Susana Solano

New Work

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
Born in Barcelona in 1946, Susana Solano was first a painter, turning to sculpture in 1980 when she exhibited canvas hangings that marked her transition into three-dimensional art. Over the last decade her work has grown in scale and complexity as she has developed a sculptural vocabulary that is entirely her own. Because Solano makes unadorned, relatively simple metal forms, her sculpture has often been linked to minimalism, and her work is like certain of the best minimal and postminimal pieces in that it gives an intense, mysterious, and unsettling charge to the space around it. Solano's work differs from minimalism, however, in important ways: it is always made by hand by the sculptor herself (although she sometimes works with an assistant), and it inevitably carries associations with other objects and experiences. Despite its austerity of both form and materials, Solano's work is defined by complex meanings that derive from the artist's own memory. What follows is a reading of three of her works by a single viewer. Although obviously based on the possibilities raised by the way the sculptures actually look as well as the suggestions contained in their titles, the works themselves are more deliberately allusive and more complex than it has been possible to suggest here.

**Aqui yace la paradoja** (Here Lies the Paradox), 1990–91, is at once a cage and a confession booth. Yet the slot that should permit the penitent to communicate with the priest, though present, is out of reach at the top of the sculpture, and in place of the narrow penitential bench one would expect to find attached to one of the sides of the structure there is instead a low table that nearly fills the available space. More important, however, is the fact that the sculpture has no entrance and no exit, and because Solano's work is always scaled to the human body, our natural desire to go inside it is entirely frustrated. Not only is physical entry impossible, but visual penetration is both offered, by the wire mesh that covers the lower half of the work, and denied, by the iron sheets that surround it at eye level. Thus we encounter the piece on several levels, imagining ourselves enclosed within its mysterious space, while being physically excluded from entering it. The implied experience of being inside the structure is complicated as well. Our lower body would be exposed to the gaze of whoever was present, yet our vision would be obstructed on all sides, producing a feeling of extreme vulnerability. Were one to make a confession in such a structure, there would be no priest to listen and give absolution, but rather one's guilt could be heard by unseen and unknown observers. Furthermore, the structure resembles not only a confessional but also a telephone booth, as well as the small, cage-like enclosures in which prisoners are sometimes kept during trials in southern Europe. Thus, the work's inherent and possible readings are multiplied.

**Arcangel Gabriel** (Archangel Gabriel), 1989, which was made for a skylit space at the Städtisches Museum Abteiberg, Mönchengladbach, similar to its present location in San Francisco, seems to announce by its title the day of judgment, just as the inwardly sloping sides of its exterior structure, which lead the eye to the light and space above, suggest resurrection. Suspended from this structure are two shallow shelves, held up at each end by metal...
rods, and separated by wire mesh. Initially, this recalls the area in prisons in which inmates are permitted to receive visitors, where communication is possible but touching or passing objects is prevented. Given the title, these narrow, lined spaces also suggest two coffins, the inhabitants of which, perhaps a woman and a man, would be inaccessible to each other until they ascend skyward as the moment of resurrection. Yet the meaning of the work must be not only theological but actual as well. One notices, after a while, that these shelves are not so much containers as suspended drawers, and that the reference to death is more direct—even clinical—since such open drawers are like the structures that hold corpses in a mortuary as they await embalming. One wonders—although knowing the answer in some not quite conscious way—what the large structure from which these mortuary trays are suspended is, only to find that it greatly resembles the playground constructions that hold children’s swings. What Solano has done is to suggest, and somehow even to embody, the presence in the midst of childhood of the corresponding and necessary ending of life, as well as the rituals and activities surrounding that moment, together with the idea of ascending upward toward the light—the possibility, in short, of resurrection.

El teu nom (Your Name), 1987, is less direct. A sheet of lead is gracefully and symmetrically draped over a large iron supporting structure in what at first seems to be a reference to death—a small waterfall, perhaps, or a wave. As we move around the sculpture, however, what at first appears to be an evocation of fluid motion comes to resemble a long length of fabric, carefully arranged as if for a ceremonial purpose. Although the work is not as specific as Arcangel Gabriel, the extended length of what looks like material—a marvelous transformation to achieve of a substance as heavy as lead—suggests the long, straight swath of a bridal train. If that is the case, then the wedding implied would be a difficult rite indeed for the bride, and the marriage surely would seem a heavy burden. But it is entirely possible that other meanings are intended, and in any case the spectacle of lead metamorphosed into water or fabric, the delicate stuff of a dress, is wonderful in itself.

That in only three abstract sculptures Solano could call forth the experience of childhood, marriage, confession, death, and resurrection is a remarkable achievement. Metaphorical in its workings, her sculpture not only evokes the essence of human life, it manifests it in structures of extraordinary honesty and precision. Her subject is life, not art, and she brings to it the gravity it deserves.

John Caldwell
Curator of Pointing and Sculpture


2. Solano often uses words related to prisons in writing about her work, for example: “... like prisoners of space itself... like cages without space between iron bars...” Susana Solano, "Un Texto de Susana Solano," Spazio Umano/Human Space 2 (April 1987): 43; cited in Rosenzweig, op. cit.
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Spiegel, Olga. "La escultura es un amante ceceito y absorbente, pero también complaciente."

El Vanguardia, Barcelona, April 8, 1987.


1990
Acquisition 1989, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris

Braschel, Threshold: Museen für Sammlkunst/The National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo
Barcelona: Avant-Garde, Yokohama, Japan

1989
National Museum of Contemporary Art, Oslo
Yokohama, Japan
Barcelona: Avant-Garde, Terskel Threshold, Plastiques, Paris

Selected Exhibitions


Hearne, Eleanor. "Susana Solano.


Huc, Fernandez. "Reflexiones sobre "Susana Solano."


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