter "la continuadora natural de Magritte". De acuerdo a Mosquera, Porter "juega así con la ironía de que la obra del belga pasa a integrar la realidad que está cuestionando". No obstante, "hay un tono típico de su obra que mezcla tiernamente humor y cinismo con una calidez amorosa". En *La clairvoyance* (1999), Porter representa una piedra real y la tarjeta postal de una pintura del artista belga en la que pinta un huevo como un ave. La obra insinúa que Porter ha representado (si así se le puede llamar al acto) una tarjeta postal potencialmente aérea como una piedra con forma de huevo, o viceversa. Tales son las rutas de la simbolización, tan arbitrarias como la clasificación animal en su Enciclopedia China.

No obstante los paralelos a Borges y a Magritte señalados por Camnitzer y Mosquera, Porter podría estar haciendo algo simultáneamente más simple y quizás más interesante. Ella les permite a sus personajes llevar la vida que sus personalidades icónicas les han fijado. Esta estrategia puede conducirnos a todo tipo de resultados dependiendo del personaje y la mezcla de medios de representación. En las obras de medios mixtos (fotografía/ensamblaje), el diálogo entre dos personajes puede imaginarse como una conversación sobre su disímil condición ontológica; como el cuadrado que le habla a la esfera sobre sus tipos de existencia en *Flatland* de Edwin Abbott. Esta diversidad de maneras de existir es incluso impactante como en *Piedra* (2000) o intrigante como en *Regresar* (2001). En obras donde hay una sola figura y una sola dimensión como es el caso de *Minnie* (1995), el espacio representado induce al espectador a sentir el *angst* de la existencia gráfica e icónica.

Es sorprendente que el tríptico de Porter *Sin título che fuera de foco* (1991-1995) no haya merecido la atención de los críticos antes mencionados. La obra muestra un plato con la famosa imagen del Che de Alberto Korda, el legendario revolucionario comunista, y una figurita del ratón Miguelito. ¿De qué podrían hablar? En los setenta, un libro de Ariel Dorfman y Armand Mattelart



▲ untitled with out of focus che /
sin título con che desenfocado

Triptyc, 1991-95. Silver gelatin print

book by Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart called *How to Read Donald Duck* accompanied and fueled the controversy about cultural alienation in Latin America. One of the issues of the controversy had to do with the way the values of capitalism were inculcated in the minds of the young through comic book characters like Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck. Porter's triptych conflates by means of the photographic effect of out-of-focus two characters that stood on opposite sides of that controversy. The out-of-focus technique, however, puts both Mickey and Che on the same plane, rendering them both agents of ideological penetration. Perhaps Mickey Mouse is explaining to Che that in Lichtenstein's hands he too was a revolutionary in the struggle against elitist art.

Porter's almost childish images bear a visual and playful resemblance to Pop Art works like those of Jeff Koons, Keith Haring and Roy Lichtenstein. Unlike the latter, however, the former show a speculative penchant for dealing with problems of ontology and paradoxes of representation. It is precisely this penchant that Borges, Magritte and Porter's works share. However, Porter clearly gives her viewers the freedom to fill in the space between the quotation marks that surround her characters' dialogues or monologues—in spite of Borges, Magritte and Porter herself—.

titulado *Para leer al pato Donald* acompañó y alimentó la controversia sobre la alienación cultural en América Latina. Uno de los temas de esta controversia tenía que ver con la manera como los valores del capitalismo eran inculcados en las mentes de los niños por medio de los personajes de las tiras cómicas como el ratón Miguelito o el pato Donald. El tríptico de Porter reúne por medio del artificio fotográfico del fuera-de-foco dos personajes que se situaban en polos opuestos de esa controversia. El fuera-de-foco, sin embargo, pone al ratón Miguelito y al Che en el mismo plano, mostrando a ambos como agentes de penetración ideológica. Quizá el ratón Miguelito está explicando al Che que en manos de Lichtenstein él también fue un revolucionario en la lucha contra el elitista.

Las imágenes casi infantiles de Porter guardan una similitud visual y lúdica con las de artistas del Pop Art como Jeff Koons, Keith Haring y Roy Lichtenstein. Pero a diferencia de éstas, las primeras muestran un afán especulativo de incursionar en aporías ontológicas y paradojas de la representación. Es precisamente este afán que las obras de Borges, Magritte y Borges comparten. No obstante, Porter claramente le da al espectador la libertad de completar el espacio entre las comillas que encierran los diálogos o monólogos de sus personajes—independientemente de Borges, de Magritte y de la propia Porter.