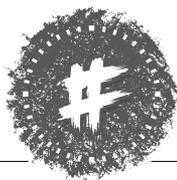


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Interview with Edén Barrena

By Sarah Elise Abramson

Producing work that is contemporary while touching on major historical themes and topics is a difficult feat, yet Spanish-born artist Edén Barrena does just that. Her story is intriguing, and her paintings are purposefully vague and complex, as the faces she paints are human and relatable, while remaining abstract. Barrena's paintings are delicately crude with deeply textured faces and figures against stark backgrounds. Ever fascinated with the dynamic between the self and the other, Barrena has spent much of her life traveling and studying. This helps engage and entice the feeling she is drawn to and ultimately allows her to experience the events she transmutes into her art. She understands it is the acute attention to detail that makes a great piece of work and intrinsically pushes and pulls on that concept.

Barrena's work looks as though it belongs in a museum, and she is certainly an artist to keep an eye on. Each piece looks exquisite, a feature patently present in all of her work. When looking through her work, one can see the wheels in her head spinning rapidly at a pace her body can barely keep up with. I'm sure the work

to come in future years from Barrena will be something significant and of interest to all who love art.

Can you elaborate on this quote pulled from your bio: "I am interested in the relationship between the self and the other, and in the estrangement and conflicts that this encounter generates"?

In the last three years, I have been living abroad. I first moved to Stuttgart, Germany, for 10 months. I had no knowledge of German, and my English by then was very poor, so it was very difficult to participate in what my new environment had to offer. It was then when I started to be really conscious of cultural identity. This had always been something vague to me, but once I had been put in that dislocation position, I started to pay attention to the condition of the foreigner and how they are perceived and treated. The foreigner might also develop a new way of looking at things, since he or she is in a different context where they're receiving more stimuli. I am not referring necessarily to the bad side of this adaptation process, but

to that period of estrangement developed while these discoveries take place.

Tell me a bit about your childhood: who you are, how you got to be the way you are and what influenced the work you find yourself making today.

I grew up in Badajoz, a medium sized city in the southwest of Spain. There were not too many things to do there, and I feel this lack of events favored my friends and me. We did all kinds of creative activities by ourselves, like fictional radio programs or magazines. As many children, I loved drawing, and I came into writing and reading very soon after. My father always made a great effort to have me go to afternoon lessons to develop my skills and awaken a deeper interest in what I already liked.

What other concepts or theories are you fascinated with?

As I mentioned, I am really interested in exploring the circumstances of the discovery, and that moment when you look at something for the first time, or in a different way that might mean, or become, an actual first gaze. I am starting to apply this approach to subtler subjects: I would like to be able to give the same importance to issues that are recognized as society concerns, but also to unseen details of every day.

Do you use any special techniques when creating? If so, what is the purpose?

There is a tendency of collecting in my work. My approach to a subject is by generating many images of the same thing or almost the identical idea but incorporating variations. For this reason, the final piece is normally a series: an accumulation.

Who are some other artists who influence you currently?

I always have Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard as my main reference artists, since I looked at their work often when I was learning how to paint. So, I keep them in the background of my influences. But then I have Sophie Calle, Francis Alÿs because of his *Fabiola* piece, Shizuka Yokomizo with her series *Dear Stranger*, and Chris Marker. These artists influence me because of their treatment to the stranger and the

narratives they are able to build from these encounters.

Do you remember the first thing you ever made? What was it? How old were you?

I used to draw a lot together with my mother. She drew what I asked her to draw, and I was so impressed by her skills. Also, I had a neighbor one year older than me who came very frequently to my place and drew with us. So these, let's say, collaborative drawing moments are the first steps I would consider.

How does your environment affect your work?

For me, the environment is crucial. Although I am quite an independent person, and I enjoy being alone, when it comes to work, I prefer to share space with other colleagues. I find it very fruitful, even when my partners are into something unrelated with my practice. There is always an exchange, and you are more exposed to a wider range of thinking.

What sort of training or schooling did you receive?

I did a Fine Arts BA in Madrid and then a Printmaking MA in London at the Royal College of Art.

If you had to describe yourself in three words, what would they be?

Observer, serene and proud.

Would you speak a little about your *Are migrants not human?* billboard project?



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That was a project launched by Metal Peterborough, a cultural organization based in the U.K. that is very concerned with the social connotations and applications of art. They asked 10 leading figures from the British cultural scene to purpose a question to the Peterborough community. After a national open call, the organization invited 10 artists to work from these questions and design an image for a billboard. In each of them, there would be a question and an image, and they would be displayed for one month in different locations of the town. The question I was given was, "Are migrants not human?", and it was placed entering the area with the biggest population of immigrants in Peterborough. This town holds the greatest percentage of foreigners in England, so it faces many inclusions about this issue.

What are your thoughts on the art world/gallery world? Do you feel you get treated any differently as a woman in this industry?

I would not say I am treated differently, but it might be because my experience has not been very wide yet. I am more interested in small spaces, run by young and bold people willing to take risks and work with young artists. I like dynamic and multidisciplinary initiatives opened to collaborations, since these are the ones I believe go along better with our times.

What's the best bit of advice that's ever been given to you?

My father encouraging me to have initiative. That can be applied to work but also to personal life. ●

1 *Colonia*, series of nine lithographies (stone, three layers) on paper, ed. of 10, 16½ x 23"

2 *Travelling from home*, series of six lithographies (plate, one layer) on paper, ed. of 10, 33 x 24"

3 *The memory is like a dam*, series of 50 screenprint monoprints on paper, 6 x 8"

4 *About fiction*, series of 20 bronze heads, unique edition, approximately 4 x 4 x 3"

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Sarah Elise Abramson is a contemporary fine art photographer based in San Pedro, California—a mysterious post-industrial enclave whose offbeat countercultural history and proliferation of unusual sights, sounds and citizens is tailor-made for Abramson's obsession with everyday surrealism. In both her own photography and in her curatorial and editorial approach to exhibition projects and independent publications, her emphasis is on discovering the eccentric beauty in the things most people overlook. Found objects, hidden messages, secrets of the universe that hide in plain sight—throughout her studies at Parsons The New School for Design and Brooks Institute of Photography, and later at LaChapelle Studios, her work has evolved from finding to intuitively creating original daydreams and shared cosmologies.

