

# Isabel Baraona: Four Recent Books

*Blue Book*

*Is This Me?*

*Untitled (Parce que l'on ne parvenait pas à nous couper la tête)*

*Diário*

Karol Shewmaker

The works of Isabel Baraona are immersive. Visually arresting and melodically arranged (sometimes an overture, sometimes a dirge), each of her tales unfolds as her characters morph upon themselves, into one another, and towards transformation. Although narrative, the triumphs and plights depicted seldom seem linear in occurrence. Likewise, her troupe, depicted in a visceral and affecting fashion, plunder, purge and absorb the obstacles and opportunities set before them—ready or not. Baraona's works feel intensely personal. They feel like memories. Layered, amalgamated, and altered, each image suggests transformation. Not necessarily transformation of an individual or the formation of a

group, but the complex conversion of experience into remembrance. This is largely due to Baraona's intricate process of creation, presentation, and execution, one that mimics the process of memory itself.

The act of recalling is a complicated undertaking. Our pasts are delivered to us out of order. Bygone moments come forth as a deluge of details, leaving one to churn about (and organize and reorganize) seemingly random happenings until there is the result of a perfect pearl of reminiscence. Baraona often approaches her narrative structure in the same way. *Blue Book* (2009) begins with its end and as it ends it begins. [Fig. 1] What occurs in between is a series of false starts, untethered

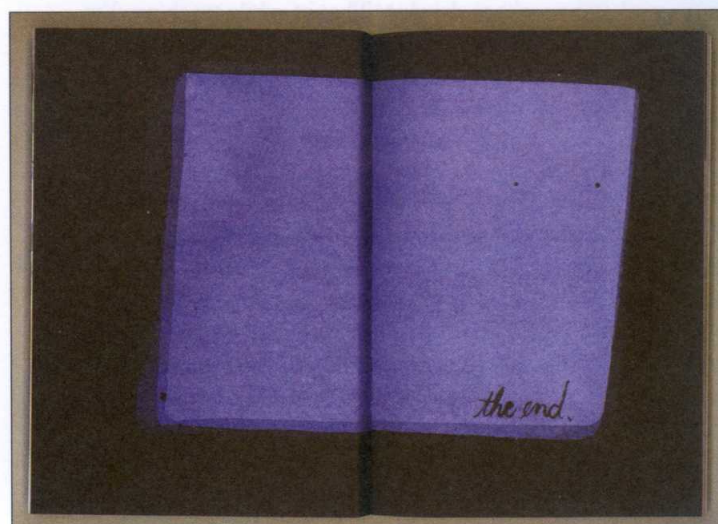


Fig. 1  
*Blue Book*, 2009, Isabel Baraona  
Four sequential page spreads



utterances, and unanchored encounters. Antagonists and protagonists can appear, vanish, and switch roles at any given moment. The viewer is given the pieces of a story to cobble together both as it is read and as it is remembered. As jarring as the experience may seem, it evokes a familiar feeling. It feels real.

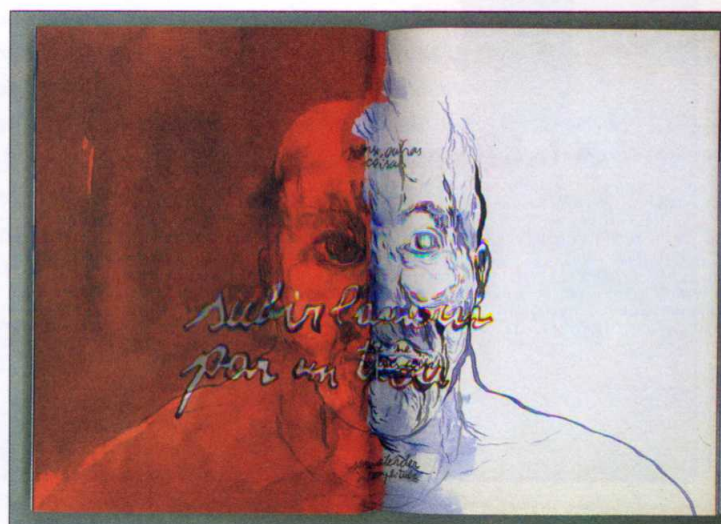
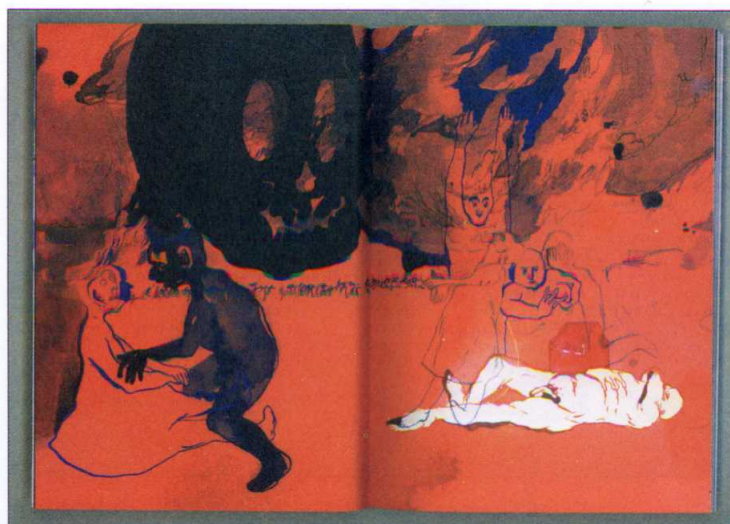
Baraona's use of the accordion structure in *Is This Me?* (2009) [Fig. 2] is another immensely effective device. While *Blue Book* contains traditional publication marks (albeit placed out of order), such as publication dates, titles, and acknowledgements, *Is This Me?* contains no such indicators of place. When the pages are turned as in a traditional codex there is some semblance of order, but this false sense of space is negated when the book is pulled open for full viewing. Subjects begin to interact with one another in a way previously obscured. The narrative that continues on the reverse side of the folded pages calls into question the assumed sequencing of events. The title page is clearly labeled, but read in its reverse *Is This Me?* emerges as a reasonable inquiry within the story.

Just as memory is as much about shuffling and selectively recalling, it is also about embellishing and creating during the recalling. Baraona's storytelling imagery is a result of multiple methods embedded within one another, resulting in a web of deliberate and discontinuous concealing and revealing. Two of the artist's most recent works, *Untitled (Parce que l'on ne parvenait pas à nous couper la tête)* (2010) and *Diário* (2011) are exemplars of this methodology. Both pieces employ a base of monochromatic offset-printed pages depicting her signature metamorphosis of physical form. Each book from each edition has been altered from its

original state via the inclusion of myriad hand-applied elements including drawing, writing, rubber stamps, postage, gouache applications, hand sewing, and cut-outs. What could have easily turned into a summer camp project in the hands of a less intuitive maker becomes, under Baraona's careful control and restraint, a largely effective and multivalent narrative tool.

*Untitled* marks a clear beginning of this type of stylistic experimentation. [Fig. 3] A modest pamphlet book, it enlists the color washes seen in previous works but ushers in her use of dimensional inclusions. Most noteworthy is the presence of red thread sewn through several images within the book and terminating, needle attached, in the neck of one unfortunate victim. This action is supported by the addition of a running text line further bemoaning the unfortunate fate of the book's denizens. In this particular case, both are superfluous and border on diluting the impact of the work at large. The striking images and intense color washes can surely stand on their own. The narrative need not be told as it is shown. The link between the images doesn't need to be physically enforced as they are otherwise visually intact. Further, both the thread and the text literally bind the sequences together at the expense of one of the greatest attributes of Baraona's book works—the creation of open visual narrative. Although not entirely successful, the piece remains a crucial link between her previous works and her latest endeavor, *Diário*.

*Diário* is the melding of the aforementioned strategies as well as significant changes in the artist's presentation of content. [Fig. 4] While the previous books have read as fictions (bordering on mythologies), *Diário* has a significantly more autobiographical tone.





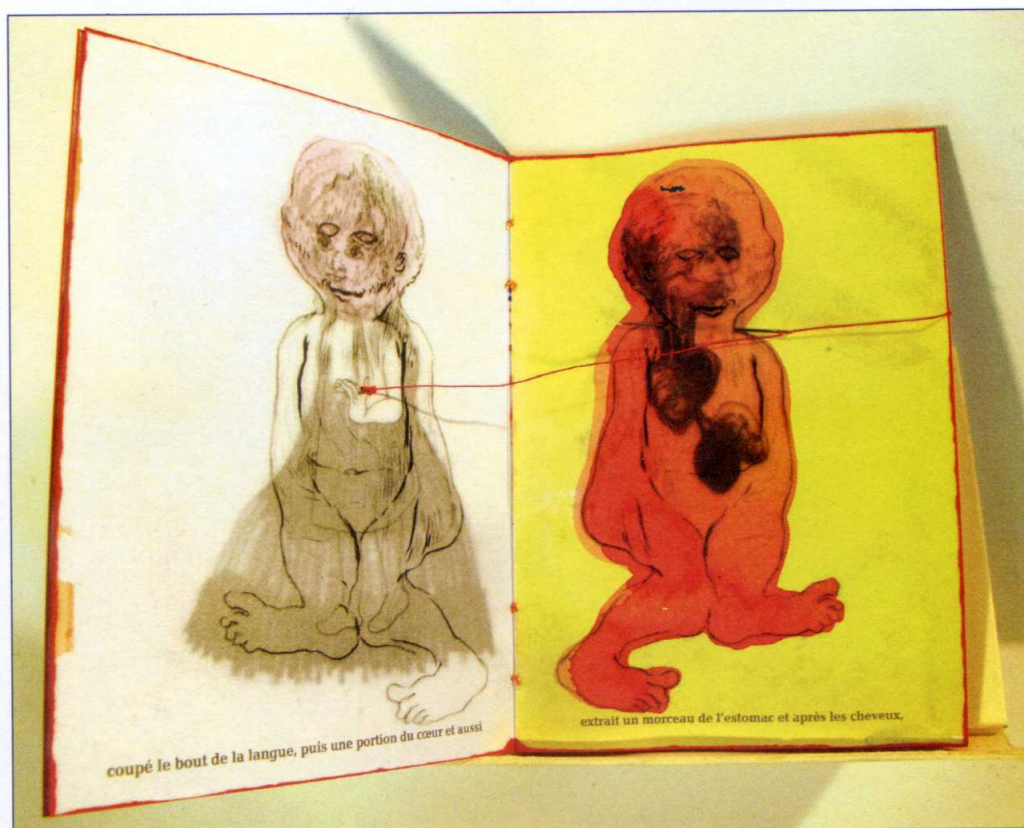


Fig. 3  
 Untitled (*Parce que l'on ne parvenait pas à nous couper la tête*)  
 2010, Isabel Baraona

Defined by Baraona as a collection of daily drawings weighing heavily upon self-portraiture, the inclusions and embellishments seem to add a personal touch more than a stylistic one. Their random and unique (each copy is ornamented differently) appearances fracture the linear sequence implied by the image-a-day mission. Motifs such as houses, which previously operated as metaphor, conjure the domestic life of the book's creator. Even in the portions of the book that remain entirely offset printed, painstaking effort has gone into making them appear entirely the result of handwork. Pieces of carbon paper imply the actual contact of pen with paper, and faux set-off of wet ink from one page to another lends the impression of a sketch produced in the actual volume as if the very book one is holding is itself the personal journal, the *Ur*-moment of its entrance into the world. The premium placed by the artist on her ability to intervene at any point in creation/production is evident. The paper choice is also a departure from earlier pieces. Previous books are printed on heavy stock (likely to accommodate the color washes) while *Diário* is printed entirely on newsprint. It feels delicate and fragile—and

precious because it seems like a private object.

While Baraona's earlier works simulated the process of memory because of structure and style, *Diário* is the process of memory. Gone are the fantastical scenes of torture, disembowelment, and despair. What remains is key to understanding what makes Baraona's artwork resonant. Be it through disrupted lines of reason or panoptic depictions of simultaneous occurrences she holds her viewers captive in that flash of a second when all recollections are negotiable, the vulnerable place where memories are formed, refined, and streamlined into something we can live with. Viscera or not, limbo is an unsettling place.

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Karol Shewmaker is a writer and artist whose work explores new media. She lives in Chicago.