

Ariane Lopez-Huici: Monumental Beauty

"There is no excellent beauty that hath not some strangeness in the proportion."

Francis Bacon (1561-1626), *Of Beauty*

by John Wood

Ariane Lopez-Huici's nudes are a primitive yet neo-classical celebration of the monumentality, beauty, and eroticism of the body. They sing out like a hymn of praise to the power, fecundity, and magnificence of the female. Her work goes directly to the elemental nature of *Woman*. Camille Paglia writing about the *Venus of Willendorf* said a number of things that could apply equally well to any of Lopez-Huici's grandiose women: "Her fat is a symbol of abundance . . . She is the too-muchness of nature, which man longs to direct to his salvation. . . . Bulging, bulbous, bubbling. [B]ent over her own belly, [she] tends the pot of nature. . . . [T]rapped in her wavy, watery body, [s]he must listen and learn from something beyond and within her."¹

We look at Lopez-Huici's images and we, too, learn from something beyond and within them. Lopez-Huici's women are not that primitive, ancient Venus--at least not all of her and not her alone. That eyeless, blind and oblivious woman is Nature; Aviva and Lopez-Huici's other women are forces of Nature, women invested with the power of time's passage and the passing history of Western art and culture. Lopez-Huici transforms Venus into Vision, the too-muchness of nature into the very symbols of female power, eroticism, spirituality, and violation.

In the reclining portrait of Aviva looking at us, what might have begun as elemental and primitive Nature has become more well-defined, more expressive, more individual, and more erotic. Lopez-Huici has taken the raw material of Nature and transformed it. The *Venus of Willendorf* has become Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. Without actually alluding to other works of art but drawing on classic postures and poses of the human body, certain female icons of Western art are suggested by Lopez-Huici, icons that allow us to witness the transformation of the primitive again and again.² Old Venus turns new Venus. But with the passage of time and the coming of Manet, Titian's seductive *Venus* transforms into the far more sexually powerful and demanding *Olympia*, a figure closer to Lopez-Huici's *Aviva, 1996, #1*. And so, Lopez-Huici's image contains within it the simultaneous suggestion of three classic representations of woman: blind, omnipotent and impassive Nature; pliant, passive, yet seductive sexuality; and finally the assertive, demanding eroticism of an equal partner in passion, the eroticism of a woman of the modern age. Lopez-Huici, however, catches up all three of these historical Venuses into one body, Aviva's, so that her one image resonates through time and cultural change to suggest whole histories of woman and how she has been perceived sexually and culturally.

In doing this Lopez-Huici forces us to wrestle with our notions of beauty. She creates images that are so clearly beautiful that we are enraptured by them even though their content might at first be jarring. We see large nude women, large nude men, a large nude mother and son, a crippled man who can do amazing, balletic things on his crutches. This is not the standard material of *beauty*, but seen through the eye and lens of Ariane Lopez-Huici, all bodies and all things all transformed. This

act of transformation is one of art's unique functions--and its single *most* moral function--because it leads a viewer's eye to revelation, to new ways of seeing, and, thereby, suggests new and often more humane ways of thinking. Irving Penn showed us that the detritus of modern life--crushed cigarette butts, for example--can suggest the power and beauty of ancient dolmens, and in that act of suggestion, the past can serve as a critique of the present. Joel-Peter Witkin allows us to see, as mystics have for centuries, that death, darkness, and the *via negativa* can also lead to beauty; like Dante one sometimes has to traverse Hell in order to ascend to the Beatific Vision, and the path one takes can also serve as a critique and commentary on the times. And many other artists--Goya, Ensor, Bacon, *etc.*--have also made us confront our notions of beauty but few on so visceral a level as Lopez-Huici.

She confronts us with fat, assaults us with the immensities of flesh and forces us to look and look again. After we have finished seeing an exhibition of hers or studying a catalogue of her work or looking through a selection of her prints, we will have seen so much of the body's muchness laid out before us like sculpture that our prejudice begins to abate. And a serious prejudice it is.

Most every aspect of modern life as presented on television, in film, or in print is directed toward convincing us that fat is loathsome. Americans alone spend forty billion dollars a year on weight loss centers, health clubs, exercise videos and equipment, diet meals, and drugs to suppress appetite.³ At any time of the day or night several television channels will be running weight loss ads, exercise programs, ads for fitness machines, devices, or videos. And all the others will be presenting images that suggest that only thin people are beautiful, successful, desirable, sophisticated, healthy, or intelligent. Fat is assumed to be the antithesis of every positive attribute. We all buy into this myth, into the stereotype, and begin to think thoughts we never before had thought: Are my abs flat enough? Should I purge? Should I have my stomach stapled? Should I have my _____ reduced or enlarged?--with the blank being filled in by calves, thighs, nose, lips, breasts, and insanely on and on.

It is almost impossible to be a part of Western culture and not be prejudiced against fat. There is no ancient mystical tradition in praise of corpulence that Lopez-Huici can rely upon to support her images, as Witkin can his; there is nothing about fat that suggests, as Penn's cigarettes suggest, the ancient monuments and temples of the past--except for the *Venus of Willendorf* and similar figures--figures that go back into pre-history, that celebrate a time and a form we would not wish to know with any intimacy, a time when fat meant warmth and a better chance for survival, a time we associate with hides and the grease of animals and heavy thighs thrashing in flickering light at the cave's back.

Even though there is no ancient mystical tradition to sing the glories of body fat, prehistoric peoples, peoples who made figures like the *Venus*, had obviously figured out something modern science also knows but the Western ideal of beauty rejects: "extra body fat helps brings on menstruation and fertility and increases the chances of a healthy baby (heavier mothers produce heavier babies, who grow and develop faster).⁴ And still to this day in certain west African countries, girls in preparation for mating are moved to "fattening rooms" in order to be plumped up before marriage.

Philosopher, poet, and critic Frederick Turner recently wrote, "Visionary realists are having to teach themselves how to . . . make mythic allegories that contain real portraits and landscapes that are appropriate to the human stories they contain, . . . how to imagine history in terms of landscapes

and faces, how to put twenty-first century faces onto timeless neolithic bodies."⁵ And that is exactly what Ariane Lopez-Huici does again and again and does like no other photographer. Joyce Tenneson and Jan Saudek both occasionally use large models but they are put to very different purposes than Lopez-Huici's. Tenneson's large women are all symbolic--they stand for other things. And Saudek's are fetishistic and often even comic or vaguely mocking. In neither case are they those artists' primary representation of woman and her beauty.

Both reclining images of Aviva look as if they could have been cut from marble; they, like the Willendorf *Venus*, have sculpture's monumentality about them. But *Aviva* from behind has the same delicacy of eroticism as does its sister image. She may partake of the most ancient of Venuses, but she is also Ingres' *Grande Odalisque*, cool and commanding. And if Aviva might seem too bulky or too big for our modern notions of beauty, one might note that she is no more too wide than Ingres' odalisque is too tall or too long. She is a Mannerist object, and like all Mannerist objects is larger or longer or taller than life. And therein lies our delight in such work. But in order to experience the delight we must be intellectually willing to embrace "the larger than life" and see it outside of our preconceptions and prejudices. When we forget our prejudice against corpulence, Lopez-Huici's work sings out to us like any other hymn to the beauty of women--just as when we forget our preconceptions about the usual length of bodies, necks, legs, and babies Parmigianino's work sings out; as does Ingres' when we simply surrender to his obsession with the backs of women, an obsession so great that his distortion of the voluptuous back of *La Grande Baigneuse* apparently went so far as to give her more bones than a back could house.

In Lopez-Huici's camera the transformation of bodies becomes an act of metaphor. Metaphor is the essence of poetry, a lightning leap of the imagination that allows us to see one thing in terms of something else, a *something else* often vastly different from what we at first saw. Metaphor makes creative connections we never before had noticed but which we instantly realize are both true and profound. Visionary artists, be they poets, painters, or photographers, construct their art, as Frederick Turner suggested, so that its most potent impact, its strongest current, is not conveyed through surface statement or surface image alone. Its charge is carried in what that statement or image connects with via the paths of myth, archetype, cultural history, and sensory and emotional similarities. Metaphors are not contrived similarities but connections grounded in sense experience and inherent in the mythic material of our collective unconscious; they are as one critic put it "the love forms have for one another. . . . [because] they seduce the unity of things."⁶

Lopez-Huici's metaphors continually stagger us. She transforms Venus (*Aviva*, 1997) into St. Theresa in ecstasy and *Holly and Valeria*, 1998 into one of Giambologna's monumental, neo-classical sculptures of the *Rape of the Sabines*. *Aviva*, 1997 is clearly an image of orgasm and ecstasy, but she is alone except for the light piercing her as profoundly as the golden arrow of Bernini's angelic Christ-Cupid pierced St. Theresa. Like Bernini's Theresa who uttered "A bridal outcry from her open lips," Aviva has "lock[ed] the O of ecstasy within / The tempered consonants of discipline," as Richard Wilbur put it in a poem contrasting St. Theresa and Circe, the temptress who turned Odysseus's men into pigs.⁷ Few things are more fundamental to the human history of the world than the relationship between women and men. The idea that an enchantress, a temptress, a sacred witch, or whatever the Circe-like female might be called, can metamorphose men into grunting hogs suggests with little subtlety that men at base are pigs--or at least possess pig potential. Paglia writes, "Worldwide evidence is overwhelming that whenever social controls are weakened,

as in war or mob rule, even civilized men behave in uncivilized ways, among which is the barbarity of rape" (p. 23).⁸

And so it would be an incomplete portrait of femininity if Lopez-Huici did not incorporate into her art images of violence against women. No one would doubt for an instant that the portrait of *Holly and Valeria* is a portrait of violence, but from where does such violence come and why does it exist? To quote from Paglia again, "Sex crimes are always male, never female because such crimes are conceptualizing assaults on the unreachable omnipotence of woman and nature. . . . The female body is the prototype of all sacred spaces from cave shrine to temple and church. . . . Everything sacred and inviolable provokes profanation and violation" (pp. 22-23). And this, too, Lopez-Huici presents but again with all the cool elegance of sculpture. With this image of violation Lopez-Huici has brought us full circle emotionally--back to thoughts of the *Venus of Willendorf*, back to the Mother and to Nature as our Mother.

The violation of the female body represents the violation of the sacred and serves to symbolize the violation of the Holy of Holies--the mother, the Mother Herself, the *Venus of Willendorf*, Nature and the very earth itself. When Nature is no longer alive to us and the earth is no longer seen as a living organism, when She is no longer recognized as our Mother, when all her garments of myth and metaphor are stripped away and She is nothing to us but minerals, animals, people, and plants to be plundered, pillaged, and polluted for cash, then she has been raped and defiled by her children. And we are back deep in the old cave's brutish dark.

Finally now we can see in the four photographs reproduced here a panoramic portrait of the female: the Mother or Nature Herself hovering over images of the goddess of love, the whore, the ecstatic but celibate saint, and the defiled Sabine. These are the great archetypes of women. They are the images of her glory, her pain, and the world's pain, as well. In thinking about what each of these images means and suggests to us, especially in its larger metaphorical, emotional, and philosophical contexts, we begin to understand the true monumentality and beauty of Ariane Lopez-Huici's art.

Notes

1. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), pp. 55-57.

2. Arthur Danto has written a fine essay on Lopez-Huici entitled "'Soi' fait chair" / "The Enfleshment of the Self" in the catalogue *Ariane Lopez-Huici* (Paris: Galerie Frank, 1999), pp. 2-4, 21-22. After having met Lopez-Huici and seen her work and been enraptured by it, I immediately knew I wanted to write about it. She gave me a copy of the catalogue, but I made a point of not reading Danto's essay until I had completed my own. It was with both surprise and delight that I discovered I had made two of the same comparisons as he: Aviva as *Venus of Willendorf* and Aviva as *Olympia*. This suggests to me that what we both saw was no accident of our eyes but the very thing Lopez-Huici was shaping in her art.

3. Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999), p. 196.
4. Etcoff, p. 199.
5. Frederick Turner, "Visionary Realism," *American Arts Quarterly* XVII, #3-4 (Summer/Fall 2000), 12.
6. Calvin Bedient, "On. R. S. Thomas," in *Critical Quarterly* 14 (Autumn 1972), 259.
7. Richard Wilbur, "Teresa," in *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), p.79.
8. As to the Homeric comparison of men to pigs, Paglia writing about the cries of sex said, "Most men merely grunt, at best. But woman's strange sexual cries come directly from the chthonian. She is a Maenad about to rend her victim" (p. 26).