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# Narrative Portfolio: Débora Delmar

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by Daniel Garza Usabiaga

Coffee and coffee culture are a recurrent theme in the history of modern art. The names of notable coffee houses are known today because they functioned as a point of reunion of different groups of intellectuals and artists, from the nineteenth century to the historical avant-garde and beyond. Coffee culture, for example, is often associated with the emergence of Cubism and one of its most notable contributions: collage. Whilst this history of coffee houses and artist collectives in Europe is well documented, similar histories that occurred elsewhere are lesser known.

In Mexico, a nation that began to produce coffee at the end of the eighteenth century, there is a history of artistic and intellectual formation around coffee and coffee houses that dates back to the nineteenth century. After the end of the Revolution of 1910, *El café de nadie* (*Nobody's Coffee House*) became the meeting point of the members of the avant-garde group *Estridentistas* (it could be translated as *The Stridentists*, the noise makers, the loud ones). In his painting of 1930 *El café de nadie*, Ramón Alva de la Canal shows a table in this establishment in which several members of Estridentismo gather around a group of cups. One of the best-known artists related to this group is Germán Cueto – his name can be read in one of the collaged elements at the bottom of Alva de la Canal's painting. Besides working in Mexico, he fostered transatlantic artistic connections and was one of the few non-European members of the Parisian group *Cercle et Carré*. In Mexico, since the beginning of the 1920, Cueto developed a practice of modern avant-garde sculpture, very similar to the one that was

being produced in Europe, particularly through his use of non-traditional materials such as wire, string, glass, concrete and quotidian found objects. This was coupled with his rejection of art's historical reliance on the sculptural base or plinth.

Another notable coffee house within the cultural and intellectual life of Mexico City, and beyond, is *Café Habana*. In this establishment Ernesto «Che» Guevara and Fidel Castro gathered whilst they both lived in Mexico in order to discuss and plan a revolution in Cuba. To bring about the Cuban Revolution through these discussions signals how in Mexico, and also in Latin America, coffee culture has developed in a site that produces not only the bean, but also the entire cultural phenomenon surrounding the drink. In Europe, for example, such scenario does not exist, something that undoubtedly contributes to the effacement of the production processes involved in coffee culture. This way, in several tropical countries, the intellectual and artistic life around coffee houses has a too present counterpart: the real social conditions that guarantee the existence of coffee. Such conditions, in Latin America at least, have a long historical connection with colonialism and imperialism. In this way, it is not surprising that coffee culture in such geographies can foster and serve as social lubricant, either for organizing an avant-garde artistic platform, or for planning a social revolution that – in the case of Cuba – had amongst its objectives to claim for Cubans the massive production of another natural stimulant which, for some, is a necessary accompaniment to coffee: sugar.

In 2014, Débora Delmar presented – under the name of Debora Delmar Corp. or DDC – a project titled *Body Blend Trade Culture*. This large-scale installation – composed of several sculptures, ensembles of objects and printed images – focused on contemporary coffee culture. In her project, Delmar conjured the imagery of transnational corporate culture, something that was characteristic of her practice as DDC (in the case of coffee, this can be represented by a company like Starbucks). Most of



Debora Delmar Corp., *Body Blend Trade Culture*, installation view, 2014.  
Courtesy the artist and Museo Universitario del Chopo

the objects used for this project were acquired in global chain stores of the likes of Costco and Bed Bath & Beyond. In fact, the arrangement of works in *Body Blend Trade Culture* seemed to use and partake in the sort of display found in such stores. There were other kinds of sculptural considerations. Delmar selected her objects according to a palette of colors that she obtained from coffee shops such as Starbucks. Some rugs in the installation even featured prints of differing types of coffee or designs that might recall the foam in a cappuccino or latte. In general terms, Delmar's work sought to evoke the quality of feeling that one can find in such establishments, a certain comfort and coolness. Nevertheless, within this group of pieces, the artist considered the set of contradictions that the consumption of such commodity can entail, particularly in a place like México – a country that



Debora Delmar Corp., *Juan Valdez*, from the series *Body Blend Trade Culture*, 2014. Courtesy the artist and Museo Universitario del Chopo

produces coffee, and where a cup of the hot drink from Starbucks represents, for many, a luxury item. *Juan Valdez*, for example, is a sculpture that takes its title from the regional (Latin-American) chain Juan Valdez, a Colombian brand of coffee that uses the figure of a fictional farmer as part of its logotype. This piece could be seen as representing a peasant: the ensemble of objects stands on top of a box carrying the names of several cities, such as Rome, Hong Kong, Vancouver and Berlin, making a direct connection between a figure of production and the sites of consumption of the bean. This work, that evokes the site of coffee production, stood close to *Durga*, another ensemble of objects that could be related, in this case, to the figure of the consumer. Both works show Delmar's strategy to anthropomorphize everyday objects. Because of the design in some of their components, these sculptures exude a certain exoticism that can be appreciated, for instance, in the presence of animal prints as well as in images or names of remote places. In fact, the whole of *Body Blend Trade Culture* contains this kind of exoticism. Delmar seems to be implying that the entirety of coffee culture profits from this element. The coffee sold in shops by companies such as Starbucks takes advantage of the places of production of the beans: the names of far away and exotic sites in South America, Africa and Asia are an intrinsic part of its marketing.

For *Body Blend Trade Culture*, Delmar stained with coffee several fabrics that she then used in the installation. When placed within the sculptures and objects, they unified chromatically in a scale of browns throughout the whole installation. It also gave a particular aroma to the project. Sensory involvement, including the sense of smell, has been a constant interest in Delmar's production. The application of color to these fabrics, obtained in this case by using coffee, illustrates another reiterative concern in her practice: there is a search to transform the object through a sort of pictorial experimentation.<sup>1</sup> In *Body Blend Trade Culture*, such pictorial research contains a critical comment. Through the variations and hues in her fabrics, Delmar seeks to evoke different

<sup>1</sup> Débora Delmar also points to the similitudes between this kind of finish and those of Photoshop, as this transformation of objects can be related to digital color gradients or textures.



Debora Delmar Corp., *Timeless designs*, installation view, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Travesía Cuatro

bodies that could refer to what Mexican scholar Susana Vargas has termed *pigmentocracy* – a social structuring based on variations in skin color. An artwork such as *Dark, Medium, Light Roast* (2014) could evoke this logic of the social, that is present in Mexico as well as in other countries with a colonial past. In many coffee-producing nations of the Americas, pigmentocracy is at play.

In line with this discussion, Delmar has researched in other projects how whiteness, particularly in publicity and the marketing of commodities, has been constructed almost as a synonym of *bonheur* and privilege. In her installation *Potential Development* (2015), produced for the Biennial of the Americas, Delmar presented domestic environments fitted with white furniture and an overall sense of décor. The associations they elicit through the objects and images she used are tied to money, privilege and comfort; they are sites that are aspired and desired.<sup>2</sup>

Another kind of reference in *Body Blend Trade Culture* relates to the history of twentieth-century art. As mentioned, Delmar's sculptures tend to rely on a strategy in which everyday objects are anthropomorphized, producing effects that span from the uncanny to the humorous. References to Cubism were presented in this project through four large-scale digital collages, printed as mesh banners, featuring images ranging from non-Western arts and crafts to «luxurious» domestic interiors. Several pieces in Delmar's installations tended towards verticality by piling everyday objects one on top of the other, very much like towers or totems. These works can be easily related to several well-known cases of modern sculpture, and their seriality (of the commodity) to post-minimalist strategies. In two works from 2016, Delmar explored the sculptural quality of two models of coffee machines produced by Nespresso and Nescafé Dolce Gusto (respectively, *Lattissima Touch* and *Oblo*), that have largely standardized coffee consumption through their products and technology. *Oblo White* (2016) is a reproduction in ceramic, while *Lattissima Touch Black* (2016) replicates the coffee machine in volcanic stone. The first one was exhibited using the gallery's furniture, almost like an

<sup>2</sup> One of the images used in the piece is a photograph of the «White House», a residence that was at the center of one of the many corruption scandals of the administration of former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto.



Debora Delmar Corp., *Timeless designs*, installation view, 2016.

object of everyday use, whilst the second was displayed next to an arrangement of men's clothing. For the artist, this material exploration transformed the mass and volume of the object in a way that could be associated to masculine traits. It seems probable that Delmar attempted to accentuate this perspective as she included in her sculpture coffee capsules made of polished steel – an element that brings an interesting contrast of materials to the piece. Due to its materiality (volcanic stone) and its volumetric solution, this work can recall classical and vernacular sculpture from the Americas.

It is important to note Delmar's tendency to make of her projects larger spatial and even architectural situations. In the case of *Body Blend Trade Culture*, she articulated an immersive situation reminiscent of a commercial display in a department or large retail



Débora Delmar, *Exclusive Providers (White Marble Stacked Chairs)*, from *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed*, installation view, 2019. Courtesy the artist and GALLLERIAPIÙ

store, whilst at the same time alluding to the décor found in chain coffee shops. For the show, she even occupied and incorporated into her project the glass windows of the museum shop in order to display her sculptures. In other projects, she has constructed similar kinds of environments. A case in point is her project *MINT*, produced for the Berlin Biennale in 2016. For that occasion, Delmar presented a trendy Juice Bar in which she marketed a beverage designed by her. The title *MINT* – as a commodity – was able to evoke different meanings, from the fresh aromatic plant to vast sums of money or a pristine condition. However, for the artist, it also stood for the acronym for the developing economic powers of Mexico, Indonesia, Nigeria and Turkey – emerging markets for investment, and a group of countries producing a great number of fruits that are processed and consumed in different forms, such as juice, in Europe and North America. As in *Body Blend Trade Culture*, she evidenced the system of production of the beverage as a commodity, working against its effacement.

After *Body Blend Trade Culture*, Delmar devotes a new show to her interest in coffee and coffee culture in order to address themes of class, upward mobility and other aspects of globalized capitalistic lifestyles. In *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed* (2019), presented at GALLLERIAPIÙ<sup>3</sup> in Bologna, Italy, the artist set the terrain for such discussion through an installation that marked the whole interior perimeter of the gallery with coffee cups; a piece with a solution reminiscent of minimalist aesthetics and that, as such, is prone to highlight the industrial character in the production and consumption of such beverage.<sup>4</sup> Architecturally, Delmar also employed certain decorative and functional features, such as a bar and wooden panels, to evoke traditional design elements found in European coffee houses. A work that might relate to such coffee culture is *Exclusive Providers (White Marble Stacked Chairs)* (2019), a pile of plastic chairs commonly used in café terraces that have the appearance of marble. The surface finish of this work, achieved through hydroprinting, attests to the

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.galleriapiu.com/eng/>

<sup>4</sup> The show also featured a sound piece with field recordings from cafés in Mexico, England, and China.



Débora Delmar, *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed*, installation view, 2019.  
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIAPIÙ

artist's interest in intervening plastically on everyday objects. Her painterly concerns can be observed in this kind of gestures. The «marble» can easily relate to a traditional notion of art and, in this way, the coffee house could be seen as a site and moment in its process of production. As it has been mentioned, the presence of certain cafés that functioned around the globe as hubs for artists and intellectuals is a classic theme of local coffee cultures as well as art history in Europe and other latitudes.

Whilst some of these elements might be able to refer to traditional coffee houses and their culture, in this show Delmar introduces other works that refer to a new global culture around coffee as a transnational branded commodity. It is interesting to note that the presentation of *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed* coincided with the recent opening of the first Starbucks in Italy and, with



Débora Delmar, *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed*, installation view, 2019.  
Courtesy the artist and GALLERIAPIÙ

it, the arrival of a whole understanding of the beverage as a sort of status symbol. According to the company, «the Milan Roastery has been created to reflect the rich fashion and design culture of the city, featuring a roastery, bar, bakery and wood-fired oven». Coffee as a status symbol, fashion and design are elements in Delmar's project. For instance, in different points of the gallery she scattered several works made with mirrors – *Daily Mirrors (Instagram Archive)* (2019) – so that the spectator encountered them unexpectedly. Their location is also strategic, in the sense that they face the windows of the gallery and, with their reflection, they blur and confuse the inside with the outside – a metaphor of the café as a place that can afford simultaneously a private and public experience. Each mirror was UV-printed with a screenshot from Instagram showing a person using coffee almost as a prop,



Débora Delmar, *Coffee Coffee Coffeeeeeeeeee (Neon Chandelier)*, from *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed*, installation view, 2019. Courtesy the artist and GALLERIAPIÙ

a fashionable article, an object that defines personality and some sort of social standing.

In line with this perspective on the beverage, Delmar recently presented her performative project *We are fresas* («fresa» is a term used in Mexico to refer to posh youth and that literally means strawberry), in which a group of adolescents visits and hangs out in an art fair as if it was a stroll in the shopping mall. In this case, the unifying prop used by this group of kids was a Starbucks' Strawberries & Crème Frappuccino Blended Crème. The names written on the transparent cups served almost as presentation tags for the kids. Whilst hanging out in the resting areas of the art fair, the participants in this performance delineated geometric shapes by using the plastic cups holding the pinkish drink.

Several works in *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed* aim to achieve a certain confusion: plastic that looks like marble, photographic images etched in wood, and artworks that seek to defy the limits with design. *Coffee Coffee Coffeeeeeeeeee (Neon Chandelier)* (2019) is a case of the latter. This neon work serves as a lamp in Delmar's project, her particular take on a coffee house. By announcing the product, it highlights the commercial character of such method of lighting. Its solution, as a sort of chandelier, is clearly sculptural, easy to relate with the work of several contemporary artists who have made of the use of neon a sort of trademark (it is possible to think, for example, of Ceryth Wyn Evans). In this work there is a play with language, which is apparent in the way coffee is spelled. Although inspired by a common and catchy phrase used by one of the characters in the American TV series *Gilmore Girls*, the particular writing in this light piece emulates the unconstrained and highly plastic forms of writing often found on digital platforms. The presence of this element and others, such as the screenshots printed on the mirrors, brings into Delmar's project those digital forms of communication that are used – either for socializing or working – within the space of the contemporary coffee house and in coffee culture around the world. The activities of socialization and production that in the



Débora Delmar, *iPhone Photo Archive (Cafés)\_ Coffee, Coffee, Coffee! (Soho, London)*, 2019. Courtesy the artist and GALLERIAPIÙ

past were performed in groups of actual people hanging out in cafés can today be realized in solitude through these media. Such digital media also function as the platform that makes it possible to showcase a whole new imagery around coffee consumption and its lifestyles. The artist has printed several photographs of interiors and exteriors of cafés taken in different cities around the world, such as Beijing, Mexico City and London, through a method of etching on wood – a material with a color that can resonate with the brownish foam of coffee served with milk. Archived on her smartphone, these photographs are of the kind that could be published on Instagram by anyone, as they show quotidian activities and things found in cafés. Although taken in different locations, the images could have been taken in the same city and even in the same establishment. As such, they reveal the homogenizing character of global capitalistic culture and signal the presence of coffee houses as contemporary non-places; regardless of the country or the continent in which they are located, these spaces are incredibly similar and formulaic in their interior design and products. Even the figures drawn in foam on the beverages pictured in one of the images seem to be very similar around the globe. In this way these works, along with the rest of the pieces in *Stressed, Blessed and Coffee Obsessed*, continue the artist's comments and research on the marketing and economic structures that underlie consumer trends, specifically in relation to coffee as a global commodity.

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