

Pequenas Estorias by Isabel Baraona

Review by Willa Goettling

Isabel Baraona's artist books often evoke a sense of intimacy, introspection, and contemplation through dynamic visual narratives. The human figure is a central focus in her work, and is often depicted in contorted positions—while dancing, falling, or having sex—each character's expression unguarded and visceral. All of the autonomous and animated bodies fill the pages and overflow from her books. Some of her figures fight for space on the page while others seem to exist in mutual symbiosis. Many figures radiate lines and webs which entangle their neighbors. These webs communicate a connectedness between characters, despite their postures and expressions indicating disparate existence. Her illustrations simultaneously address the personal and the societal, are jointly micro and macro in their scope, and urge readers to consider what it means to exist in relation to others while living in individualist societies.

Her latest book, *Pequenas Estorias* (which translates to *Short Stories*, from Baraona's native language, Portuguese) explores ideas related to inheritance and gender. It relies predominantly on intricate linoleum prints to communicate information, with the exception of two texts that bookend its visual content. On the first page, the word "litany" is presented, and on the last page, the phrase "all that you inherit." According to Merriam Webster, the word "litany" has Latin roots, originally referring to a 13th century prayer in which a leader and congregation would recite a series of lines together. This recitation was known for being repetitive and lengthy, and would take on chant-like qualities. Today, the word has similar connotations—relating to lengthy, repetitive texts, and chanting.

The structure of Baraona's *Pequenas Estorias* indeed has a chant-like quality. Though no image repeats exactly, the book's structure is reminiscent of a Rorschach inkblot—the imagery in the second half a loose mirroring of the first. Just the process of editioning a book—specifically one which was made from repeatedly printing carved linoleum blocks—has layers of litany implicated in its very production. The book feels rhythmic; in the same way a chant or musical composition has overlapping notes, the images in Baraona's book bleed into one another by way of translucent paper. The continuity of its pages draws attention to how each image is meant to be considered in the context of the whole, challenging the boundaries of a page spread, and with it, the boundaries of a book. *Pequenas Estorias*, being a predominately visual narrative, may also challenge the litany of text-centric cultures.

Poetic and associative, the book's title, *Pequenas Estorias*, could be interpreted in a number of ways. The images within the book are so dynamic that one could extract a different story with every read. Each of Baraona's characters, with their complex expressions, actions, and movements, seem to hold a multiplicity of stories within them. The title could also be a commentary on the stories that are passed down through generations, often by way of books, which can become so ingrained in our collective memory we hardly recognize them as fictional. The stories we read as children become our morals, and the stories we read as adults give us vocabulary and grammar for navigating the world. By placing the phrase "all that we inherit" on the final page of *Pequenas Estorias*, Baraona seems to again be pointing to the

hegemonic yet discrete influence of language on the individual.

Implicated in the stories we read as children (and as adults) are the values and expectations of the societies from which those stories emerge. Baraona's book offers subtle interpretation to the ways in which gender expectations are placed on us, perhaps through our engagement with story and narrative. A female figure reappears throughout the book, standing as if in the midst of doing some heavy lifting, while, what looks to be hair, grows wildly from her head. In classic Baraona fashion, the hair on this figure reaches outward, catching other characters and objects in her path. It's unclear whether the woman has willed the growth of her hair unto others, but it is clear she cannot—and perhaps refuses—to be contained, as parts of her extend beyond the confines of the page in which her body is depicted.

As the book progresses, the woman's hair starts to more closely resemble a fingerprint. In this context, the term "inheritance" takes on genetic connotations. While other images in the book seem to be urging the reader to consider acquired inheritance. For instance, the placement of nude figures next to items such as dresses and buttoned shirts, asks the reader to reflect on the characters' relationships to their clothing. It draws attention to how something like the performance of gender is partially learned—from family, society, and the stories we engage with.

The characters' expressions throughout the book alternate between contemplative, pained, and satisfied. Their postures alternate between being passive, i.e. mid-tumble depictions; to more active postures like lifting and pushing. This imagery is evocative of a dichotomous push and pull related to inheritance. The characters alternate between seeming content with their predicaments, sometimes oblivious, while at other times their expressions seem full of frustration—their body language indicative of an active effort to combat a situation. The male and female characters in *Pequenas Estorias* seem equally affected by their ailments, however the author tends to depict the female figures in more active positions resembling reaching, growing, and lifting—their heads tilted upward in determination.

Considering the cyclical, rhythmic, and mirrored structure of the book, it feels as though the book doesn't favor endings or beginnings as much as other books. Rather, it's a sculptural representation of a litany of stories—the stories we tell ourselves that continue to resurface throughout our lives. After reading *Pequenas Estorias*, the image that lingers is the one located at the centerfold. Printed in bright red and spanning two pages is an image of a woman caught in a net. And she is held in place literally by the red thread of the binding. Her toes are splayed, her body tense and falling. Circling the figure's head is an image of black string or rope, loosely tied, seeming to hover perpendicular to her body. The rope could be interpreted as a noose, but whether or not the figure is caught in the noose or just travelling past its grasp is up for interpretation.

Willa Goettling is an MFA student in Book and Paper at Columbia College Chicago. Her books and video rely equally on poetic text and visual art to explore ideas related to inheritance, corporeality, and translation. One of her favorite pastimes is finding shady spots to read and eat snacks on warm days—especially by the Puget Sound in her home state of Washington.



Pequenas Estorias (Short Stories), by Isabel Baraona, 2017, artist's book printed by linoleum block on translucent paper.