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*Panoramic View or Cityscape*, 3 panels, 80 x 150 cm each, from the *Requiem for a City* Series, 1979-1982 (acrylic on canvas). Paloma Woolrich Collection.

# WOMEN'S CAUSES IN THE ART OF FANNY RABEL

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**B**oldly distinguishing herself from several Mexican women artists who, even now, are reluctant to accept any direct relationship with the feminist movement, Fanny Rabel was always very up-front in her recognition of its importance in multiple ways. In fact, as a woman artist,

she knew that her professional development was largely possible thanks to the social struggle carried out for several years by the feminist movement; she enthusiastically participated in many collective shows of women artists organized by feminist groups; throughout her life, she very actively supported different feminist activities in defense of women's rights; and she felt a profound thematic empathy with some of the main problems denounced by the feminist movement, especially during its rise in the 1970s and 1980s.

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Photos by Jorge Arreola Barraza.

## FANNY RABEL'S LIFE AND WORK

Fanny Rabinovich (1922-2008), known as Fanny Rabel, was born in the city of Lublin, Poland, into a Jewish family of stage actors. Their profession and the complicated situation in Europe after World War I meant they spent a great deal of time traveling through different areas of Poland, Russia, and France. In 1938, fleeing from fascism and the imminent World War II, the artist and her family moved to Mexico.

At first, given her family's precarious condition as recent immigrants, the young Rabel had to work to contribute to their support. She began her artistic career by attending drawing and printmaking courses at the Evening Art School for Workers, and shortly afterwards, her talent and perseverance allowed her to join David Alfaro Siqueiros's mural

art collective. Finally, in 1942, she entered the La Esmeralda National School of Painting and Sculpture, where she met teachers like Diego Rivera and José Chávez Morado,<sup>1</sup> who consolidated not only her artistic education, but influenced her social concerns and political activities as well. Through her acquaintance with Frida Kahlo, Rabel became part of the group known as "los Fridos," and later on continued her instruction in mural painting working as one of Rivera's assistants. Rabel was a key member of the Popular Graphics Workshop and the Mexican Salon of Fine Arts, where not only did she develop a very active professional career, but also participated in union activities and many public conferences and debates in favor of artists' rights.

Throughout her life, she produced a wide range of artistic work, including prints, easel paintings, murals, and scenery



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*Self-portrait*, 79.2 x 60 cm, 1966 (acrylic on masonite). Paloma Woolrich Collection.

In her paintings Rabel was able to communicate a very intimate, complex, and painful account of what it meant to be a woman in Mexico during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.



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Mirele Efros, 69 x 51 cm, from the *Far and Near Theater Series*, 1986-1989, (acrylic on fiberboard). Jaime Sommer Collection.

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designs; she also participated in numerous collective and individual exhibitions, both in Mexico and abroad. Later on, her style evolved from realism to expressionism, demonstrating her outstanding creative capacity and her open-minded spirit, never fearful of experimentation and change.

In the 1970s, Rabel was in her fifties and at the height of her artistic career. She began to exhibit widely, painting and organizing her individual shows by thematic series, such as *The Social Media News* (1972), *About Time* (1975), *Requiem for a City* (1979), and *The Distant and the Near Theater* (1989), which, more broadly than the scope of their different specific topics, share the artist's talent for denouncing some of the contemporary world's most excruciating social problems, with a very original mixture of nostalgia and her ironic sense of humor.

#### THE FEMINIST AWAKENING OF THE 1970s

As in other parts of the world, the 1970s was the decade of the feminist boom. The 1960s cultural revolution, and the rising socialist, anarchist, and Marxist ideals in Latin America in general, and particularly in Mexico, offered some of the reference points needed for the emergence of a very radical, militant, and avant-garde type of feminism, which began to be felt in every political, social, and cultural field at the time.

The 1970s, the inaugural decade of the modern new wave of Mexican feminism, was a time of discovery and passionate struggle. The pioneering founders were a very small group of no more than 30 women, who together gained consciousness of their so-called shared "condition as women" as "subjugated beings" *vis-à-vis* men. Like in other parts of the world, the spectacular discovery that the oppression they experienced was not just individual but a collective experience gave them enormous strength, and in spite of their reduced number, allowed them to make lots of productive noise.

The founding feminists of the 1970s generally belonged to the intellectual Mexican middle class. They formed autonomous groups, with no fixed alliances in political parties or unions. At that time, the movement was not structured; it did not have carefully thought-out strategies, or fixed declarations of principles, but their enthusiasm and energy is still difficult to match. They frequently organized some very emblematic actions and interventions, using artistic expressions in very persuasive ways.<sup>2</sup> Through the first academic courses, the first feminist journals, and the organization of

the first collective women's art shows, the pioneering Mexican feminists denounced and fought against the historical confinement of women to the domestic world, "where a lack of educational opportunities and the burden of exhausting and monotonous work added to women's backwardness in the political, economic, scientific, and artistic worlds, objectifying them and depriving them of their voice, their consciousness, and their right to history and creativity."<sup>3</sup>

### RABEL'S FEMINIST WORKS

In accordance with the Mexican feminist political agenda of the 1970s and 1980s, and with her own personal experiences as a woman living and working in a patriarchal society, Rabel created some very paradigmatic works. In all of them, despite their different inspirational sources and styles, the artist boldly denounced some of the social "imperatives" or "deformed desires" that have oppressed women throughout history: domesticity, beauty, and dependence on males. As expressed by Rabel's works, women commonly appropriate these social mandates in spite of their serious and dangerous self-damaging effects.<sup>4</sup>

Rabel's *The Shipwreck* (1983) represents a surreal atmosphere where stormy waves violently irrupt into an apparently quiet room, where a woman seated on a bed is self-absorbed in her own thoughts in front of a TV set displaying a giant pistol. This very strange and powerful iconography was most probably inspired by the movie of the same title from 1977, directed by Jaime Humberto Hermosillo, and based in turn, on Polish writer Joseph Conrad's short story *Tomorrow* (1902). Both the painting and the movie metaphorically refer to the dramatic consequences that the patriarchal system can have in a woman's life, when, once again, she has internalized a "deformed desire" by renouncing her own intellectual capabilities and placing instead all her hopes on the arrival of an idealized man for self-validation. The metaphoric "wreckage" alludes to the existential crisis women embark on when the idealized "hero" finally shows himself to be no different than other violent, indifferent men who characterize the patriarchal system.

In *Be Beautiful* (1977), the body of the woman portrayed assumes the seductive pose of a reclining odalisque, a very frequent stance for female figures in Western iconography, but in this case re-appropriated by Rabel to ironically criticize not only the social mandates regarding the damaging



*The Shipwreck*, 124 x 202 cm, 1983 (mixed techniques on canvas). Paloma Woolrich Collection.

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*Be Beautiful*; each triptych panel measures 111 x 75 cm, 1977 (mixed techniques on canvas). Private collection.

absolute standards in relation to women's bodies and beauty, but also the complicity of many women who allow themselves to be objectified this way. The painting becomes another good example of the unmasking of another "deformed desire" internalized by many women who obsessively follow diets, fashion, and other diminishing practices, discriminatorily and exclusively applied to their bodies.

The naked body of the modern odalisque of Rabel's image evidences how, in fact, our most personal acts are many times scripted by patriarchal social conventions, referenced in this specific painting through its iconographic allusion to Western artistic tradition. At the same time, the painting's triptych composition, breaking the woman's body into three different parts, acts as a potent visual metaphor of women's fragmented identities throughout history.

*The Empty House* (undated) is a very moving piece created by Rabel most probably during the late 1960s, since it relates both thematically and stylistically to her series of that decade, such as *Solitude* (1962) and *The Prisons of Humankind* (1967). In these works, the artist explicitly alludes to the difficulties of human communication and to the burden that some social customs, including marriage, can impose on human beings, since they often damage our well-being and freedom. *The Empty House* originates in the dramatic experience of many women, but particularly housewives, who, once

their children grow and leave home, experience a painful sense of loneliness and emptiness. This feeling, called the "empty-nest syndrome," which frequently coincides with other major changes like menopause and trying to cope with increasingly dependent elderly parents, turns out to be very difficult to overcome.

The painting is an original mix of realist and surrealist styles, where a seated and almost paralyzed woman occupies the empty space of her present, evoking at the same time the ghostly presences of her recent past, filled with the very demanding mother-housewife's activities that up to that point had kept her busy, but not necessarily happier. We can conclude that the great value of Rabel's painting resides not only in her astonishing aesthetic qualities, but in the important fact of making visible a very common and serious social problem, the dangerous depression that invades many adult women and is not openly acknowledged by society and even less treated than it should be.

#### THE ART OF DENUNCIATION

Even though Rabel was not a feminist activist, throughout her life, she was very close to the feminist movement, supporting various initiatives in favor of women's causes, and

drawing inspiration for some of her themes from the main issues denounced by the movement during those years.

Combining both the information and the ideas discovered and denounced by early Mexican feminism and her own inner experiences as a woman living in a patriarchal society, in her paintings Rabel was able to communicate a very intimate, complex, and painful account of what it meant to be a woman in Mexico during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

By denouncing the social constructions surrounding what women “ought to be” and their dramatic consequences, including the unbearable sense of solitude and meaninglessness, the internalization of the highly self-diminishing objectification of women by women themselves, and the violence of the patriarchal world from a very intimate and well-informed perspective, Rabel was able to denounce some of the ideological bases and gender prejudices that commonly characterize the lives of many women in Mexico even today. As an artist greatly influenced by the feminist movement, Rabel at the same time contributed enormously to the advancement of the struggle in favor of women’s causes, becoming a key figure in the genealogy of resistance to the social discrimination exerted against women in Mexico. **VM**



*River of Time*, 72 x 109.5 cm, 1975, from the *About Time* Series, 1975 (oil on canvas). Museum of Modern Art, State of Mexico Institute of Culture.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Rabel also studied with Feliciano Peña, Raúl Anguiano, Carlos Orozco Romero, Francisco Zúñiga, and Alfredo Zalce.

<sup>2</sup> Let us remember the 1976 protest against the celebration of Mother’s Day, May 10, because of the conservative ideological basis of the tradition, when activists dressed in mourning black walked to the Mother’s Monument in Mexico City and deposited a funeral wreath made out of instruments, pills, and herbs used by women to perform clandestine abortions. Another important public rally was held at the National Auditorium, this time to protest against the Miss Universe Beauty Pageant, because of its appalling objectification of women. Even though the first Mexican feminists got together in order to reflect on their own condition as women, as a consciousness-raising strategy, some of them began to organize in bigger and more public types of associations such as the Women’s Liberation Movement (MLM), created in 1974 by Eli Bartra, Marta Lamas, Berta Hiriart, Lucero González, and Martha Acevedo, who because of their coherence and permanence, constructed the bases of the new feminist consciousness in the country. Other important organizations of the times were the Movement of Solidarity Action (MAS), founded in 1971; the National Women’s Movement (MNM), in 1973; and the *La Revuelta* Collective, created in 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Delia Selene de Dios Puente, “Preface,” *Mujer y sociedad* (Mexico City: Facultad de Ciencias Políticas y Sociales de la UNAM/Salón de la Plástica Mexicana, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> I am using the concept as used by the Norwegian social and political theorist Jon Elster (1940). For him, a person acquires “deformed desires” in order to adapt his/her preferences to his/her opportunities, such as in the so-called “sour grapes” phenomenon of the classic fable, where, since the fox could not reach the grapes, he declared that they were sour to convince himself that he preferred not to eat them.



*Super-elegant Women*, 83 x 62 cm, from *The Society Pages* Series, 1971-1972 (mixed techniques on wood). Lailson-Zorrilla Collection.