

Liliana Porter: A Question of Scale

“With respect to the scale of the object in relation to its space, the smallness serves to underscore the infinite nature of the “place” and the “aloneness” of any entity or person.”

Liliana Porter

When confronting one of Liliana Porter’s works, the viewer must be ready for a line to come out of its two-dimensional support and continue as a thread onto our three-dimensional home. Although her cultural allusions range from Mickey Mouse and Pinocchio to René Magritte and Elvis Presley, by her own admission, her work deals primarily with issues of time, space, and the limits of representation. The media of her artistic production is manifold — acrylic paint, graphite, sand, yarn, lithography, etching, collage, found objects, plastic or porcelain figurines, photography, video, and even theater. At times, her different media come together as assemblages, or they stay as pristine a tool of communication as they were meant to be. As it turns out, assemblages abound in the current exhibit at Sicardi | Ayers | Bacino.

Some critics have interpreted Liliana Porter’s work by alluding to the literature of Jorge Luis Borges and to René Magritte’s paintings. Gerardo Mosquera has even referred to Porter as “Magritte’s natural continuator.” Porter’s interest in Magritte has a long history; she has cited him in works like *An Archaeology of Magritte’s 16th of September* (1975), *Magritte’s 16th of September* (1975), *The Great War* (1975), *La Luna* (1977), *La Clairvoyance* (1999), and more recently *Magritte* (2008). Porter’s photo etching and aquatint *An Archaeology of Magritte’s 16th of September*, is particularly telling because it is an early self-portrait (1975) that draws a visual analogy between the canopy of the tree in Magritte’s 1956 work *16th of September*, and Porter’s hair by placing the moon crescent on her forehead. Porter’s connection with Magritte is complex and multifaceted, and it includes how both use witty incongruities (the former of unlikely dialogues, the latter of titles vis-à-vis images) as well as depictions of objects with non-matching scales. Take Magritte’s *Personal Values* (1952) where an oversized comb, pencil, glass, shaving brush, and soap-bar dwarf the space of a bedroom. This strategy, aimed at discombobulating and intriguing the viewer, Magritte used again in *The Listening Room* (1952) and *The Tomb of the Wrestlers* (1966). Porter too has used this mismatch of scale in many works, including a series of works titled *Forced Labor*, in which minute figurines face gargantuan tasks, virtually impossible to accomplish for a scaled-down person.

In the current exhibit, *The Anarchist*, 2024, exemplifies a non-matching scale. It is an installation in which a tiny figurine gathers red yarn. Is the figurine raveling or unravelling the skein? If we were to multiply the scale of both objects to actual size, the yarn would be about nine meters high. On a political interpretation, could this small unassuming person be instigating a so-called “yarn-bomb” — sometimes used in guerrilla actions to cover public structures with knitted fabric? As much as current events would at times make us wish it, Porter is probably not promoting the idea

that we are better off without any government. Perhaps the anarchism that she is alluding to is one in which the difference in scale, circumstance, and context generates an unruly multiplicity of interpretations. For the Venice Biennial 2017, Porter did the installation *Man with Axe*, in which a small figurine goes on a destructive rampage. The work included an actual piano and chair (scale 1:1) together with scaled-down objects. In the current exhibit, *Girl with green yarn*, 2023, the actual spool (scale 1:1) is as tall as the scaled-down human figurine. Needless to say, in the broader world of art, life-size and over-size artistic representations are the exception rather than the rule — Michelangelo’s David being one, Chuck Close’s self-portraits, and Koon’s *Puppy*, others.

In an interview Liliana Porter once stated, “what I would most like in my life is to do plastic arts as Borges wrote.” At first, the parallel of Porter’s work to Borges’ literature seems counterintuitive because her photographs and assemblages of kitschy plastic and porcelain figurines hardly fit in the erudite horizon of Borges’ *oeuvre*. The easy correlation (which Porter is unlikely to choose) is to illustrate one of Borges’ literary figures; like the professor who goes to India looking for blue tigers and finds terrifying blue stones instead. Borges’ interest with maps and hence, with scale, is explicit in *The rigor of science*.” (1946). There he describes an unlikely map of a kingdom as large as the kingdom. Such a 1:1 map is nonsensical and impractical; only a monarch’s hubris can conceive of such a project. In 1983, Porter did produce *Fragments with Borges’ Book* depicting a sample of a book, but that work does little to address the content of the literary text therein.

However, there are other aspects of Porter’s work which can connect more directly with Borges’ literature: her dialogues, her simulacra, and her motley groupings. In his writings Borges often appears to be conversing with a real or invented character. For example, in *Pierre Menard*, author of *Don Quijote*, a critic engages his characters in a conversation meant to redeem Menard’s *oeuvre*.

As for groupings, in the essay *The analytical language of John Wilkins*, Borges concocted a Chinese Encyclopedia in which animals are classified into absurd categories like (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) suckling pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies.” Porter’s installation, *Them*, 2018, is a disparate set of her all-star figurines and others? The viewer is at odds to find a connection between Kasper the Friendly Ghost and the Chinese communist couple, a Mexican Mariachi and Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and José Gregorio Hernández, etc. Alternative classifications to well-entrenched natural classes are implicit in these two works by both Borges and Porter, and they are a consequence of Nelson Goodman’s *grue/bleen* conundrum. Hence, what is Borges-like about these motley groupings of Porter figurines is nothing less than the ways we make rigorous sense of the world — i.e., that indeed, that there are different ways to

reclassify the world although not every single one “works” — some groupings being intriguing at best.

The representational lie is a constant in Porter’s *oeuvre*, and scale is part of the fib, but so are the myriad imagined improbable dialogues that she proposes between figurines representing different ontological categories: invented fantasies, imagined realities, accepted fictions, popular beliefs, iconic personalities, etc. One of her most emblematic dialogues is the one between Mickey Mouse and Che Guevara — *Untitled with out-of-focus Che*, 1991-1995 — ontologically analogous to a meeting between a unicorn and Neil Armstrong, respectively. It is always an open question what they can be talking about.

The figurine dressed in a black suit and a homburg hat, originally represents José Gregorio Hernández, the Venezuelan “physician of the poor” who came to be regarded as a popular saint and was even beatified by the Catholic Church in 2021. However, it is clear that Porter takes advantage of the figurine’s resemblance to Magritte, the Surrealist master of the visual lie who painted himself into peculiar contexts. In *The Explanation* (1991) Porter placed José Gregorio Hernández qua Magritte, in an unlikely conversation with a toy duckling. Porter also has Hernández in *Dialogue with Pinocchio* (1998), Carlo Collodi’s quintessential lying character.

To be sure, Porter herself has been generating visual and conceptual riddles since her New York Graphic Workshop years when an actual string could attach to a drawn hook as in *Untitled (hook and string)* 1973, or hang from a virtual nail, like in *Untitled (nail and string)* 1973. About these works Porter commented, “The trick itself did not interest me. What seduced me was the way in which the real came together with the virtual (the silkscreened nail with the real thread).”

Borges is not the only Argentine author whose works fit the unusual actions of Porter’s characters. In Julio Cortazar’s 1962 anthology *Historias de Cronopios y Famas*, the author invents absurd characters — *cronopios, famas and esperanzas* — that often find themselves in outrageous situations, not unlike some of Porter’s miniatures. Take the case of a cronopio who squeezes a tube of pink toothpaste that keeps pouring out to the point that it spills out the window and onto the streets. In Porter’s video *Matinee / Tres de Ellos*, 2009, black liquid pours into a small porcelain bird’s hollow and spills out of its mouth onto the floor presaging a messy flood. Estrella de Diego, curator of *Liliana Porter: Diálogos y Desobediencias* (2017), once mentioned that a “tsunami” periodically occurs in Porter’s *oeuvre*. Indeed, these “tsunamis” are like premonitions of existential or actual disasters. In *Untitled at Sea*, 2021, a ship is navigating on the crest of a huge wave reminiscent of Hokusai’s wave. The paradoxical title hints that there is something very wrong about the picture. What is paradoxical about this title? That is not really “untitled” because it is “untitled at sea” — however, we are not at sea. So “untitled” has to have a different meaning. And what is wrong with this picture? There is a question of scale, but also of direction: the ship is sailing away from a shipwreck. The ship and the chair are both at vastly different scales and that difference

is camouflaged by their relative smallness and the pictorial distance from each other — there is no perspective cue to make visual sense of it. “Untitled” becomes a euphemism for “unconscionable.” The disaster is simultaneously revealed and hidden by the pictorial syntax and that empty pictorial space that has worked for Porter in so many ways: spatially, existentially, anti-contextually, etc.

To make it glow, 2022, one of Porter’s “Cortázar” works in the current exhibit, is an assemblage of a broken clock and a tiny human figurine who is proportionately eight times smaller than the clock. The title suggests that the small figurine is working on the clock not in order to make its gears move accurately, but to make it shine anew. It is precisely the kind of thing a *fama* would do. This work is also reminiscent of *ModernTimes*, the 1936 Charlie Chaplin film whose most emblematic image is that of the Tramp working on the gears of a giant machine whose function we ignore. Chaplin was one of Cortazar’s “great magi.”

In addition to being absurd, mismatched scales can be perilous. *Tennis player*, 2014 shows how dangerous and absurd a tennis ball twice as tall as the player and several more times its mass can be. In the current exhibit, *To Do It: Man with Shovel*, 2023, a small figurine and black sand are contained in a circular frame similar to one of a clock. Given the slope where the sand is piled, the man’s job seems like a Sisyphian task. Why is the man shoveling the black sand anyway? Why are the sand and the man inside a circular frame? Maybe it is not sand but some toxic substance. If any of the two elements are blown to their 1:1 proportion, the meaning collapses. For a regular human that trifle amount of sand is easily disposed; for a minute one, a massive hill of sand would bury him.

Nothing better than *Forty Years IIIA (hand, over horizontal line 1973)* (2013), to finish these commentaries about Porter’s *oeuvre*, as it ties three media and a reflection across a forty-year period. In this 2013 work a previous 1973 work participates providing the background in which the younger hand of Porter allows a drawn line to go over her index finger. That same line continues onto Porter’s older hand subtly showing the blemishes and defacements of time. Nonetheless, the work is a testament of a hands-on dedication to artistic production. Perhaps, in 1973 the task ahead might have appeared too vast to handle, but Porter never veered.

When Inés Katzenstein asked Porter, “What is it that moves you? That your model has ended up so far away beneath so many layers of representation?” Porter responded: “First, there is a great pleasure in doing it. But simultaneously, the matter of time emerges and, through the gesture of copying the image, it seems that there is some logic at work that you understood. What stirs me emotionally is realizing, finally, that one is always touching the surface of things.”

- Fernando Castro, Houston, TX