

Elena del Rivero's Healing Feminism
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"Feminism for me is freedom - another language - the unconquered territory - words written in our own bodies- as a political statement - The world is patriarchal, continues being so and will continue being so. Law is made by men and for men since 'God became a man'. Therefore my tools are based on how to break up that law and continue, otherwise the only chance we have is revolution."

Elena del Rivero, December 2019¹

2020 marks the 100th anniversary of the ratification of the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote in the United States. Even though voting was not truly available to all women in the country, particularly not to women of color, this right was hard-won by the women's Suffrage Movement and represented a true milestone within the Feminist Movement and the centuries-long struggle for women's rights. Elena del Rivero's *Suffrage* series (2019-2020) honors this fight and celebrates the 19th Amendment with what she describes as "monstrous dish towels." Even though del Rivero's work stems from her own experience, and is to some extent autobiographical, the artist has explained that she aims at erasing herself, "so that the personal may become public, the personal [becomes] political and the political [becomes] personal." This notion is at the very root of Feminism, nevertheless, we may argue that the origins of del Rivero's feminism go way back, centuries before it existed as such. Her studio is named after The Paraclete, which means the name of God in the feminine and signifies one who protects; and was the name of the small oratory Pierre Abelard bequeathed to Héloïse – an important French thinker of the 12th century, and a proto feminist – where she wrote her most important work, a correspondence of love letters to Abelard. Medieval women like Héloïse, Hildegard of Bingen, Eleanor of Aquitaine, and 16th century Teresa de Jesús, the Spanish mystic and religious reformer, are key references, and the artist acknowledges their influence.

The *Suffrage* series, which belongs to the larger series *Letters from Home* (2014-present) and draws on historical epistolary references, takes the form of dishtowels, collapsing the notion of home and studio, of private and public, embodying the "political place par excellence, the kitchen, which for centuries was the prison for women, 'the gird'." The dishtowels are striking for their enormous proportions, larger than human size. The geometric designs for the kitchen towels-cum-paintings are based on the French Torchon designs that are traditional patterns found in French kitchens, and all over the world. These patterns were replicated with great care by the artist, while for the larger surface, the paint was applied randomly in stages, before being scrubbed in the tub as if she had been washing real dishtowels. She hung them from strings to let them dry for a day and then applied acrylic, as well as turmeric, wine, bleach, rust and dust from her house, resulting in a surface of delicately superimposed areas of diluted color. In contrast to the geometric Torchon pattern, the performative act of metaphorically cleaning, while also creating and integrating

¹ All quotes by Elena del Rivero are from written interviews between the artist and the author during December 23-29, 2019.

chance into the process of panting, both celebrates and exorcises women's history in the kitchen. For example, *Suffrage 1* and *3* include stains of Rioja wine that look like blood, a material the artist has used before, adding a scatological, bodily reference to the paintings. Additionally, in some of the works, words such as 'SUFFRAGE' and '1920' are included. The repeated act of scrubbing, hanging and painting is an exhausting task, as the large canvases are primed on both sides and are very heavy. Thus, the physical effort also references the prolonged history of struggle by women for their rights. Another key compositional element is the stitching of ripped areas of the canvas that were damaged accidentally, giving her the opportunity to repair it and make it, in the words of the artist "bloom again," and also reflecting that, "life is a path of mending." Her *Suffrage* series embodies the notion of the passage of time and memory in relation to del Rivero's intense form of seriality, numbering, preserving, mending, repairing, curing, suturing, repetition, classification, archiving, and indexicality. The role of memorializing in her work also relates to the natural cycles of life, with its processes of pain, illness, creation, and healing.

The needle for the artist is a sort of pencil, thus stitching functions like drawing, a non-hierarchical aesthetic element related to craft, to the feminine, to feminism. It also refers to a history that Rosika Parker in *The Subversive Stitch; Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984), describes, "as both an instrument of oppression and an important source of creative satisfaction", and that Julia Bryan Wilson in her recent book, *'Fray': Art and Textile Politics* (2017), describes textile politics as meaning "to give texture to politics, to refuse easy binaries" and also to erase the hierarchy between high and low, something crucial in del Rivero's work. French feminism and the post structuralism of Helen Cixous, who taught her the "double entendre", is also key in the artist's work, as we see illustrated in multilayered and contrasting notions embodied in the *Suffrage* series.

Elena del Rivero tends to a crafted and intense materiality that comes to life without restraint, after a process of thinking and planning. A good example of this is the *Domestic Landscape* series (2019), drawn on ledger paper that has been exposed to the liquids and traces of the artist's kitchen and daily life: coffee, wine, strawberry, turmeric. In these works, the rationality and accounting implied in the ledger paper are contrasted with the organic universe of the home. Del Rivero superimposes circles, some perfect and others not, either drawn or painted with gouache and graphite, stitched by hand, or with a sewing machine, onto the geometric background. The artist explains that Hilma af Klint is present in this series, as she is "aiming at the spiritual essence of the kitchen, playing with symbols, [... creating], a visual poem with automatic renderings." The element of chance and the lack of control embodied in the kitchen stains become a metaphor for liberated women, for an environment of creation. An important reference in analyzing these works, is the notion of the 'Woman House' depicted by Louise Bourgeois in 1946-47 and expanded by Judy Chicago in CalArts, California in 1972, discussing the tension between oppression and freedom found in the home.

The gelatin silver print *Easy Morning on Tompkins Square* (2015), illustrates the ultimate example of Elena del Rivero's radical conflation of the intimate and liberated universe of the kitchen and the public arena, as she takes a photograph of her dishtowels hanging from the park's trees at 6:30 am, at the same moment when a jogger came passing by. This work embodies the artist performing, "the idea of a flag that commemorates the confinement and also the power and solidarity that brewed in kitchens all over the world."

