

# Butterfly Wings: The Fragile Subversion of Tania Bedriñana

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*Butterfly Wings* is an “expanded painting”<sup>1</sup> installation, presented by artist Tania Bedriñana as her graduation project at Kunsthochschule Kassel (Kassel School of Visual Arts) in 2002, which now – twenty years to the day – can be seen at *The Dress Backwards*, an exhibition curated by Miguel A. López that revisits her production through a perspective that focuses in body representation and kinship.

*Butterfly wings* inaugurated several of the topics and formal strategies that distinguish Bedriñana’s work today and can be read from the present as a critical pointing towards the heteropatriarchal imaginary that dominates the local pictorial tradition. In fact, since early in her formation at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru’s Faculty of Arts, Bedriñana refused to align her work with a methodology that demanded an acritical reproduction of a modernist and masculine sensibility –where enunciative seriousness and a maturity of the visual repertoires, as well as a technical excellence based in a hierarchy and non-contamination between the different artistic disciplines– set the boundaries that made painting valuable and intelligible. In the opposite spectrum, Bedriñana had a fixation with representing the body – more importantly the female body – by resorting to precarious materialities and techniques associated with the domestic and infantile such as drawing, watercolors and paper cutting. For years, Bedriñana regarded this repertoire of images as sketches that would sooner or later become something more, or even a personal obsession that it was pointless to make public. However, her encounter with German academia – which encouraged its students to seek and develop a personal formal language by means of interdisciplinary experimentation – gave her the push she needed to dive into her interests and the interstices that appear while working at the limits of what is traditionally regarded as painting.

In its original iteration, *Butterfly Wings* was made up of a hundred and ten paper cutouts on which the artist used watercolors to paint a series of female figures, individuals of ambiguous gender and body parts –especially heads, torsos, erogenous zones such as mouths and eyes and limbs such as hands and feet– all

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<sup>1</sup> “Expanded painting” is a recent term that describes projects where painting plays a central role but is complemented with sculpture, photography, new media and other formats. Bedriñana was not aware of this nomenclature when she was working in *Butterfly Wings*, but it has helped her think about the project in retrospect. Conversation with the artist, June 2022.

of different sizes, which hanged off the walls in random position to bounce to the audience a question about the character of their presence and interactions. The installation included the projection of an equally enigmatic animated video, an artisanal over photographs. On a first assessment of the project we could state that, in the transition from canvas to walls, Bedriñana burst the seams of what we normally understand as painting. As such, the use of paper cutouts allowed her to free her characters from the frame and canvas and compose directly onto the space. Reminiscing about her first montage of *Butterfly Wings* in her studio, the artist narrates with excitement the sense of freedom – rivaled only by the free play of childhood – that she felt as she let herself get carried away with the whites, the stains, the shades or simply the possible relationships between objects in order to seize the walls with her work.

On more than one occasion, Bedriñana has resorted to the memory of playing with cutout dolls to describe the logic of change and displacement that cutting enabled in her practice. Cutout dolls were invented by seamstresses in 18<sup>th</sup> century France, meant to give their aristocrat patronesses an idea of what the finished garments would look like. However, due to their easy reproducibility and low cost, they spread across the world during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and became a popular pastime for girls of all social strata. Although the game was about experimenting with the different identities that the female body could take on through clothing, it reinforced very traditional gender stereotypes, consequently becoming a space for indoctrination. Far from representing a serial model of femininity, however, Bedriñana's cutouts are deeply disruptive and unsettling. There is an unmistakable rawness in the artist's treatment of the body. A body – female or feminized, generally – that, while it has escaped the frame and the customs associated with the construction of the human figure, returns to interpellate us with its fragmented reality.

Indeed, *Butterfly Wings* is effective in conveying an atmosphere of tension or anguish. Its characters' positions point to an incomplete action, expressing a passivity and disempowerment that remind of certain mythical Catholic imagery: kneeling, seemingly penitent women; youths lying down - naked from the waist down, their sexes implied– who look up with imploring eyes; the silhouette of a faceless virgin/bride surrounded by a trousseau comprised of possible gestures including hands, mouths and eyes. And suddenly, a desintegrated taxonomy of other body parts emerges from the empty spaces between these characters: heads without torsos, torsos without heads, anonymous bodies that hold heads, hands that hold bodies and bodies that complicate the human and animal anatomy.

In the heterogeneous compendium of dissident corporealities that constitute *Butterfly Wings*, color becomes a sensitive and unifying element. While the artist uses a wide gamut of pale, washed out tonalities, there is a predominant use of rose, the faintest hues of which allow the artist to produce an unstable, translucent coloration similar to skin, while its deepest moments yield a deep violet that evokes the color of coagulated blood or a contusion. With these resources and based on a careful handling of color, line and stain, Bedriñana alters the body's representation, managing to communicate an affective aspect rather than anatomical or descriptive. The faces, for example, the ultimate expression of individuality, are depersonalized, with their traits summarily sketched. The artist actually does not seem interested in the precision of a portrait, but rather its capacity to evoke and mobilize a gradient of complex emotions. As a result, her disquieting characters resist any attempt at classification, vindicating subjectivity as a dense, permanently disputed terrain.

Bedriñana has never felt comfortable theorizing over her work, but she equally avoids the confessional. Throughout the years, she has preferred to let her artistic process reflect her most immediate emotions, circumscribing the creative act within the intuitive gesture in the studio. However, *Butterfly Wings* is a special case within her trajectory. As she worked on the project, the artist began a psychoanalytic therapy process that led her to revisit violent episodes from her childhood. The process of recalling these hard moments, which deeply marked her youth and adulthood, bore intensifying dreams and nightmares as a consequence, whose images condensed aspects of her emotional life that are still hard to put into words today and which she consequently rushed to translate faithfully into her work. For this reason, when prompted to explain the content of the piece, Bedriñana prefers to avoid closed explanations, and modestly responds that the work captures the sensations left in her body by a constellation of ambivalent affects that she experienced in her family nucleus.

In *Mothers, fathers and others*, author Siri Hustvedt states that even an existentialist concept such as German philosopher Martin Heidegger's "thrownness" is insufficient in describing the deep defenselessness of a baby faced with the intimacy of the family who receives it. For the author, it is women, generally the biological mothers, who mitigate this experience of absolute fragility with their care. From a psychoanalytic perspective, on the other hand, family is understood as an instance of conflict and incompleteness where the Oedipal drama is set in motion. Hence, in the context of the nuclear family, the son or daughter would step into a fusional relationship with their mother that only the father can sever with his symbolic intervention. For the classic psychoanalytic narrative, this paternal intervention gives way to sexual differentiation, as well as

a successful insertion into a social context. However, a feminist reading of this very narrative cannot look away from the fact that it is the negation of the mother's power that provides the basis for the social bond in the family, inscribed into a heteronormative and patriarchal cultural matrix. A different but complementary reading is that of Judith Butler<sup>2</sup>, who has pointed out that the family is an organization that emerges around the fundamental forms of human dependence, including birth, rearing, illness and death. As the philosopher points out, however, the other side of dependence is usually violence. This way, the family is the space where the relationships of domination and oppression that prevail on the female world and, by extension, in everything close to it, are naturalized.

In the simultaneous historization and problematization of her own experience of vulnerability – as a child and woman – at the nucleus of her family, Bedriñana not only opens the possibility of resignification and personal reparation, but highlights the inexistence of a “natural” harmony in kinship relationships, depersonalizing affective states that are otherwise toxic and guilt-generating. Certainly, Bedriñana offers new possibilities of meaning to painting through her works, in a context where communication and social media barrage us with images that configure what British theorist Sara Ahmed has called a “cruel optimism<sup>3</sup>” as the feeling structure of our times. That is to say, a state of omnipotence or collective mania aimed at creating productive subjectivities that are over-adapted to the system, where “positive” affects are promoted as the only desired emotional state, while an important set of human emotions – such as sadness, shame, anger, and others – are invisibilized and even socially chastised. But there is more: in her book *Ugly Feelings*<sup>4</sup>, feminist scholar Sianne Ngai takes this argument further and states that the cultural canon reproduces the phobic logic towards “ugly, minor or politically ambiguous” affects. According to Ngai, the art world seems to have prioritized superior passions and emotions, as if “minor or ugly” emotions were incapable of producing “great” works. Following this interpretive line, we can state that Bedriñana's exploration of a subjectivity mesmerized with the “pre-social” world of infancy –as well as the emotions of weakness and disempowerment associated to this condition – is not only cathartic when set against the straitjacket that the social ideal of family supposes, but also

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<sup>2</sup> See: Judith Butler, *Deshacer el género (10th Edition)*. Barcelona, Spain. Paidós (2006-2018)

<sup>3</sup>See: Sara Ahmed, *La promesa de la felicidad: una crítica cultural al imperativo de la alegría*, Buenos Aires: Caja Negra, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> See: Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005.

interrogates the binaries and dualisms – such as public/private, male/female or adult/child – on which the artistic canon has been erected.

*Butterfly Wings* allows its spectators to engage with a set of socially repressed emotions which, despite being fundamental to human experience, are touted as a source of shame. Bedriñana's fragile act of subversion is then to experiment with the sensible repertoires of malaise, but without renouncing to the search of beauty, in order to create a means of transformation that deviates from "correct" politics and the colonial logic of submission, opening a field of signification and understanding that stands closer to nerve and flesh than to reason.

*Alas de mariposa* [Butterfly Wings ], 2002

Elementos recortados en acuarela sobre papel y técnicas mixtas, montaje variable [Paper cutout painted with watercolor and mix media, montage variable]. Vista de instalación [Installation view at] en Stellwerk, Centro Cultural Kulturbahnhof Kassel, Alemania.