Claudia Casarino

About the Artwork

Claudia Casarino, Paraguayan by birth, demonstrates through her work, the importance of the "body as territory", addresses the key role of women in society, and our indelible origins as humans. Spanish Colonization, the Hispano-Guaraní pact, and the War of the Triple Alliance against Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, are a series of historical events irreversibly linked to both the "silenced" and "silent work" of the women of Paraguay — indigenous or otherwise. Casarino's body of work represents inerasable living reflections of the mind—through collective memory; clothing—by dress and cultural tradition; and skin or blood—human traces representing mankind—and more specifically, the Paraguayan struggle. These three elements, conceptually bridged with the use of the fiery, brownish-red, iron-rich earth of Paraguay (known also to exist throughout many regions of South America) as pigment in her work, conveys the struggle that plagues its peoples, through a shared history of conquest and colonization, with the exploitation of the indigenous worker, land loss, and centuries of economic and socio-political setbacks.

Casarino's artworks most often and specifically deal with subjects surrounding gender issues, canons of beauty, the roles imposed on women, and those that women impose on themselves. These explorations are frequently intertwined with the female body and its relationship with clothes. Her work showcases her personal history, which she transmits through her own body, guiding it into a societal dimension. In her Inhabited Dresses series, Ellas 5 (trans. She 5, the plural for "5 females") is a hanging arrangement of five white cotton dresses doused in red earth, as though the women presumably wearing them had been toiling in the wet earth, staining only the lowerthirds, while the top two-thirds remain pristine and pure. In doing so, the artist reveals a political discourse about the place that women have in Paraguayan society. A political reflection on the presence of women from generation to generation, and their bodies, in a state of tension. Casarino shows us how each historical event lived in Paraguay, including colonization and war, dictatorship and economic injustice, conjoins the "silenced", and quite "traditional work" of women. In traditional Indigenous and European fashion, handsewn clothing, crocheted lace and dressmaking is passed down from generation to generation as "women's work". And by soiling them with red-brown earth, she alludes to the fieldwork that has become part of the agricultural labors of all indigenous workers, including women, and children. In *Indelible*, Casarino squares crisp white linen, embroidered shirts side-by-side with silkscreen images of yerba mate plants. The shirts are made with *aopo'i*, a lightweight cotton fabric that embodies the textile culture of Paraguay since pre-colonial times. The shirts and prints are stained, marked, with red-brown earth from the Paraná River, dissolved in water. The ancient Guaraní had said that the red of the land comes from indigenous bloodshed during the violent conquest of their territories. But that color also comes from the same spilled by the *mensú* (meaning "monthly" but referring to the farm laborer, someone who works on a monthly basis), and the *tareferos* who, in the same region, collect *yerba mate* leaves in extreme and exploitive conditions: grueling labor for low wages, under unsafe, unregulated circumstances, in remote areas, far from home and family. These conditions, typical of slavery, cause injury and often death to these workers. The artwork is based on the writings of late-19th century author Rafael Barret (of British-Spanish descent) in *El dolor paraguayo* (*The Paraguayan Pain*)

wherein the *mensú* are described as arriving to work with no more than their own shirts on their backs —made by their wives or mothers which were so treasured, that they preferred to expose the skin of their backs, tear their flesh by the crackling and heavy loads carried, rather than to destroy their revered delicately handmade garments. *Mensú* shirts were worn backward to cover the chest and expose the back. The garments exhibited by Casarino bear earthly, blood traces of other drawn shirts that seek to replace the part subtracted from the back of the worker —seeking somehow to reverse the tragedy. These, alongside earth/blood-painted images of the *yerba mate* plant, complete the work. *Yerba mate* is considered a "traditional staple" of the South American breakfast, afternoon teatimes, and sometimes imbibed throughout the average day, all around most of South America. Its consumption, per capita, is highest in Uruguay, followed by Argentina, then Paraguay, and Brazil.

Casarino works from the conceptual point-of-view, reflecting on female gender issues, women's work traditions, the impacts of poverty and the exploitation of natural and human resources, and the consciousness of the body affected by borders and forced transits. Her work deals with interpreting the universe of women as a subject of social transformation.

About the Artist

Claudia Casarino was born in Asunción, Paraguay, and studied at the ISA of the National University of Asunción, with post-graduate residencies in New York, and London.



Photo Credit: Javier Medina

She has exhibited her work since 1998 and participated in five of the MERCOSUR Biennials, the Biennials of Havana, Tijuana, Busan, Cuenca, Curitiba, Algeria, and Venice, as well as the triennial of Santiago and Puerto Rico, and in various exhibitions in galleries, museums and cultural centers of Asunción, Santiago, San Pablo, Buenos Aires, Bogotá, Madrid, Barcelona, Milan, Amman, and London, among others.

Her work is included in the collections of the Museo del Barro in Asunción, Paraguay, Victoria & Albert Museum in London, Business Improvement District Council in Washington DC, the Spencer Museum in The University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Sapin, and Casa de las Américas in Havana.

