

We are not.

We were this or that.

A conversation between Elly Strik and Jean-Christophe Ammann



Jean-Christophe Ammann: Who is this?

Elly Strik: That is me.

JCA: You?

ES: It portrays me in 2012. It started with a photograph, which I made when I was at art academy at the beginning of the 1980s. The training was classical; we did a lot of drawing and painting through observation, such as still-life, model, portraits, etc. At home I made photographs. I was my own model or sometimes my dog was also figuring. I set up very simple decors and used a self-timer to take the photographs.

They were all analogue, of course. I developed the film and printed the photos in a small darkroom that I had set up in my bedroom.

I wanted to make an official portrait of myself as a student, to give this state an official look, like a portrait of a king. You know how the official king portraits are, they are all standing in the same composition, and hang in post offices or other state buildings. I was trying out how an official photo of an artist would look and holding a falcon was supporting this idea. I still like that photo, it became a kind of talisman for me.

JCA: But it is mostly men who are photographed like that.

ES: I made myself look androgynous. I think girls and boys have similar dreams, at least I did. I always wished to have a bird as a friend. A bird can fly, watch, hunt, and always returns. It gives you a powerful feeling. I called it *Self-Portrait at the Academy*.

JCA: You have reused that image in this large work thirty years later. Why?

ES: I wanted to see if it was possible to show the same person in a new dimension: shining, reflecting, and being invisible at the same time. But it is not the same person any longer, because the physical appearance has changed.

I was focusing on how a dematerialized figure, who nonetheless still represents the artist in a more general way, might look. How far can the dematerialization reach, without disappearing.

JCA: What you do not see straightaway is that this is reinforced with hundreds of tiny swirls. Even the head has become essentially indistinguishable because it is made up of so many little swirls. Is that an interpretation of yourself compared to yourself as a student at the academy of fine art, as clear as a photograph, while today it has become a memory, and therefore a much more open image? Did you include the swirls from the outset?

ES: I will tell you about the process of this work. I had some vague ideas, and although I had a steady starting point in the photo, what I was hoping to achieve from the picture was undefined. I started with a very dark green, everything was in dark colors, and every day during a long period I added more white.

But you know, it is hard to make white more white; black has many more gradations. And the swirls, I don't know exactly what I should call them, we basically have no name for them, because they are normally invisible. I needed the electric charge or the magnetism of them, dreamlike in a softer way, introducing the figure in a new way.

They make the figure and the bird visible just by touching them. So you can say the figure both exists and came to exist in swirls. There is no distinguishable material in this work anymore, only compactions or condensations. And the density thus created makes the shapes visible.

The swirls are also connected to the idea of being free. Just by holding a bird in your hand you are able to make the connection of flying. But here it goes further than that; for me it became a cosmic journey, like a dream.



JCA: Did you spend a long time on this piece?

ES: Quite long. Slowly I invented the possibility of the vibrations. The swirls make the figure shining and transparent at the same time, invisible while giving off light. They made the impression of disappearing and appearing possible in the same space and the different sizes of the swirls give the dimension.

I literally had to move a lot, so that I could do them in various sizes. When I stayed at the same distance to the work, the size of the swirls stayed the same.



The work is called *Modo de volar* (A Way to Fly), which I borrowed from the etching by Goya. Do you know the etching I mean? There are five people trying to fly, each in a different way, with their own inventions. You know like they did in the old days:

wearing wings for example, or standing in a construction like a kind of big bird. It is quite amusing.

When you enter Madrid through the airport one of the first things you see is a huge reproduction of it.

JCA: Is “modo de volar” sometimes also a necessity for you, to escape from yourself?

ES: It is not an escape, it is a possibility to expand.

JCA: How do you want to start the conversation, do you have an idea? Should I start first? Maybe I could begin by speaking about the general situation, to introduce the time we live in and look at ways in which artists can develop something?

We have to talk like porn stars, bearing our viewer, the reader, in mind. You see, the more we can star as porn stars the more impact it will have. It is like Marilyn Monroe. She did her best show in front of 100,000 people, but once alone with her different husbands she became very lonely and didn't know how to do something with herself.

ES: But I am in my private space.

JCA: That is the reason why we have to be superstars now. Shall we start?

ES: The recorder is already running. My proposal is to focus on the process of creation.

JCA: I think we have to put our conversation about the process of creation first of all into the context of our time; we absolutely have to consider the time in which we live. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a professor of philosophy and literature at Stanford University, on the west coast of the US, puts this very well indeed. He says that we live in a time in which the encroaching presence of the past is being increasingly felt, yet it does not determine what the future will be.

There was a time, he says, in which we had the past, the present, and the future. And when you look at the twentieth century, in terms of art, you will see that every generation managed to forge a new future. A generation in the art world means ten years. And today this concept or notion of the future no longer exists, except perhaps in the field of technology. There are an incredible number of opportunities for the future.

In the twentieth century there was found a general direction in the different currents, namely modernism and abstraction, and today the general direction is 360 degrees. The sheer volume of art has multiplied over the last twenty years. Everyone is looking to find a way and often paths taken in the past are used without being properly transformed. Every piece of art comes from memory, which does not mean going back into the past, but making the past solid in the present. How did you find your way? Was there something in your life that affected you most? Perhaps it is better for us to talk about why you painted Sigmund Freud's sofa?

ES: It started with the wish to have this sofa in my studio. I began this piece in 2007. At the time I was introducing smaller pieces of work. For twenty years I only made work that was three meters high. And in 2006, I had so many ideas that it was almost impossible to continue on this large scale. With the small pieces I was able to develop a lot of ideas at the same time. It was like a little quantum leap. On one wall of my studio I had the sofa, and all the smaller works were spread out on the other walls. The ideas, attractions, and instincts were dealing with the condition of mankind today.

JCA: You were working on Darwin and Freud at the same time?

ES: I went to London to visit their homes. Both had become museums. Both Darwin and Freud found revolutionary things in human development. When you live a long time in the same house, it is like your personal coat, like an extension of your body. Darwin's house is in the country, the outside is still the same as it was, but almost nothing of the inside is original, except the floor of the kitchen and a few small things. I remember his glasses and watch, an old nice model, but all the rest were reconstructions. There is still one tree from his time in the backyard, which is now held up with supports. Nevertheless it was nice to be there. I was there in winter, no other visitors, it was dark early and misty and raining and I absorbed the atmosphere, the silence, the country. You can do the Darwin walk, which follows a similar route to the one that he did. Every day he did the same walk five times successively, always taking an identical route. It was his thinking time. But in thinking he easily could lose track of the time. He found a very good solution for this: he laid down four stones at the starting point of his walk and every time he passed this point, he kicked out one stone, so when all the stones were gone, his walking and thinking time was up.

JCA: What did you find in Darwin?



ES: *The Difficulty for a Monkey to Throw off its Instinctive Fear and Hatred of a Snake* is a work that I developed after this visit. It deals with creation itself. The lines of the pencil are charged in different directions, like a seismograph, sometimes very detailed, sometimes more rough but still under control. The title is based on a part of Darwin's autobiography in which he compared the difficulty of letting children grow up without the belief in a god with the instinctive fear a monkey has for a snake. You can also read the title in other ways, like the difficulty of seeing your true self. But back to Freud, you asked about the object itself, the sofa?

JCA: You are right, we were going to talk about the process of creation.

ES: As I said, I wanted to have the sofa in my studio, to see what would happen. I think Freud is always present. We have lived with his ideas for a long time, we have grown into them. The value he gave to our unconsciousness, our instincts, our dreams. Through him, or better, through watching my version of the sofa, I wanted to come closer to these aspects in myself.

JCA: He died just before World War II.

ES: Indeed, he died in 1939. He had to emigrate to London in 1938 because of the war. The house in Vienna is also a museum. His concrete materials, his collections of ancient sculptures, and most of the furniture you can see in London. But his soul is connected to Vienna, where he lived for forty years.

JCA: So the house in London was like it was in Vienna?

ES: The house in London was lighter and there was also a garden at the back. In Vienna it was a second-floor and darker apartment. On the last week before he left Vienna, everything was photographed by Edmund Engelman. The entrance door was draped with a swastika flag. A lot of these photos are taken from the point of view from where Freud usually stood. I like those photos. They are real documents.

The famous sofa was also moved to London, and when I saw it I was surprised about the size. It is pretty small. When you enter his rooms it is like a mausoleum. It is like entering a different time; the whole atmosphere is quite heavy, but special.

After my first visit I kept thinking of the sofa. I arranged another trip with permission to photograph it myself, instead of looking at the existing photos I had bought.

Then I felt the magic that emanated from it. I don't know if this is caused by my imagination, about what took place on it, but the visual appearance has a strong identity too. It sort of sucks you in visually, like a journey. It is covered by an Oriental carpet with various decorations. While I was photographing, I felt a strong longing to see the real sofa under it and asked the warden to unveil it. First he protested and said in a very British way, "Well... this is very unusual," but I insisted and finally he took off the carpet and pillows with white gloves. I still can hear him doing this. He was already fairly old and was breathing heavily.

The uncovered model is surprisingly simple and I saw on the cotton of the naked sofa all kind of forms in the leaking spots and other human traces. It was a beautiful life in itself.

Back home, I looked at my photos but didn't know what I would do. Nevertheless I started to draw the sofa, to look at it in my own surroundings. I made it somewhat bigger than life-size but it was still too small for me. I wanted to fit on it myself as well, so to make it more natural for me I made it longer than the real one.

Using an object was rather strange for me. I tried to treat it as living material, but for a long time it stayed what it was, just a sofa, no transformation involved. I think it was present in my studio for a whole year. I looked at it every day, changing small things, but it didn't become art. It was dying in itself and killing me.

JCA: Too heavy?

ES: Yes, the sofa itself is a dusty object, but at the same time I felt attracted by it because it is was so loaded. In his house every square centimeter was filled in, there was no breath. It was an atmosphere I found very claustrophobic. How can you deal with that as an artist? While creating the illusion of the presence of the sofa in my studio, it gave me some imagination, but not enough. I tried to find how I could deal

with the mass of it. The heaviness and weight slowed everything down as if it dragged on time.



JCA: I think it is a symbol of what happens in your head. It is like a point of culmination for everything which you had done up until that point. It is like taking the tip of the iceberg as a symbol and also as the work itself. The whole work is phantasmagorical, but what is interesting is that it is a quality that does not rely on something that previously existed. We cannot say that it is surrealism, or that it is outsider or borderline art or anything like that.

Your phantasmagorical constructions have an authenticity that is also expressed in the materials themselves.

And materiality is a process, it takes time. You tend to spend a large amount of time on each of these pieces.

ES: I spend more time looking at my works than I actually do working. And looking needs time. I go on with a work until it reaches the moment it tells me, "Yes, I am a totem." From that moment it might function as something sublime. Not sublime in the classical, aesthetic sense, but in the sense of facing the unknown. That is why it

sometimes needs a non-stop doing in details, but also the open, non-filled-in areas. It can replace aversion with a more contemplative state. I want to go beyond the fear of instinct. I want my approach to be “horrible” directness with a contemplative feeling.

JCA: What do you mean by totem?

ES: A totem mostly appears as a confrontation, it faces you. But the presence of facing can also become transparent. I mean when it is becoming a part of you the element of confrontation dissolves.

JCA: You spend years working on one piece. Others work on canvas but you use paper with graphite and oil paints. The product resembles a depository in which things crystallize, but at the same time remain hidden.

When I see *Freud's Sofa*, I think about the following problem: the famous filmmaker Olivier Assayas once said that in Europe there can be no more history because history is always made by wars and, thankfully, we are not at war.

But there is no more history, actually, because there are no more collective visions such as there were in the twentieth century. Utopias, such as the Bauhaus, Constructivism, Mondrian, were all directions that were more closed than open. And after the historical avant-gardes came to an end in the mid-1970s, anything became possible. And if we assume we live in a society in which individualism grows stronger and stronger because there is no foreseeable future other than the one I have described, a future of technology, biomedicine, and biochemistry, then we need to be able to consider the opposite of this, a state of extreme intimacy.

Intimacy is something that we all share, unlike privacy. The private is a notion within society, but intimacy binds people together.

And I believe, having seen your work, that you have a clear capacity for differentiation, but people have still not recognized this fact. And it always takes a long time for people to realize that the person they confront is themselves. What does a real artist do, then? Real artists do things that touch us all. They are always a sort of dervish and you are a dervish. Meaning that the collective is something with which we are no longer familiar.

When an artist does something, it emphasizes more the collective life story than the collective dreams. And therefore I think that Sigmund Freud is in a sense similar to you, because he was the first to have thought about dreams as themselves being collective life stories. They can push at you and cause you trouble. And sometimes it is indeed better to repress them. That is one of the main achievements of people, to

be able to repress their dreams, and sometimes it does not work because this repression causes so many problems. In the same way that we always remember the most beautiful moments of our lives, unless something terrible happens and we are then haunted by the trauma. You say you started doing the sofa piece in 2007. Did you read Freud before?

ES: I was more interested in looking at his life than reading his theories, but I liked his book *Totem and Taboo* and remember the last sentence: "In the beginning was the deed," which roots us in Goethe's *Faust*. But when I was working on the sofa piece I tried to forget the information and just focus on the paint. It was the decoration that had my attention; I wanted to let it leave the object and be in the space around it while still being in contact with the object itself.

JCA: To give us an idea of what I am talking about, I could mention *Tutto* by Alighiero Boetti, a huge work made of many different objects, relating to order and disorder. Therefore we have to use the term "decoration" in context. The Freud method involved not asking any questions. Even when the patient sat there and said nothing, the sessions would cost the same amount. Freud did not want to ask questions, but waited to see if the patient might come out with their own ideas. Perhaps "pattern" is a good term to use to help us understand what is meant by "decoration."

ES: That is a better way of referring to it.

JCA: The moment where order and disorder are embodied by objects that address the imagination. It can also be the case that the patient is repressed. Perhaps they are reluctant to speak about masturbation. And this then becomes the key, as the patient grows agitated they start looking around. To come back to your work, I therefore think that the pattern here is not just one in the sense of that on the quilt on the Freud sofa, but is also the pattern made up of tiny swirls. It is a pattern made up of small tsunamis. Emotional turbulence.

ES: I wanted to create something monstrous and overwhelming, a heavy mass in weight but with the presence of a ghost, and still active. Showing the illusion in a light, ghostlike activity as an afterimage.

JCA: When I look at the upper section I see an amazing sort of flood. And this flood is washed away so that what remains is the place, by which I mean the sofa.

Perhaps we need to talk about your ambiguity. In regards to the early works, where there was a naked woman wearing an animal mask. And also your inquiry into Goya, who always played both male and female roles at the same time. This dual sexuality is something that people find hard to accept in our part of the world. For the Native Americans transsexuals were often the most respected negotiators with the white men.

Is this dual sexuality also something you sense in yourself and that functions like a boost in creativity, or do you think your way into the male world from a woman's point of view, and take energy from this? And what has that got to do with Sigmund Freud? Are you a "winged being," going from male to female and back, a mythical creature, a hybrid of human and animal?

ES: I think essentially people are amorphous beings, and therefore able to create. When I manage to concentrate properly, I become what is on the painting. When I made this sofa, I also thought about what Freud himself thought when he heard all those stories, to what state did it bring him. I identify with him but also with the patient, in fact with all the patients, everything in the same space. That made it hard to finish, I needed a break once in a while.

During the process I was constantly confronted with an endless switch of thinking and doing. But also when the unfinished, unsatisfying work is standing straight and rolled up in my studio, and I have stopped looking at it, it is still present. The unfinished ones are continuously present and waiting. I finished *Freud's Sofa* at the end of December 2012, so it took five to six years in total. The floor was the last thing I painted, to create a bigger illusion and make a bridge to the viewer.

There is always a moment when I simply want to get rid of it and act in a more rigorous way, having freed myself of thinking. And mostly, when I leave the carefulness in the deed, something interesting happens that takes me by surprise. Then it breaks through itself so that also the invisible space above the sofa can break open. It sets the instincts free. And through this, the imagination itself comes to have a visual presence.

JCA: That is also what Arthur Rimbaud talked about when he said "I is somebody else," which means the "id" paints or the "id" writes.

ES: I think Freud would be very curious how we, mankind, are doing now, how we are developing in this new time. Sometimes I think that he, along with others, is still around. It's an idea that, if you allow it, can give you strength.

JCA: Nobel Prize winner Jacques Monod wrote about the origins of the world in a book he called *Le hasard et la nécessité*, published in 1970: *Chance and Necessity*. It examines how looking for and finding are processes that are constantly being repeated. Only he or she who searches will eventually become lost. Whoever only finds things is sacrificing themselves to chance. Searching and finding is an osmotic thing, complimentary, involving order, disorder, and repetition. And Søren Kierkegaard wrote anonymously in 1843 that we must remember from the future. You must remember yourself into the future, which means you repeat yourself, but only so as to bring the past into the present, and therefore also into the future. This, I believe, is a founding principle of creativity. Someone might be born as a moving, creating being. Anyone who is not doing this will regress. Nature shows us this. A beehive is a cathedral, and honeycombs, noticeably, have six corners just like carbon atoms. Artists can visualize the incredible processes that go on inside people. Nowadays we all talk about brain research. Perhaps in twenty or thirty years' time we will be able to explain the brain exactly. But we will never be able to explain how Goya made something happen or how James Joyce or a different poet or writer created a world. And that is the secret. And I think that when we think of this huge secret, we can see how art, physical science, and religion have never been as close to one another. The more deeply we look into the universe, the larger the secret becomes. Art and religion form the founding principles, and are the opposite of theology, given that theology is based on an ideology. And art comes out of the human cosmos. And your work, in my opinion, has a wonderful cosmic dimension because it goes in all directions, lets everything in, blocks nothing out. You are the prototype of an artist who explores within yourself, and therefore does not do the work, but allows the work to happen. In other words, who allows what Freud calls the "id" full rein and who lets what Rimbaud speaks of then actually happen.

ES: It is already present in my name. ES is my signature.

(Note: Freud's "Es" = the "id")

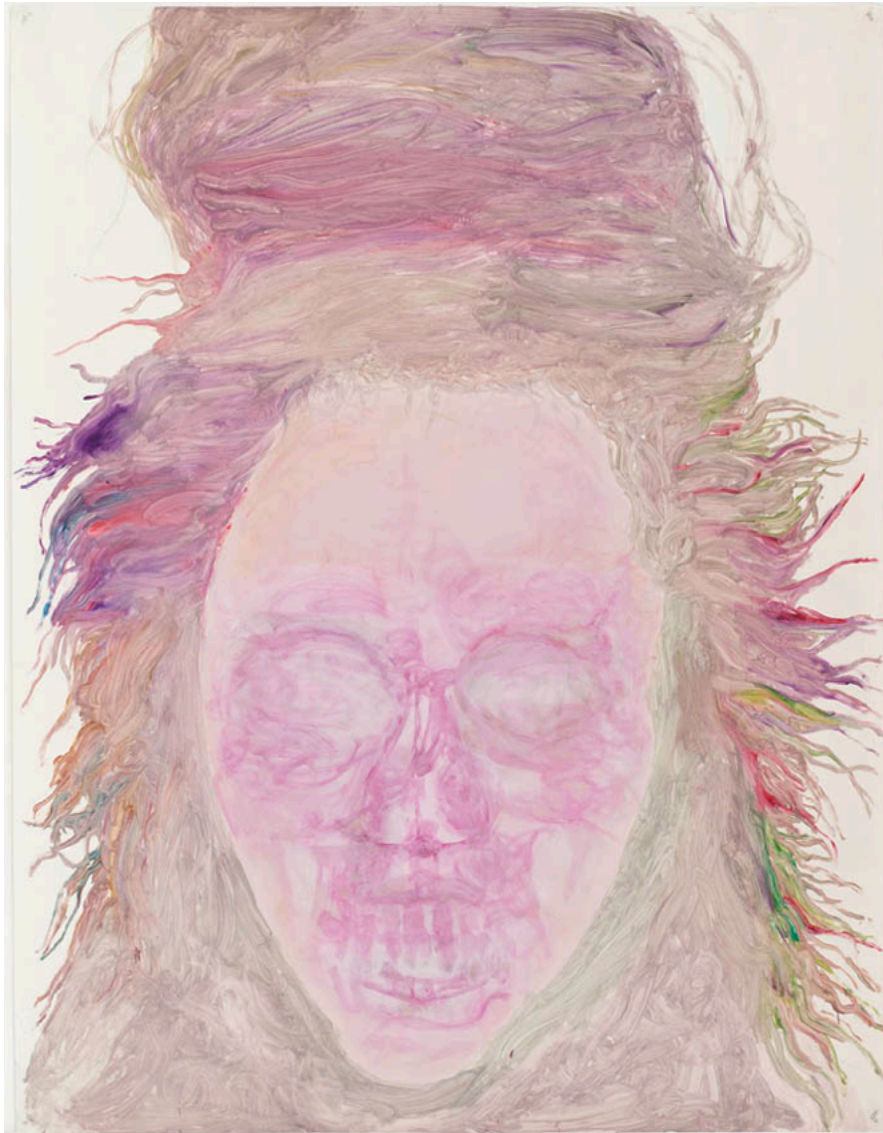
JCA: When I think about secrets, and when I sometimes speak to young artists or students and hear them say "Everything has already been done," I say "Everything

has already been done, is already written in the Bible, as spoken by Solomon. But that is our strength and our power, that we can visualize this and do something with it.”

I have also discovered for myself that there is nothing to invent, but a lot to discover. And what I really enjoy about your work, even an erotic joy, is that you are always making discoveries rather than inventions, that I am always confronted with your visionary strength. It is the sensuality of what you do, or the sensualization of the body. Lending the body sensual form in an image. The criterion for art is to research the self, on the basis of thinking about and having an awareness of the present. Today there is nothing we can hold onto except for tradition. And there is no tradition on this planet so rich as that of the accidental, by which I mean an ongoing process. From Carolingian art to that of Marcel Duchamp, it is present, but where is it? That is true wealth. And we need to take our cue from that wealth now. And not from utopias or past styles, but being your own victim. If you understand yourself to be a victim then you too will suffer. And the artist is engaged in a creative process of suffering, because, as Duchamp once said, every artist is their own bride or bridegroom.



ES: That is something I literally found out through my collage *Goya y Goya*. They are in embrace and facing us. The viewer also has an important role. Without them, the work does not exist. I like including their eyes in the titles, for example, *Your Look Gives the Angels Strength*, or *Your Portrait*, or *When you read this, my dearest, I will be near you*.



JCA: I think that the task of the artist is exactly the same as it was, but the general direction became 360 degrees, which causes a difficulty in perception.

ES: As you say, that is why personal relationships have become even more important today. For myself, I don't experience things as suffering anymore. When you live in the moment you can choose. There is always a choice, so I don't connect

suffering to the process of creation. I think the lack of certainty causes the confusion. But allowing confusion can actually create possibilities.

JCA: That makes me want to follow through on something. You say that everyone can choose. But the ones who can choose, choose the one thing or the other, but do not tend to find themselves. My question, then, is when did you know that you had to become an artist? How old were you? Or did you not choose it, did it choose you?

ES: I think I created it myself. Recently I read a story which I wrote when I was twelve years old. We had to write a fictional story about our own future. I fantasized that I was a drawing teacher. In my free time I did portraits and trees, and I wrote that I wanted to show how a tree grows. But it was not always that clear. When I look back at my life story I can see that I had a period during which I wanted to be an archaeologist or a restorer. Then later I was considering training in creative therapy, but decided that I did not want to serve in that way. The year 1979 was the first year it was possible in my high school in the Netherlands to do an exam in art, and so I changed my options, and changed biology for art. I noticed that I had a natural, innate feeling for it, and so began to think about going to an art academy.

JCA: There are artists who work out everything very quickly, so they quickly establish the path they wish to follow. And sometimes there are also artists who have a phase in which suddenly they have no more ideas, because they have already had them all, and so they abandon themselves to their style, which they have already created, and rely on their "style," which tells them, "You can have a lie-in today." And then there are the female artists. And again it is something that your work shows, which is why I am speaking about it. Male thinking is linear, female thinking is circular. And I say that consciously in a black-and-white way. Before 1968 there were women who did art and after that there were female artists. In the mid-seventies thinking changed, went from being linear to circular, and feminine thinking stopped being only for women. Men could, and had to, learn how to do it. Your thinking is unbelievably circular, which means that you are always getting stronger and better at thinking in this way. And today you are right in the middle of this, and developing this circular thinking more and more. Louise Bourgeois is another woman who developed her circular thinking increasingly, the more advanced in age she became. Linear thinking is always destined to die, because one day it will break. Circular thinking always takes the center with it. If you work on a piece, or on various pieces, then you are always incorporating your

previous works. And I believe that when we think about the process of creation, your work provides a great example, as it goes a full 360 degrees.

ES: I am more conscious now as to how it can function. The female artists were less known. An artist like Ana Mendieta gave the feminine mystical nature a form through her physical consciousness, but she died early. The works of Hilma af Klint, who was a medium and a pioneer in abstract painting, were only made public twenty years after her death. This was also what she herself wanted, because she thought that people were not yet ready for it.

In my case I think things went just as I was able to handle them. I was already close to my themes at art academy, the ones I am still dealing with; it was purely intuitive and always based on looking. I didn't change a lot, but I developed a more precise approach. I grew because I understood the forms better in time, and so I became able to transform more, and see and handle forms in their essence.

There was a time when I desired a more instant way of communication, a telepathic way, without the bother of our body. The advantage would be that things would go much faster. Later on I became more focused, and realized our body is our tool and house. The delay is a positive factor to give the embodiment some time. Through this I am able to deepen the synchrony of my experiences instead of being overwhelmed by it. I always experienced my life as a life in a life, which I could make more comprehensible and complete through art.

Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray made a wonderful trilogy called *The Apu Trilogy*. These black-and-white fictional films are almost like documentaries. The camera moves very slowly, so that the synchrony between the play and the surroundings becomes quite conscious. It is almost like a dream filled with daily actions. There is so much beauty when you watch in simultaneity, then you can experience yourself in silence.

JCA: Do you consider yourself someone reporting on our times?

ES: I would never formulate it like that, but I like the word "reporter." In a way I am my art, I spend long days in my studio, I live my life with my works, and I embody my subjects. In this connection, I am. I think because my subjects are dealing with different states of being, describing our condition that comes into being mostly in the form itself, it is connected to our time. It has to do with seeing and being.

Do you know this beautiful little drawing Goya did at a very old age, called *Aun aprendo*, I am still learning? It shows an old man with two sticks, still walking like a wizard. Today I feel a little bit like that, but of course in my own body.

In a way, Goya opened my eyes to Spain, and I am constantly discovering new layers in his work. It is like an unveiling. Only recently I saw that the “Jesus” figure, the nameless man in the white shirt in his famous painting *El tres de mayo de 1808 en Madrid* indeed has a stigma in his right hand. To show the vulnerability of mankind in this way is like a doubling of our common memory.

JCA: You told me once about his frescoes in the small dome of San Antonio de la Florida.

ES: It is one of my favorite places in Madrid. He painted the story of a dead body brought back to life by Saint Anthony to show the innocence of his father. He took this story out of Lisbon and into Madrid, like Giotto situating his frescoes in Tuscany instead of Jerusalem, and much later James Ensor painting Jesus Christ entering Brussels. They also humanized the painted figures in their facial expressions.

The Saint Anthony miracle made by Goya is surrounded by the regular people of Madrid, like an ordinary event in the top circle of the dome, behind an illusionistic balustrade. I have seen it several times. Below this he painted the angels in a quite unprecedented manner; he painted them as real women, very inviting. They form the bridge between you, standing at the bottom of this little dome, and the common people at the top. And under this floor Goya is buried. It was his final resting place, after his body had been moved twice. These four layers give a real resonance to the dimensions of this place.

The weird thing is that he is lying there without his head. While re-interring him, while they tried to find the right spot for him, his skull was stolen. So you can say that because Goya’s remains are spread out, he is everywhere. He literally became multidimensional. I made a series of five works that deal with this atmosphere and place, and it is titled *Para Goya*.



JCA: Goya has played an important role for you.

ES: Once I had a very special experience. Goya did two quite similar self-portraits when he was sixty-nine years old. In one he is holding his face more slanting, so that his neck is more open. One is in the Prado, the other one is in the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, and it was particularly the one in the Real Academia that awoke something in me. I was looking intensively at his face, for maybe five minutes, and suddenly I saw him come to life. His eyes actually left the painting! Goya became real, he was in the same space as I was, it was quite a shock for me. I often look at self-portraits of artists, but I have never had this experience before. You know, when an artist does a self-portrait, even when he looks straight at the viewer with both eyes, one eye is always somewhere else. He is always keeping one eye for himself. And in this self-portrait of Goya, it was the first time a self-portrait of another artist was watching me with two eyes. So you can conclude he was really able to see himself. And I think he had the strength to do this, to give himself totally, because before this he had been so ill that I guess he lost his fear. Every time I am in Madrid, I go to see this portrait. And every time I have the same experience, meaning that in a way he has become a part of myself.



JCA: With Goya there are the curious drawings of the mirror, where two figures meet one another, so that the figure in the mirror is different from the one who is looking. And this draws our attention to very strange things, namely the lack of identity between the person who is looking and the one who is reflected in the mirror. And this lack of identity is polymorphous, because other figures, even animals, appear in the reflection. Was that what inspired you to paint certain pictures, for

example the picture of a woman in an animal mask, or a woman with a totally veiled face?



There is a large picture of you where your entire face is veiled. Were you influenced by Goya there?

ES: I had done my images before I saw his mirror images.

JCA: And so did you find a sort of alter ego in Goya?

ES: For me there is no alter ego, only ego, but then no ego in the sense of a central representation of the ego.

JCA: I understand that: for you the ego in you has many sides. But it is a very beautiful notion that these drawings by Goya represent an introspection comparable to the way in which you portray yourself.

ES: I also liked his mirror pictures. They could have been made yesterday, but he did them before Darwin was born.

JCA: Is cruelty a theme? In your work there are these women who you paint with masks. Are they cruel? And you have also painted some corpses' heads, are they signs of cruelty?

ES: I think they are solutions, it is more that they are solutions to cruelty.

JCA: Is cruelty a part of all of us?

ES: We take many aspects of the past with us.

JCA: Animals are not cruel, they are hungry. But people are cruel. Is the ritualization of cruelty a way to realize it? We say this in the following way: Does the Inquisition make cruelty legitimate? Is war a way of making cruelty legitimately possible? In the context of war, cruelty becomes legitimate, in excess, not as an intention, but as collateral damage. There is a basic, broad sense of an enemy to fight against. Cruelty is also an extension of pain, the victim is an enemy that one does not want to kill with a bullet or an axe but to see suffer. Cruelty is also this delight in seeing suffering. Sometimes with Goya one gets the sense that he was not only rebellious in *Los desastres de la guerra*, but also that he derived his energy from the cruelty that was going on.

ES: The power of Goya was his capacity to transform what he saw into his work. I think the cruelty is freed by the energy in his works. In that way he could integrate the war without being paralyzed. The original title Goya gave to these etchings was *Fatal Consequences of Spain's Bloody War with Bonaparte and Other Emphatic Caprices, in 85 Prints*. He fell very ill several times, and after he became deaf at the age of forty, everything from then on had a greater visual impact than it had had before. I think he was processing the cruelties by depicting the personal suffering of war, which was a real breakthrough. He was not afraid to see.

JCA: You have also painted large peacock feathers, three of them, and the interesting thing about this picture is that, first of all, these are actually peacock feathers, and, secondly, the eye of the feathers, which is connoted with masculinity, is missing. The eye of the peacock feather is the male's pride, and so you have purposely castrated this. Of course, we could interpret this in a feminist way, but was that your idea?

ES: Absolutely not. Of course, the title *Castration* sounds like that and it refers to my deed. But we are speaking about an eye. When there is an eye in the image, even when it is the eye of a peacock feather, which is not moving in itself, it has no iris, I

feel restless. The eye is an overwhelming thing, an important part of the game of seduction before mating takes place. To take out the most beautiful thing is a matter of taking out seduction. I simply wanted to make an image without seduction. I didn't want the vanity of the beauty in that image. What was left was an empty place. And when I saw this empty place I realized that it created a new space, and this new space gave a place for the eye of the viewer.

JCA: But this is a little too neutral, because the empty place is no longer a place of seduction. On a content level this empty place is formal. I mean that the empty place makes room for the feathers. Previously, the feathers meant that everything focused on the seductive aspect of the feathers. Previously, the feathers had meant that everything was linked up together with the peacock eyes, whereas now, when the eyes are not there, the feathers become the lines, and, in terms of the drawing, they come to have more meaning. Was that the aim of the piece?

ES: That is what happened. I was playing with a real peacock feather and I cut out the eye and I liked what I saw. It became a receiving form. So yes, you can say the beauty was given to the feather, I never formulated it like that before, but I also experienced the beauty of the lines without the pride and power of the eye.

JCA: That means then that in terms of content you brought the masculine and the feminine onto the same level.



ES: Exactly, but I only realized it once I displayed them in between two other works. The peacock feathers were escorted by two other paintings. It was like a marriage. The two other works, which I called *Bride* and *Two New Brides*, represented female figures and appeared as a phallic form. In showing them together it was as though the male and female forms were married to one another. Both sides were doubly present and able to represent one another twice.

JCA: Going back again to the idea of the eye being cut out. Is there such a thing as female as opposed to male creativity? Are they different, or do we find that it affects our attitude as we visit exhibitions, or do female artists feel different than male artists?

ES: I don't think it is that dualistic. On the other hand, I think the approach can be different.

JCA: I don't mean the artist as a person, but more the principle of creativity. Let me return to what I said earlier. Prior to 1968 there were women who did art, and after that there were artists who were women. And we must also never forget the thing that the younger generation no longer knows, that in the mid-sixties the contraceptive pill spread fast and wide, creating a new consciousness among women. And if you look at that now, the way that you have cut out a peacock eye with your scissors, you could say that you did not want to achieve the effect of actual castration, but the beginning of equality between men and women within creative thought. Have you still got the cut-out piece of peacock feather?

ES: I still have all the pieces and feathers, with and without the eyes.

JCA: And where did this idea come from?

ES: It was pure attraction. We buy things because we feel as though we might come to have a need or a use for them, without yet knowing how or when. I remember that at the time I was obsessed by the story of Salomé. It is a complicated story that looks at many different forms of relationship and love.

I painted a large standing figure wearing a gorilla mask and a white wedding dress. I depicted this wedding dress in terms of the position of "just married." In this way it seemed like the figure dealt with another person and carried her over a threshold. The title *Speak woman, what shall I give you?* refers to the question that Herod

asked his daughter Salomé. I posed for that figure myself, and wearing a mask like that felt like a victory over the fear of love. You know, the mask was not just a frontal one, it surrounded the whole head. A claustrophobic feeling. When you can hardly breathe the way out becomes more urgent. Wearing a strange head is a step further than holding a severed head on a serving plate, an image we know from Saint John the Baptist. So I gave the figure a new head and the head got a new body. Looking at it from a Freudian perspective, you could say that wearing a gorilla mask like that is a victory over the fear of instinct, of the “id.” This was made possible because of the wedding dress.

So maybe you can conclude that the head of John the Baptist, who was a spiritual thinker, had to be separated from his body to remind each of us to reconnect our body and soul.



JCA: You asked yourself this question as a man.

ES: To invite oneself to speak is an invitation to go deeper into the choices in my work. In fact it is questioning yourself about your essence. To ask this myself in this form makes it more complete, it is like a love story.

Maybe you are right, maybe you need to do something cruel to see yourself. It reminds me of the piece by Lucas Cranach in which he painted Judith and Holofernes. He painted the theme several times; I love those works. They also deal with beheading, but in a different way.



I tried to understand these works by copying them. I took out the face of Judith, so she could represent all women. Lucas Cranach depicted her in a very proud position. I gave her even more power, so that she was almost like a sun, but with the mane of a lion. What was left was the power of the body, the deed itself, yet without the personal identity.

JCA: In this work, *The Marriage*, which is in four sections, we see in the middle the peacock feathers but without the peacock eye, and on the left and right we have the hidden figures, which you called brides.

ES: Somehow the brides, the hidden figures, are also castrated; we can no longer see their whole identities. At that time I made the connection between a bride and a work of art. The bride is always veiled when she makes her first appearance. When you buy a work of art, you can take it home, then it is all yours and in time you unveil the work in relation to yourself.

JCA: The work on the left, we could say, is a vagina, which is enveloped by a veil. It also looks like an opening to a hidden head. And the other work on the right, there we see an entirely hidden figure, like within a chador.

ES: The brides are hidden in the sense that they are veiled. Their appearance is phallic because this happened through the form in which they appear. The opening, which you can call a vagina, gives the entrance to the form.

JCA: It is always interesting to look at how the masculine and the feminine function as complements in your creative world.

Is this sort of expansion also something that motivates you? And if so, in which subjects or shapes, or is there something that you are looking at in the long term?

ES: Expansion can take place in any form or object. It depends on the way you treat it. I am working on different works continuously, but to start talking about them before they are finished would be preemptive, as it would cast them in words.

I don't want to be fixed in desires, it lets the flexibility of choice disappear.



We have made a book together about the work *The Bride Fertilized by Herself*. It consists of eight drawings that show the connections I am still looking for. And sometimes I come closer to the fertilization of the "id." Then I can continue in making connections. The connections create space and in fact the work creates itself.

If it goes well, it will resonate. All my plans look at considerations of our condition, of what it means to be a human being, and I try to integrate my experiences into these. My work is not about me, I just embody it. You can say I learned everything about myself through my work, without focusing on myself. I always try to make the found connections more intense, until they reach a force such as you might feel watching a totem.

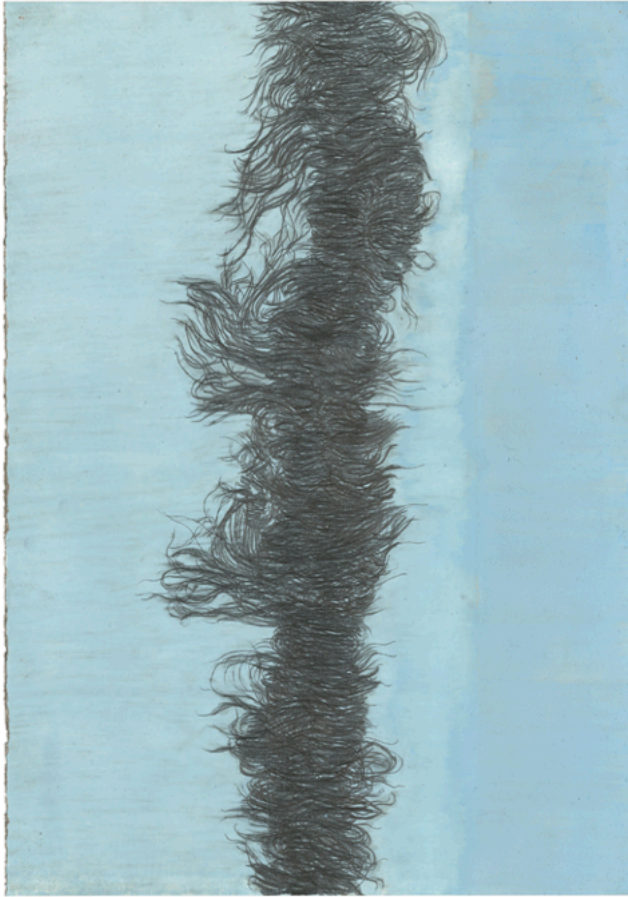


The disconnection is also important. The works with the strings deal with a form of disconnection. It gives a bigger unity. The vitality of the process is a matter of acceptance, passion, and compassion. The more patient I am the stronger I can reach an image that is both monumental and intimate at the same time.

For the exhibition in the Reina Sofía I ordered my work carefully into different themes, and I noticed mysticism and rebirth became more important.

The relation to myself, my body, and my mind, along with the unity or the impossibility for this unity, was always present in my work. Somehow the expansion is more conscious now.

In the cosmos, equal parts attract each other. In a way a lot of things are speaking to me now.



I still experience my work as unfinished and feel myself related to it both as a parent and a child. I am in concentration when I am working. Reflecting on the work and positioning it is always a few steps behind.

Perhaps I could introduce a new work?

JCA: So we can see a large work here, split into two, a silvery section above and then a layered section below. Together this constitutes a portrait, a picture of a head. The section above, I think, which is really silver, is something that we can see from the quarter leaves. And the part that is beneath is quite raw, there is a necklace, a phallic nose, and some eyes, or spectacle lenses. In the silver section it is almost impossible to recognize anything except for the continuation of a nose and the suggestion of eyes.

Now is that once again a female/male interpretation? Is the silver feminine and the masculine the part which I described as raw, given how brutal it is?

ES: For me, the reflective, silver part is more like wisdom, and below this the witch becomes visual. It is therefore like an animalistic part of her. It is quite complex, because it forms a mask, and is a bit of a caricature. And yes, the nose is quite raw,

and of course it is phallic. I think a witch can have everything. You can see her smiling.

JCA: That is a hard piece, it is not inviting for the viewer. You said it was a mask. There is a story by Cees Nootboom called *Mokusei!* A photographer falls in love with a young Japanese woman, very deeply. He spends a mass of guilders on phone calls from the Netherlands to Japan, keeps on visiting her, and he wants to marry her. She does not reject him, but is reluctant. And one day she tells him that she has gotten married, to somebody else. And then he says, "But did you not know that I love you and I want to marry you?" and she replies, "My parents decided it." But before she says that, he says, "I have loved you, this woman, thinking that she loved me, and all the time she has just been wearing a mask?" And with this Nootboom wanted to make the point that we consider things as masks when they in fact are not; they are just other cultures. And masks appear time and again in your work, as do disguised faces, and skulls, which we could also consider a form of mask, as all individuality is lost. And now you are also talking about a mask where the lower part represents the emotional side. You compared it with a witch.

ES: A mask is a way by which one can develop oneself; I think that, somehow, masks make it possible to create a keener perception.

JCA: I would just like to clarify, once again, that these masked pictures of yours are real masks, that you did indeed wear a mask and then take a photograph?

ES: I did it like that from the beginning of 2000 until 2004.

JCA: So you had the mask in order to be able to sharpen your perception? Was it a form of protection? Was it this protection that allowed you to sharpen it?

ES: A new form allows you to encounter something different. When you connect with somebody else or another culture you meet yourself differently, but you can do this alone at home as well.

JCA: Is one naked without a mask?

ES: That is not what it is about, it is not about protecting yourself because you are afraid to reveal yourself, it is the division of the two parts that plays an important role.

The silver is repeated three times, so that it really covers all of the materials beneath it and thus is fully reflective.



JCA: We could also consider, couldn't we, the silver part to be the Cartesian part and the lower part to be the archaic part. And that would bring us back again to the principle of masculine/feminine. But that would also signify that the one can only live off the other. So we cannot have the one without the other, like you have done with the peacock feathers, even when the peacock eye is no longer there and the emphasis is placed on the feathers, and they are the same for both men and women. And this would mean that there is a complementarity in place between the archaic and the Cartesian. So both need to be there at once.

ES: When you only look at the lower section, then you become lost.

JCA: The lower part is a lot more brutal, not only because the silver part chokes the configuration. It is almost African in the sculptural feel.

ES: Indeed, I went quite deeply into it.

JCA: And it is also interesting,..something which we can go into further, the lower, archaic part, which you associate with a witch,..that the nose is incredibly phallic. Everyone knows it of course, it is a fact, for us men the phallus is an incredibly powerful symbol. And this phallic symbol on the witch tells us of her multiple capacities for orgasm, which the man does not have. I mean, you have not done this on purpose but it has turned out like that. A witch has no phallus but has a capacity for orgasm that a man does not have.

There is a famous photograph by Araki that shows Yayoi Kusama cutting a phallus made of artificial material, a large realistic male member. It is not a misogynist piece of art, quite the contrary.



It expresses a dissatisfaction with using dildos; it is a woman calling for a penis. The interesting thing about the lower part is that there is no mouth.

ES: It is not missing, it is there, intimated.

JCA: Then the mouth is clearly too high, it looks like a hollow. It is much more like the female sex than it is a mouth. It is a hollow, and through it this archaic being expresses a wish. And I'm not sure, perhaps I am psychoanalyzing too much here, but this nose, which for me is in the shape of a phallus, is pushing into the hollow.

ES: Have you ever seen a laughing witch?



JCA: There are antique sculptures, called Baubos. George Devereux, the psychoanalyst, wrote about them in a book, how the Baubos sit on the ground, spread their legs out and show their open sex, and then laugh. And most probably this frightens the men.

ES: I meant that the mouth of a witch who is laughing would be that high. I was quite aware of my intentions in this work. I called it *El espejo mágico*, the magic mirror, but it is still strange for me when I look at this work, I wanted to see how far I could go into the darkness of a witch without becoming bewitched myself. The necklace is there to counterbalance the silver part.

JCA: Women have a very pronounced sense of physical memory. And this is biographical, genetic, self-referential, and cultural. Every month the woman remembers this, because she bleeds. This gives women a strong link to their bodies and to intimacy.



ES: It is like my piece *Collective Memory*. There, the eye is greeted by splayed legs. Eros is something that was always present in art. For me they are still close to each other, not necessarily in terms of content, but in the way I treat the material.

JCA: Before Sigmund Freud there was Eros, even if that was a metaphysical Eros, and after that we spoke about sexuality.

ES: Sexuality is one of the things that brings life into a movement, it is a form for becoming one. I think that is why I often refer to merging in my work.

When I look at the two small works I finally called *La Muerte y El Amor*, I see a whole history. The blue one started with a desire to come closer to the face of Mary in *The Descent from the Cross* by Rogier van der Weyden.

The first time I saw it, ten years ago, I was moved by the enormous sensibility with which he painted the wound and blood of Jesus, it was almost erotic. I thought they were crying not because of his suffering, but because it looked like they were suffering themselves, because they realized their own lust as a perverse joy hidden in the beauty of Jesus's dead body.

The last time I saw it, it had a great emotional effect because it looked so real that I believed the descent had actually happened. It is so powerful, but the painting, you can see it in the Prado, is hung too high.

Mary's body is painted in the same position as the almost naked Jesus, but wearing her blue garment. Also their hands are mirroring each other. I am not a devout Catholic, but it was this synchronization, or you can call it echo, that had my attention. When you come close to the face of Mary you see her eyes, tears, and mouth are deeply erotically loaded.

This was the starting point for the blue one in my diptych, but I let it grow in its own direction and didn't want to follow up on the religious connotations. I developed it into a direction connected with *Der Tod und das Mädchen*, Death and the Maiden. The hardest thing was to bring them together as one work.

JCA: So did you work on them in parallel or did they come together later?

ES: They came quite quickly together, and from that moment I worked on them together.

JCA: What came first?

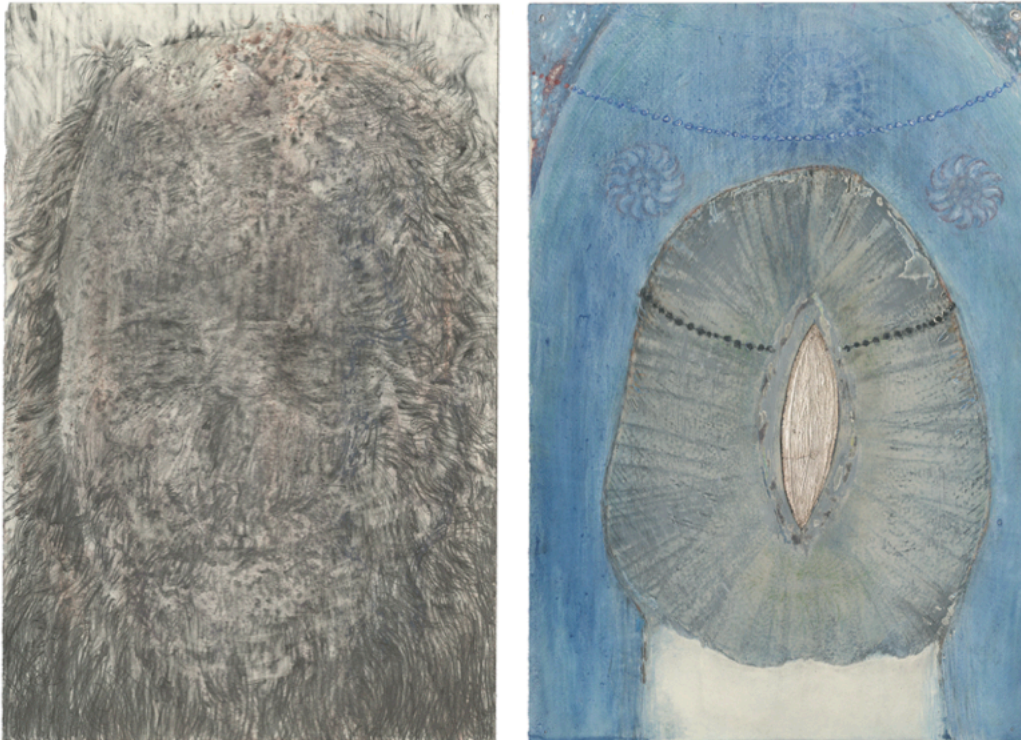
ES: "Death," but then it was not clear that it was death. Perhaps death is never death.

JCA: Is "Death" a man?

ES: I gave him a male face. He is hairy and the picture grew into the shape it now has. There was already a lot of ephemerality present in the way the drawing was done, so the transformation looks quite natural. Death became a visual appearance. I often think about the conditions of death and life. For a long time I thought about life as being a condition of not-being-dead.

JCA: Death is like a contrite picture, an introverted picture. Does "Death" do something with the "Maiden," or is that just a connection you have made?

ES: They resonate in each other and in themselves. That is why they belong together and are framed separately, so that they stay in their own space. But once I decided to bring them together, it took a lot of fine-tuning to let them really work together.



In the final title I replaced “Maiden” with “El Amor.” “El Amor” clearly contains both genders. It is like survival for “La Muerte,” they fertilize each other. In fact I wanted to cover over the Christian story and replace it with a human story.

JCA: The Christian story is hidden, because there is a long period in the life of Jesus about which we know nothing. Thinking about the hidden part in Jesus’s life is like looking at the human part, because it is a part that the church doesn’t speak about. We were speaking about the function of the swirls in *Modo de volar*; you made the association with flying as a form of extension. Is flying also about becoming lighter?

ES: Flying is being able to lose gravity.

JCA: And at the same time you worked with gravity on many different levels; is gravity an opposing force?

ES: Yes, it makes it possible to be here and now.

JCA: You can say that Mary Magdalene is the opposing female force for Jesus, I mean in an anthropological sense. Theologically speaking, Jesus is a massive weight. We ought not to talk about theology, but Jesus only exists because he was killed on a cross. It is like predestination: he had to die to become Jesus, but we do

not know whether he actually died or not. I want to describe him as a weight, an opposing force. And Mary Magdalene is possibly a woman who had children, for he was a rabbi, and in this case she would be seen as being a female figure of light, because we know next to nothing, or nothing, about her.

And in your photograph with the falcon there is also a male opposing force, and through the swirls you can see this picture liquefying itself thirty years later.

ES: I think there is no such a thing as a feminine or a masculine soul, but there are different bodies; you are born in different bodies. In each body the masculine and feminine aspects are present and it feels more complete when you allow both sides within yourself. I think the real incarnation takes place in the emotional body, then you can let your physical body function in the way you wish.

The metaphysical aspect is something that is reachable when one is in contact with oneself.

Giotto painted a wonderful detail in his moving frescoes in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. It is a detail of the Last Judgment and on the very top he painted on the right and the left side an angel rolling up the blue sky to open the space behind it, through which you see a golden door. He painted it around 1300. Painting a heaven that literally rolls up on itself is something I find really touching.

JCA: That is a good invention.

ES: To open the sky fits in our time very well, although nowadays we don't wear warrior clothes like the ones Giotto gave those two angels. A few days ago I spontaneously I did a small drawing.



It is a self-portrait in profile as an angel, but for an angel it looks quite weird. I filled the whole surface with lines as if they don't stop and suddenly I saw the work was done.

You were talking about patterns and swirls as little tsunamis. This one came up suddenly and ended unexpected quickly. For me a work is finished when it doesn't ask anything any longer. I never have a fixed plan when I enter my studio, but mostly it takes much longer to let a work land.



Note:

"We are not.

We were this or that." is a quote from Rafael Alberti.

The text of this conversation is also printed in 2014 in the book 'Ghosts, Brides and other Companions', published by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid and AsaMER. Paper Kunsthalle, Ghent.