

A Woman's World: the Artist's Books of Isabel Baraona

Catarina Figueiredo Cardoso

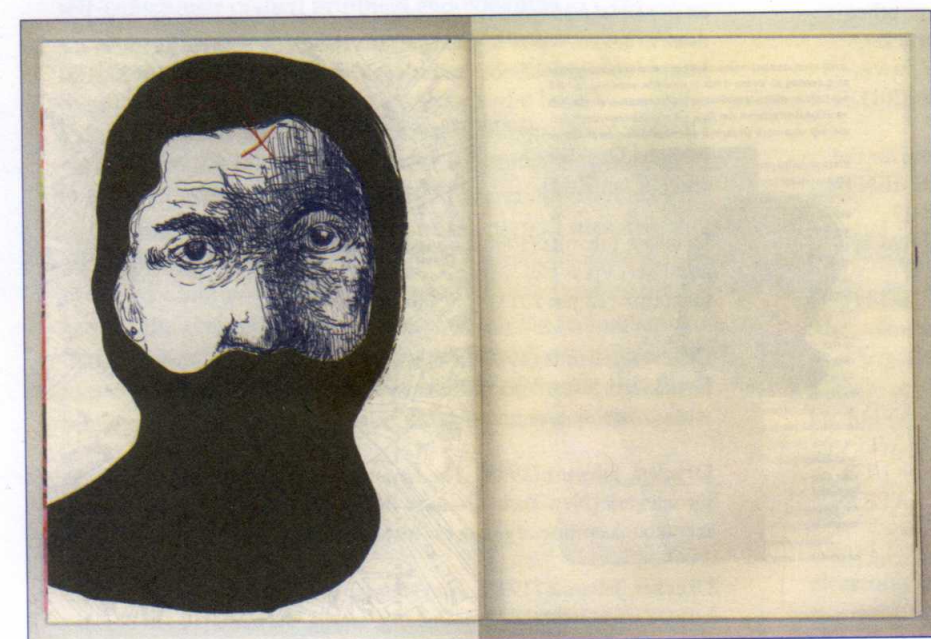
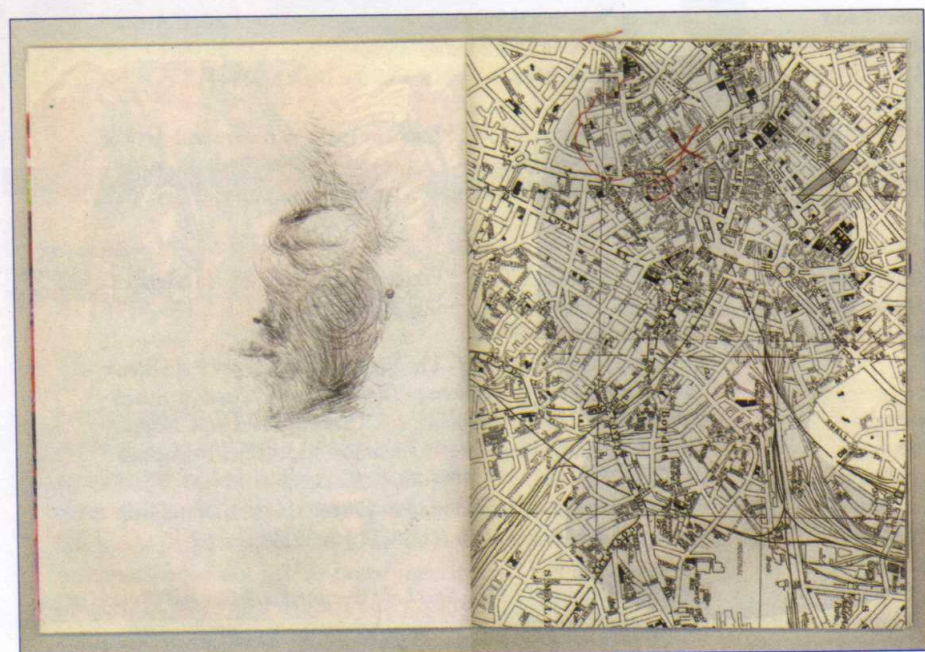


Fig. 1
Diário [2nd volume], 2011, Isabel Baraona
sequential page spreads

The Portuguese artist Isabel Baraona makes books because she loves the medium, the format, the portability, and the intimacy a book provides. Baraona's artist's books are real books in terms of traditional form as well as the wider distribution that comes with publication. They have recognizable book formats (codex and accordion fold), they are at least partially printed in editions, and they contain language and images that make sense. Most of them have a classic construction: the four books of the color series *Is This Me?* (2009) and *Prière de Bonheur* (2010) are printed books, although all three edges of *Prière de Bonheur* are hand-painted to match the vibrant red of its pages. *Procession* is a screenprinted accordion fold in an edition of twenty-two copies. Both *Untitled* (*Parce que l'on ne parvenait pas à nous couper la tête / Because they could not cut off our heads*) (2010) and *Diário* (*Diary*) (2011) [Fig. 1] have individual interventions in each copy: the edges of *Untitled* are hand-painted in blue or red, some pages are painted with water colors, there are lots of rubber stamps designed by Baraona, and several pages are sewn with a red thread—the needle remaining attached in each book of the edition. *Diário* also has rubber stamps and other individual features in both volumes: collages, paintings, and cut-outs. It's the biggest edition to date (500 copies) but at the same time each copy is almost one-of-a-kind due to the amount of intervention it undergoes.

In her interview, Baraona talks about her appreciation for the book as an easily manageable and transportable object. And indeed her books fulfill this ideal:

they are small, they are light, and yet they are robust. Her books are diminutive: the biggest to date, *Procession* (2011), is an accordion fold 750 mm long when opened, but when closed it measures 150 × 250 mm. *Diary* is a codex that measures 240 × 180 mm. *Prière de Bonheur* is an A5 format 148 × 210 mm. The color series and *Is this me?* measure 170 × 120 mm. *Untitled*, the smallest, is 95 × 135 mm. This makes a sharp contrast with the original drawings, which are usually A4 210 × 297 mm or slightly bigger paper sheets.

The transposition of the drawings to the books requires great technical ability. Starting with the first book, *Graphite Book* (2008), she reproduces the delicate transparencies of tracing paper, and the ink blotches and stains provide an array of subtle shades (pp. 3–4, 6, 11–12, 18, 27–28). The use of tracing paper to form portraits is explained and shown with *Black Book*. The color of the pages of *Prière de Bonheur* is amazingly true to the original mostly deep red watercolors.

The world of these two books, *Graphite Book* and *Black Book*, is a women's world: the characters have androgynous heads, but the bodies are gendered. The women have breasts, vulvas, and skirts; the men have penises and trousers. The men are greatly outnumbered. They are objects of love or desire and the source of trouble or violence, but they are also its victims at the hands of unkind women. The men often appear helpless with their erect or replete little penises.

Only in *Blue Book* is the main character a man, presented lying on the ground in seven images, his right arm over his head in an attitude that can be construed as either defensive or careless abandon. But even here women are the dominant force, except on pages 20 and 21, where a satanic little male is preparing to perform surgery on a woman. Even so, the woman's body, lying on a kind of surgical table, is bigger than the man's, and her red colors stand out. This is the only image in all Baraona's work thus far where a man looks dominant.

These are the artist's responses to notions of power and dominance. In our conversations she explained that the male characters almost always have erections because, besides the fact that their sexual excitation is visible, male sexual desire is always the given. Men desire and conquer, women passively receive. The medieval allocation between female / lunar (silver) / passivity / left and male / solar (gold) / activity / right is still ingrained in our culture. To contradict this, she shows things upside down.

The characters of *Is this me?* and *Untitled* are plainly sexless. These are the only books where the characters are explicitly threatened or harmed. The hero of *Untitled* is stripped of his right side and, in order to remain whole, his left side doubles itself, creating a body that can stand up but only has two left sides.¹ The lead character of *Is this me?* has no sexual identity and is not even able to take refuge in the uterus-boats, which are all occupied by women. He refuses the company of others, while denying his own identity, and is completely alone in the first pages of this accordion fold book.

An almost complete absence of gender differentiation is achieved in *Procession*. There are no apparent sexual features, men have skirts, hats, and beards, the prone figures' gender is indistinguishable. Baraona's interest in androgynous characters stems from the kind of social clichés about the

separation of traditional masculine and feminine roles that do not reflect real life. The androgynous characters are weak sheep who don't think or take a position, as in *Procession*, or the fools of the hallelujahs, as in *Is This Me?* But, paradoxically, these same characters may be the ones who change sex or take on other behavior in order to survive.

The feminine tone is fully accomplished in *Prière de Bonheur*, so absolutely different from the preceding works that it can be misleading. It has text but no images. It employs many of the sentences previously used in *Red Book* (2008), *Black Book*, and *Is this me?* In its verses, written in French, Isabel explains her oeuvre. *Prière de Bonheur* serves as the key to all these earlier works. It closes the color cycle – which includes *Is this me?* – both in its size and its content. *Untitled* and *Procession* are extrinsic in their format and in their technique. *Diary* points to a new path for her work: contemplative portraits and pleasant surroundings, but with the idyllic quality ruptured by the tense, harsh, sometimes hungry expressions of Isabel's self-portraits. They are not sweetened by the serenity of the other persons portrayed or the tenderness of the handwritten phrases that close the book.

Isabel's books are very prone to psychoanalytical readings: Freud, Jung, and Lacan are invoked with the books' sexual references, battles over gender, and women ascendant over men sending. Some of her books appear to be autobiographical—*Black Book* has her self-portrait, and *Graphite Book* can be read as showing her struggle to become an artist, while *Diary* presents many self-portraits done in the most classic way: the artist at the mirror.

Isabel embraces the use of autobiographical material, as long as it is used conscientiously. (As she puts it, drawing is not merely a therapeutic process.) She admits that she "steals" the stories of other people (friends, family, literature, for example) although there is a lot of fiction built around the episodes she draws. She is a storyteller who manipulates images so that the story involves the viewer emotionally.

INTERVIEW

of Isabel Baraona by Catarina Cardoso

Tell us about you and your artistic beginnings.

My path is not linear either in academics or in terms of life experience.

I was born in Cascais, Portugal, in 1974, and in 1975 my family emigrated to Brazil. We lived for about 12 years in Victoria, the capital of Espírito Santo state. In 1988 I returned to Portugal and began my training at AR.CO Centro de Artes e Comunicação Social from 1993 to 1996 (Center for the Arts and Visual Communication, an independent art school founded in Lisbon in 1973, dedicated to experimentation, training, and the propagation of arts, crafts, and visual communication). There I found excellent teachers of drawing who instilled a good sense of rigor and discipline in me. These have become inseparable aspects of my practice as an artist. In 1997 I went to study in Brussels, Belgium, and I completed a degree in Painting at La Cambre École nationale supérieure des arts visuels (the La Cambre National Higher School of Visual Arts).

My PhD thesis from Polytechnic University of Valencia, Spain (June, 2011) was on the differentiation between self-portrait and self-representation in the twentieth century. Since 2003, I have been a teacher of painting and drawing at ESADCR—Escola Superior de Arte e Design at Caldas da Rainha (School of Fine Arts and Design of Caldas da Rainha, Portugal).

Professionally, I began exhibiting in 2001, which is an important date on my résumé. In that year, while still attending the 3rd year of my degree at La Cambre, I was invited to have my first solo exhibition at Cabinet d'Art Contemporain (a Brussels gallery that closed in 2003 or 2004). And in the summer of 2001, at Oporto Capital of Culture,² I presented a large set of drawings and objects in hand-made crochet at the "Quarto da Maria" project room of the Artes em Partes building, an alternative space, which closed in 2009.

How and why did you begin to produce books?

I started making small books and notebooks in 1996 while attending AR.CO, but for various reasons these works were stored in a drawer until 2007. The previous year I had started my PhD, and my tutor insisted on the need to develop a research practicum. It seemed an ideal opportunity to deepen the subjects that interest me, namely the book as a means and structure. The *Color Books* series was initially a response to a my PhD project, whose core is an attempt to distinguish the concepts of self-portraiture and self-representation in the twentieth century. The subsequent printed editions are independent projects that give continuity to my many personal avenues of research.

I publish because the book structure allows me to develop a strong narrative nature along with the sequential relationship, which already manifests in my drawings, be it linear or fragmented. Publishing facilitates the dissemination of my work—I'm interested in showing my work outside the institutional and gallery environments. I often put economic

considerations in second place; I offer or exchange books with other makers, creating an effective network of shared experiences.

How would you describe the origin and evolution of your books?

Projects come from simple ideas. They sometimes appear because other work didn't succeed; they slowly mature—through scribbles and small-scale models; they are always conceived in a deep and strange symbiosis with my preceding works, and once they materialize, they give origin to yet more. All my projects develop in a continuous and simultaneous process, which has an internal logic of its own.

Although there is a theme or precept that initiates a project, the hand has an intelligence of its own, and the ideas mature as I draw. I make tens or in some cases even hundreds of drawings, which develop associations and relationships, although they may initially have had different intentions. Periodically, I photocopy or scan the drawings, slowly constituting a kind of database of possibilities. By making and destroying, choices are made and I tear apart almost all the drawings that are rejected. This is a passionate process, lengthy and sometimes confusing. In fact every maquette or dummy might lead to other books. When I understand or intuit that the model of the book has begun to have a definitive shape, I stop drawing and spend a lot of time constructing the connecting thread. The next step is to request estimates from printers, and finally I work the images with the very patient graphic designer who has worked with me from the beginning—João Carrôlo. He processes the images and prepares them for printing. João and I literally work side by side and I give João direction, explaining to him what I want and how the colors should be. I never learned to handle these technical aspects—I have little appetite for electronic tools.

The books are self-published. Only one, *Prière de Bonheur*, was supported by the Ministry of Culture through the General-Direction for the Arts, and by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.

I have just finished the second volume of *Diário*. The first was completed in June 2011. I do not like to talk much about future projects.

How do you choose the mode of production of your books? You have completely "industrial" books [offset printed] and others with various interventions, such as paintings, rubber stamps, needlework . . .

While I believe there is a conceptual and formal coherence or common thread between the different books and series, each requires specific and suitable choices. For example, while the earlier books (from 2008–09) were all produced in offset and presented as such (an industrially manufactured object), in *Untitled (Parce que l'on ne parvenait pas . . .)* I claim a peculiar plasticity by using manual interventions to the (necessarily) industrial production. That is, since it is important and I insist on selling the books at an affordable price to the general public, I must do multiples, but they can be made more "precious" by transforming these industrial objects, by "individualizing" each volume with

interventions. These “choices” are the result of a thought still open on the subject book, on its manufacture, and on the metaphorical implications implicit in these and other processes I use: rubber stamps, needlework, cut-outs, hand-painting, folding, and collages using my work or images taken from magazines...

How do you perceive the reception and reactions to your books?

My books have been well received in Brussels and have been collected by several people and entities, partly due to the efforts of my gallerist, Jean-Marie Stroobants (http://www.officedartcontemporain.com/OAC_Galerie.html), and partly because there is a tradition of collecting such objects in France and Northern Europe. I don't think I have a specific or typical audience, because my books are shown in various contexts. Over the past two years, I have received positive responses from all sorts of people, some I know and others I don't, and they encourage me to continue publishing. Generally the people who write me emails emphasize the disturbing, violent, and/or erotic nature of the images, often making a very personal reading of the content (I sense these are sometimes therapeutic projections). It is very interesting that in most cases, people interpret the drawings as if they were a confessional testimony and give them an autobiographical character without questioning the fictional side or the (sometimes obvious) relationship with literary sources. These personal readings sometimes give me ideas for other drawings and/or graphic solutions.

How does your activity as a teacher influence your work?

My teaching activity influences my artistic practice in both positive and negative ways. It's negative because teaching requires physical energy and a degree of attention from me that makes the days I teach . . . I only teach. Generally I get home too tired and cannot do anything else. But paradoxically, teaching is a source of another type of energy. I believe in tutorial teaching and in “project/studio” classes. I try as much as possible to have an individual relationship with each student – trying to help her/him find her/his own solutions to the work (s)he seeks to develop. That is, while teaching, I'm immersed in a movement of demand, research, and dialogue – of trial and error, which feeds my own creative process.

And do you introduce your students to the production of books?

I try not to direct the work of the students too much, and therefore I do not directly urge them to make books. But I encourage them to read and consult books (as another source of knowledge beyond the internet). Quite often, I carry many books to the classroom: artists' books, catalogs, and small press, among other kinds of editions. Although we live in the era of the internet and the virtual, I emphasize the material presence of the object in various ways (to handle, smell, feel the weight, etc.). In general students respond well and are almost always interested in one book or another. Sometimes I lend them a few volumes. I also accompany them to the library. It's amazing and frightening the number of eighteen-year-old students who have never entered a library!

Although I never show my personal work to the students

(in order to emphasize what they do) there is another kind of influence that certainly propagates through what I say, what I refer to, and the set of practices and exercises I propose to them. It is human.

You don't make only books. How do you situate your practice as a book artist in the entirety of your work?

My work is like a map of references and affiliation which simultaneously constitute me and that I create, embodying all that surrounds me. My work is a personal and fictional cartography: re-designed according to the images, trips, books, films, music, and people I see and meet. It's an imperceptible web, woven from my day-to-day experience, and it embraces two continents and three languages. It's impermanent.

My various art activities relate to one another. The main theme of these several series of drawings, small paintings, and books is loving and parental relationships. Almost all the stories are interpreted through fairy tales and mythologies. Their implied narrative nature is populated by beings in permanent transformation, enduring an everlasting maturation process. Innumerable hybrid characters and different universal and personal iconographies co-exist in a same space. There are a few words often repeated – as in an affectionate affirmation: you are my landscape.

I often think that “people” are too much domesticated in their/our quotidian lives. Making some kind of (art) work allows me to have a safe and peculiar territory of genuine inner freedom, where you can feel whatever you want without censure, where everything can be said. It keeps you “alive” (lucid?) and emotionally structured. As Lucian Freud says, “The process of creation becomes necessary to the painter perhaps more than is the picture. The process in fact is habit-forming.”³

Catarina Figueiredo Cardoso is a Portuguese diplomat posted in Paris. She collects small press and artists' books. She holds a degree in Law, and an MA in Political Science.

ENDNOTES

1. “Doublement gauche” in the original French text. In French, as in Portuguese and English, and probably in most languages, the left side of the body, the left – or *sinister* – hand, is connected with clumsiness and other negative associations. The right – or *dexter* – hand is associated with grace and skill. The word “ambidexterity” is intended to mean “skillful on both sides”; however, since it keeps the Latin root *dexter*, it ends up conveying the idea of being “right-handed at both sides.” See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Left-handedness#Negative_associations_of_language.
2. The European Capital of Culture is a city designated by the European Union for a period of one calendar year, during which it organizes a series of cultural events with a strong European dimension.
3. Lucian FREUD, ‘Some Thoughts on Painting’, Encounter, July 1954, pp. 23–24.