

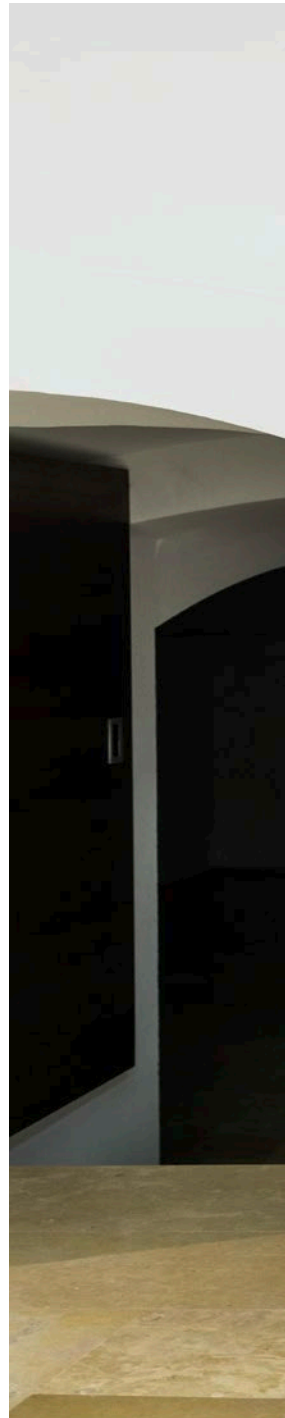
When far sightedness was ~~forbidden.~~

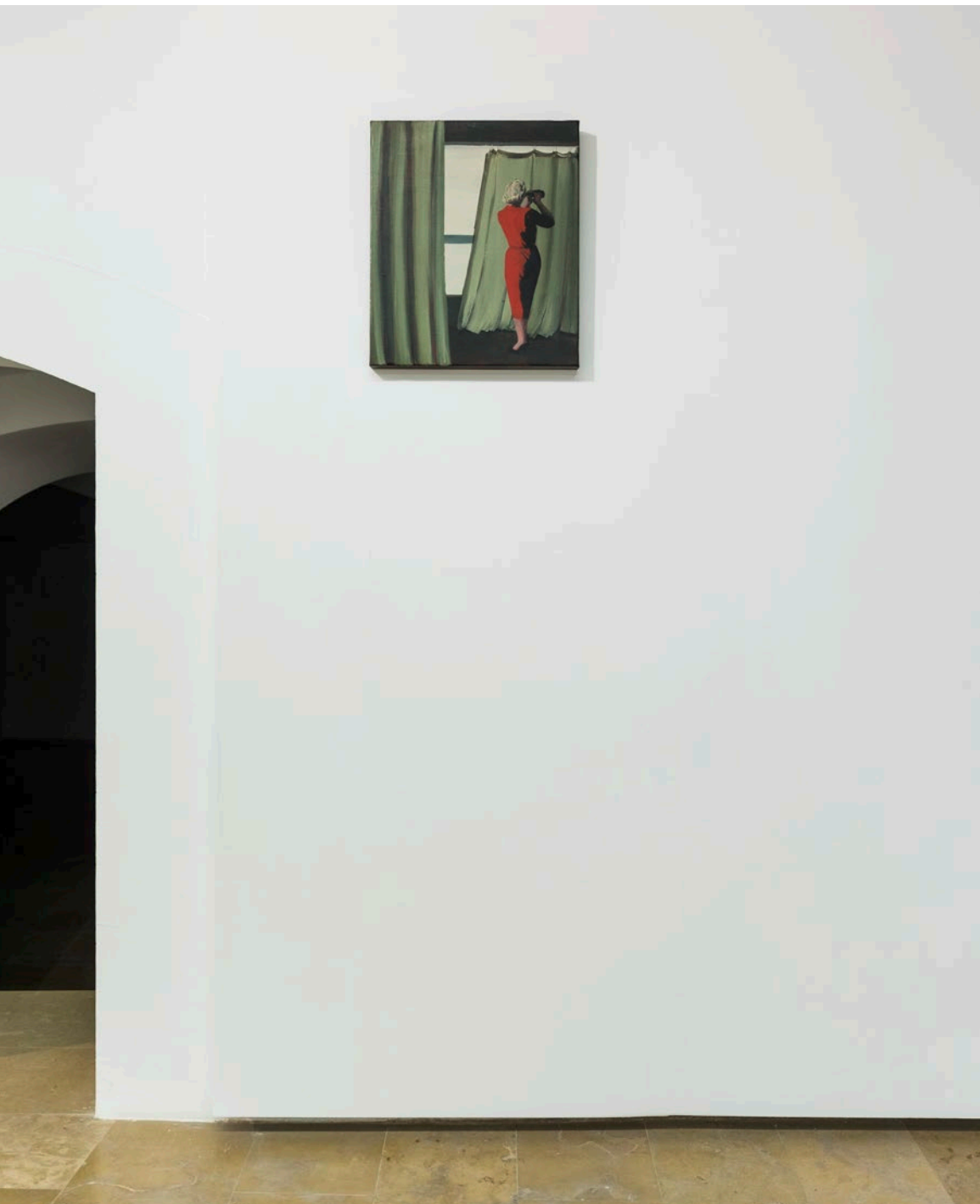
Nuria Rodríguez

Isabel Tejeda, UM

*The Grass so little has to do,
A Sphere of simple Green,
With only Butterflies to brood,
And Bees to entertain.*

Emily Dickinson





Have there ever been female artists throughout history? The university curricula of the 1980s, at least during my studies, first at the University of Alicante and later at the University of Murcia, seemed to indicate that there have not; an inertia and prejudice that I carried into the early 1990s when, with *venia docendi*, I taught as a research fellow at the UA.

During that decade, determined to curate a feminist exhibition, I began fieldwork on the artists of my generation - some of whom I already knew personally; following that, those who had begun their careers in the 1960s appeared one by one. Later, still in the first half of the 90s, and during research into 19th century painters from Alicante - the subject of my doctoral thesis at the time - two recipients of pensions appeared in the archives of the Royal Spanish Academy in Rome: one from the last quarter of the 19th century, the painter Carlota Rosales, and another from the 1920s, the composer María de Pablos. During this process of learning and revealing, I realized that I had to doubt the established narrative in order to begin to spread alternatives.

Nuria Rodríguez has introduced the issue of gender in her exhibition *Estación Nómada*, something that differentiates this project from her previous. *La expedición* (the expedition) is a painting in which a woman with her back to us, dressed in red, looks into the interior of the canvas through a telescope. She is prevented from doing so by a thick curtain. The adjoining room behind the wall that this woman cannot cross tells the story of the great expeditionaries, the adventurers who were entangled in ice, ravines, high peaks and deserts. Apparently, women could only get there through the intermediary of a man who would recount their heroic deeds in writing or in pictures. It was impossible to be far sighted when others had a telescope and they only had their bare eyes. Or even when, with the telescope in hand, there was an opaque barrier right in front of the lens: conventions and stereotypes. The letters I found in Rome written by Maximina, Carlota Rosales' mother, and by Maria de Pablos were an endless litany of barriers that were impossible to

overcome. And I remembered a British woman who broke through that wall in the 19th century. .

I came across her by chance. A few years ago, during a country stroll through London's Kew Gardens, my companion and I entered a small Victorian pavilion among the many James Ferguson buildings that populate these impressive grounds. Its interior was lined from floor to ceiling, in the tradition of baroque panelling, with

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illustrations of flowers and plants in their original contexts. They fit together perfectly like a puzzle, without a single centimetre of free wall space; even the backs of the benches in the centre of the room are decorated with paintings. They were the extensive and prolific work of the botanical illustrator Marianne North (England 1830-1890), the result of her travels beyond the wall.

North enjoyed an artistic education - in the beginning, the kind that women of her position normally received, drawing and music - and an economic situation that allowed her to be independent, avoid marriage and become a professional scientist, unheard of in those years for a woman. Furthermore, her father - a prestigious landowner and politician in his time - had friends who strongly influenced her, such as Charles Darwin, who encouraged her, in her vocation as a naturalist, to travel around the world: Canada, Jamaica, Brazil, Japan, Borneo, India, Chile, Australia, and Spain. She was fortunate enough to be able to choose to be a scientific illustrator and move on from the idea of a herbarium, with neatly dried plants carefully and creatively presented as a botanical inventory, to plastic representation. She lived in Tenerife in 1875 in the same house/botanical garden where Alexander von Humboldt had stayed almost a century earlier, Little's Place or Litree Garden, doing so,

in fact, on Darwin's advice. This may be a coincidence, or maybe not, since Nuria Rodríguez has studied Humboldt to the point of "obsession" (according to Román de la Calle), and it is the starting point of her most important creative project to date, *Sistema Humboldt. Pensar/Pintar* (La Nau, 2020).¹ Going from what we have talked about since we started working together, North will soon be the subject of her work.

North, had the precedent of the 17th century German entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian. *Estación Nomada* cites Merian, together with the poet Emily Dickinson and the philosopher María Zambrano in portraits that Rodríguez has drawn with a fine, cross-hatched line reminiscent of the figures on banknotes. Merian, like North a century and a half later, used her skill and knowledge of painting, drawing and engraving



¹ Román de la Calle, in *Sistema Humboldt. Pensar/Pintar*, Nuria Rodríguez, Valencia, Universitat de València, 2020

to transfer the image to a base, be it canvas or paper. This transfer necessarily produced a translation that either chose to comprehend mimesis in its descriptive aspect and in the smallest detail, or, as the Romantics conceived it, understanding that the artist was a filter that translated not only what things are, but also what they can be, what is imaginable, following the analysis of Román de la Calle.

North's work thus has two intersecting genealogies: continuing the path of Humboldt, probably through Darwin, but also that of Merian.





HUMBOLDT AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN SCIENCE

Humboldt was a scientist with a knowledge of drawing and engraving, and interested in finding a link between the arts and sciences that would allow him to describe the world; it was a time of expansion for the expeditions in which he participated, and that coincided, not by

chance, with the flourishing of the landscape genre.

Humboldt's generation went beyond popular taxonomies, if we follow the Foucaultian concept, in which objects were grouped by non-consensual ordering formulas, influencing subjectivities, affections, the symbolic and the magical.² The cabinets of curiosities and *Wundernkammern*, although generically separating the objects in *Naturalia* and *Artificialia* in a first basic formulation (to which the *Scientifica* section could be added), were never clones, as what for one collector could be a strong point was not relevant for another. Neither was reticulated order a priority; in the engravings that we have preserved, and that give a more or less faithful image of these cabinets, the objects are piled up on tables, shelves and drawers.

Rare and difficult to obtain, many objects were real and came from nature, such as the bezoars; others were symbolic and apparently charged with magic; others were simply fake and deceitfully constructed for the enjoyment of some wealthy collector, so a unicorn horn could be among the *Naturalia*, when it was, after all, an *Artificialia*. This is the disruptive, pre-scientific view that interests Rodríguez and has an immediate genealogy in the art of the historical *avant-gardes*, fundamentally the cabinets of the dadaists and the surrealists. To show that these illustrated taxonomies were just another construct, a convention taken for granted, she reuses them with a twist, by generating pieces with ordering formulas that also look at the pre-enlightened, at the clearly subjective.

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² Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*





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Placing herself between the references to these previous taxonomies and the birth of modern science, Nuria Rodríguez makes numerous references to these formulas for presentation, rescuing old archival devices that function as both containers and content, as the devices also integrate the semantics of the work. Entwining, she mixes methodologies of enlightenment organization with a capture of the image that refers to pre-photographic representation.

Nuria Rodríguez focuses on *Naturalia*, which, as Joan Fontcuberta suggests, encompasses everything, given the human being forms part of it and, therefore, so does his cultural production, including the taxonomic conventions taken for universals. On a round trip, Nuria Rodríguez collects stones, some of which have been obtained from the quarries of Riba-roja de Túria, which are in fact history, as it was from these veins that the material was extracted which built part of the Valencian real estate heritage. The artist appropriates the rocks, analyses their shapes and colour, traces of a singular past, and turns them into a collectible artistic object whose taxonomy can seem cryptic to us, as it depends only on her. If the shape, each chip that had been pulled off, gave information, capturing the colour was much more complex. Thus the project is based on the experiments with watercolours, drawing and painting that led the geologist Abraham Gottlob Werner to the nomenclature of colour, classifying minerals by their colour and shape (again we come across Humboldt, a pupil of Werner, from whom he inherited his taxonomic methods).

Colour, with which the fine arts experiment and analyse, would continue to be a fundamental instrument for Patrick Syme, who expanded Werner's chromatic nomenclature from 54 to 108 different terms. Thus, in the first room of the Castell, *Nomenclaturas de lo natural*, Nuria Rodríguez takes up these formulas with her own rocks, which she draws, paints, places and cares for on a half-destroyed Alfonsine armchair, or catalogues and re-catalogues by filming her ordering formulas in an act halfway between concept and representation. Her pieces from *Estación Nómada* look towards a knowledge of the world that pursued literality, the truth that photography seemed to promise from the 19th century onwards and that art had not really sought until reaching this turning point in the 18th century where it merged some of its expressive aspects with science.

THE WOMEN PIONEERS... WHO WERE MANY AND OF DIFFERENT TYPES

The other genealogical line leads us to my guide for this text, Marianne North, who has Humboldt as her antecedent, but also, in terms of gender, Maria Moninckx or Maria Sibylla Meerian in the 17th and 18th centuries, female scientific illustrators in a man's world. However,

the genealogy goes much further back, to the knowledge of nature, botany and the preparation of ointments and medicines by healers - an alternative to that of doctors, who did not usually touch the sick. This work and their knowledge were persecuted from the 15th century onwards under the accusation of witchcraft, reduc-

ing their numbers until their virtual disappearance. The institutionalization of science from the Enlightenment onwards, the establishment of consensual knowledge, had positive aspects but also others that were terrible and a great detriment to human knowledge: with the rejection of the empirical knowledge of those who did not belong to the wealthy classes, knowledge that was passed from mothers to daughters, millennia of "popular" culture, considered superstition, were abandoned; furthermore, it would preclude women from academic training in the Western sphere until the end of the 19th century (with some exceptions - Spanish women did not have access to formal higher education until 1910).

But there were always loopholes to slip through. As we mentioned, among the aristocratic and bourgeois classes, having knowledge that "adorned" marriageable girls made them more desirable and presentable in society, and therefore it was an essential training in that social sphere. Drawing and watercolours were arts that did not dirty excessively. In fact they were quite neat compared to oil painting, and at the same time did not require a studio - the famous room of one's own, which was still a long way off; a few notebooks and pencils or a small box of pigments were sufficient. Still life, the genre least valued by the Academy, was ideal for girls, since to capture a still life it was not necessary to climb mountains, socialise or know human anatomy, this latter being a direct cause of







loss of honour and lack of decorum. It was also permitted to look out of the window and capture a landscape or paint a flower with its pollinating insect in a private garden. The garden walls did not serve primarily to protect - though they did - but to prevent people from going out to look at the world. The figures of Merian, Dickinson or Zambrano reclaim in *Estación Nómada* - from the garden to the imagination - female imaginations to be recovered.

“...women, botanists or healers, had to slip through almost imperceptible cracks that, being small and exceptional, left few traces...”

Nuria Rodríguez’s work picks up precisely from this historical moment, the transition from a “popular” formula for ordering the world to an enlightened one. It is also the moment when women, botanists or healers, had to slip through almost imperceptible cracks that, being small and exceptional, left few traces, and today we strive to unravel them by pulling at threads, knowing that beneath many anonymous authors there are women whose descendants, out of laziness or shame, out of modesty when coming across ancestors who did not fit the stereotypes of femininity, eliminated them from the historical record ■