

GRIMANESA AMOROS





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FOREWORD

Grimanesa Amorós has 20 solo and over 80 group exhibitions to her credit. Her work is in the permanent collections of 12 museums and foundations and 10 corporations. She now brings to the Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, two masterful multi-media works: *Rootless Algas* (a reworking of an installation first exhibited at Artspace in Raleigh, NC) and the new breathtaking *Between Heaven and Earth*, an interdisciplinary (sculpture, video, music) collaboration with Amorós' Peruvian compatriot, the internationally acclaimed vocalist and interpreter of Afro-Peruvian music, Susana Baca. Both installations evince the artist's fascination with northern places and climates and their social contexts. This is evidenced in the case of *Rootless Algas*, utilizing the seas surrounding Iceland and, in the display of *Between Heaven and Earth*, the Norwegian fjörds. Each installation is distinct in personality but together they express a single statement: the mystery – the holiness – of nature. Indeed, the idea of communion is central to this exhibition. Says the artist of her encounter with the fjörds: “The experience reminded me of time in my native country, Peru. I wanted to belong in those mountains,” an idea that would have been most appreciated by the fjörds' ancient denizens, the Vikings.

These installations contain the hallmarks of Grimanesa Amorós' recent work which creates a total and engulfing ambientación with the use of moving images, dramatic lighting, abaca paper (which the artist makes herself) and sound. *Rootless Algas* includes recorded music by Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, the acclaimed Icelandic film composer. In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Amorós enlists the prodigious talents of one of the great contemporary vocalists of the Western Hemisphere, Susana Baca, who contributes a specially commissioned work and her recorded voice to the piece. The appropriateness of the collaboration goes well beyond the fact that Amorós and Baca are compatriots; it is right because of the nature of the latter's voice. As critic Jaime Manrique expressed, “Susana Baca's voice isn't so much an instrument to name things but to paint them through sound so that we can see them perfectly if we close our eyes.” In short, *Between Heaven and Earth* is a beautiful, all-encompassing journey led by two enchantresses.

This presentation of this exhibition is a collaboration between the Hostos Center and the Bronx Council on the Arts Longwood Gallery at Hostos. It is being presented as part of a broader celebration of Peruvian culture, including a concert by Susana Baca and her ensemble, a reading by New York-based Peruvian poets organized by the Latin American Writers Institute and two folkloric concerts for children. We are honored that Grimanesa Amorós and Susana Baca, two virtuosos of their disciplines, are the focus of this celebration.

Wallace I. Edgecombe

Director of Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture

INTRODUCTION

Grimanesa Amorós orchestrates works that bridge a diversity of forms, themes, and personal issues. In a past artist statement, she wrote about her painting as being analogous to poetry and continued:

I feel that I can reach an orphic mythic reality, plumbing creation so that my work is related to the core of art of the past, to add a link to a specific lineage, so that enclosed in the work is a metaphor for creation. I usually don't have a clear idea of what I want to do when I start a canvas. I just respond to what the painting needs.

From this trajectory, Amorós' current multimedia installations are consistent with a painterly focus that travels along many intermodal channels. Her multisensory environments, *Rootless Algas* and *Between Heaven and Earth*, embody an interest in providing a transcultural, third space to complicate binaries of life and art. It also connects feminism and art-making, nature and technology, north and south, city and country, New York and elsewhere. Moreover, these works link the past and present by combining seemingly unrelated media, such as video and sound, with papermaking. Amorós remains true to her pursuit of innovative work and has collaborated and experimented with professional musicians from a wide range of genres: vocalist Susana Baca and composer Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson for this solo exhibition. Musician Meshell Ndegeocello was also enlisted to produce the soundtrack for a previous work.

In addition, the sculptural forms here are made from the resilient and multipurpose abaca – the banana leaf fiber grown and produced in the Philippines, Borneo, and the Americas. Juxtaposed to these sculptural elements are lush, multilayered nature videos derived from travels with her family to Iceland and Norway, then mixed with images of the New York City skyline and housing projects shown large to create a unique cinematic flow throughout the gallery. Furthermore, these two new projects may be considered part of a triptych portrait of her daughter Shammiel, which began with the earlier recent mixed-media installation *You Cannot Feel It...I Wish You Could*, in which a human figure is cast from a male head and the artist's own body when she was pregnant.

Altogether, we are reminded of our natural existence. And, like the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, sensations, specters, and sirens of love, longing, and desire endure.

Edwin Ramoran

Director of the Longwood Arts Project

A MOMENT OF SANCTUARY

In the hands of Grímanesa Amorós, installation art becomes a form of interactive theater that eschews narrative in favor of creating a poetic ambience within which multiple dialogues evolve. A masterful conductress, she mixes textures, lighting, words, music and moving images together to convey a sense of expansiveness that transcends time and promotes the kind of mental and psychological openness optimal for contemplation and leaps of comprehension. This fresh strategy allows the viewer the autonomy to feel their way through the labyrinth of meanings suggested by the artist, and to draw their own conclusions, whether they are political, social, ecological or entirely personal. Subtly weaving in and out of *Rootless Algas* and *Between Heaven and Earth* are parallels between current social conditions and cycles of nature. Amorós avoids drawing didactic conclusions from such comparisons, for that would be too easy. Instead, set against the anxiety over and concern for damaged and disappearing landscapes, this exhibition invites us to explore our relationship with that most fraught yet sacrosanct of subjects, nature. In a media saturated world that promotes disjunction and confusion, Amorós' meditative work provides a moment of sanctuary so that one may pause to reconsider and reconfirm one's rightful place as an integral part of the natural world.

Amorós is an artist who likes to wander. It is not that she doesn't have destinations, it's just that she holds her expectations lightly so that places and people can speak, surprise, and teach her lessons she could never have imagined. That's how it was when she traveled with her husband and daughter to the remote island of Flatey, in Breidafjörður Bay off the coast of Iceland. She had intended to sketch the many species of birds to be found there, only to realize that they had all migrated a mere two days before. On this island at the edge of the world, with only a few inhabitants, she felt far from discouraged and decided to explore. The multi-media installation piece, *Rootless Algas*, chronicles what she found in this isolated nothingness, freed from the confines of planned projects and prior imaginings.

Flatey possesses a great abundance of seaweed (algae, kelp, etc.), a rootless aquatic plant that drifts through oceans absorbing nutrients without needing anchor. Settling on rocks in thick masses they prevented easy passage to the shore and thus forced the artist to admire their ecological kingdom. As tides move, these glistening ribbons of green rhythmically flow in a graceful, hypnotic dance. For Amorós, an artist uprooted from her Peruvian homeland, this natural spectacle served as a metaphor for survival in our current age of diasporas and migrations. In particular this lesson seems to have resonance for artists who must find stability and home in their work and to locate value in flux as an opportunity for discovery and wonder.

The viewer cannot help but feel engulfed in this magical installation of sensuously undulating curtains of hand-made paper algae, uncannily animated with shifting winds and lights. Amorós' technical prowess in creating these multi-hued strands

of wet-looking abaca paper is breathtaking. In this dream space a video plays whose somber and soulful string music, interspersed with the cries of those ghostly missing birds and the sea, fills the space with a heart wrenching sense of unnamable longing. The artist collaborated with the famous Icelandic composer Hilmar Örn Hilmarsson, who had his own poignant memories of playing on Flatey as a child. The magic of childhood is echoed in the video where Grimanesa's young daughter (her great muse) soars into the sky on a swing, like a bird in flight. Slow distant and close-up pans of the swaying algae mimic the movement of the tides that, along with the pulling strains of the music create a seamless environment. Time is caught in an ever-present moment full of nostalgia for the loss of self found in overwhelming encounters with nature. Zoom-ins featuring flowering algae, hovering and then spinning like living mandalas contributes to this sense of otherworldliness.

Between Heaven and Earth is a profound meditation on mankind's fragile but tenacious habitation of perilous landscapes, both rural and urban. At once visceral and spiritual this installation of sculpture, video and sound draws haunting connections between those dwelling places situated high amidst the sky and located in places of dangerous beauty. Whether they are the projects of the Bronx or the mountainous homes nestled under the cliffs of the Fjörd regions of Norway, shelters are synonymous with safety. This work delicately insinuates that safety is perhaps an illusion, or at least a state of mind that enables us to cling, against all odds, to the psychological terrain of our identities.

The video component of *Between Heaven and Earth* is a visual paean to nature that utilizes vertiginous sweeps of water, earth and sky in order to plunge us headlong into a vast and untamed wilderness. Waterfalls flowing both up and down, huge mountain ranges reflected in the eerie stillness of glacial ponds, and ominous turquoise icebergs with the consistency of crushed metal speak of an archetypal place where no amount of human negotiation can prevent unavoidable catastrophes. Winding in and out of this in extremis natural panorama, with extraordinary subtleness and poetic melancholy, are urban vistas no less extreme and certainly no less dangerous. Housing projects (they are from the Bronx but they could be anywhere) rise up like canyon walls, their unornamented facades mimicking sheer rock formations. Shots of flowing rivers are interspersed with flashes of water towers perched atop buildings, hinting at capture and stasis. Cascading waterfalls are transmuted into those large water bottles so necessary to polluted city living, held aloft and poured by an anonymous modern alchemist.

When Amorós traveled to Central Western Norway she was struck by the conundrum of those living in the flatter regions out of the desire for safety and minimal contact with the wider world, who still spoke wistfully of villages so high atop mountains that they could only be reached by ladders. Although these habitats were fearfully isolated and periodically destroyed by avalanches, the villagers worried that future generations would abandon them altogether, irretrievably changing ancestral lifestyles that held the essence of who they were. Their pride in such fantastical feats of survival, punctuated by unforeseeable and certain tragedy, spoke of the mysterious bonds that link humans to place, however difficult and marginal it might be. In the face of globalization and mass contemporary migrations of peoples this hold is ever more tenuous and transitory.

Embedded in this montage, two scenes of human presence have particular resonance for its visual discourse. The first, towards the beginning of the piece, is a close-up of the artist's then six-year old daughter Shammiel looking like an ethereal denizen of fairyland. Gazing at us with a wistful smile she puts her hands over her eyes as if searching, and then the camera cuts to her hand gracefully pointing to and waving at dark waters ringed by mountains. This brings us to another remarkable aspect of the work, the soundtrack executed by the renowned Peruvian singer Susana Baca who collaborated

with Amorós. Baca, also enamored of Norway from her concert appearances there, energizes the video with an abstract vocal piece called *Nacimiento de Voces* (Birth of Voices) specially created for this installation. This remarkable score, an updated blend of Yma Sumac and Diamonda Galas, with its undulating wails and echoing cries, infuses the scenes with a preternatural sense of longing and power. How appropriate a background for a little girl whose ancient Hebrew name means “angel of heavenly song.” Amorós’ use of her compatriot’s song prods us into recognizing the artists’ own reflections on belonging and national identity. Those familiar with ancient indigenous Peruvian beliefs will call to mind huacas, sacred objects and places in nature inhabited and protected by supernatural spirits. These powerful natural sites, thousands of which exist in Peru, are still believed to contain the power to cause good luck or misfortune.

The other striking passage is one of a man lying prone, alone on a barren rocky plane. Gradually his form waivers and slowly dissolves into the earth, implying cycles of life and death. This theme is brought further into the installation sculpturally by a sarcophagus-looking receptacle made up of stacked layers of cast paper in the form of the artist’s silhouette. Amorós has a long history of working in abaca paper shaped by molds and such forms are used in the piece to great effect. If one listens carefully one can determine that the sound emanates mysteriously from inside this human tomb; as in nature, life and death are inseparably intertwined forces. Dozens more of these mold-made silhouettes are hung on the wall, like so many floating souls, momentarily coalescing to form a mountain. Upon closer inspection, these halo-like forms have the rugged texture and weathered surface of newly cut paths through virgin territories.

These two installations by Amorós, *Rootless Algas* and *Between Heaven and Earth*, are open doors to other worlds. We can travel far, or sit quietly at the edge but either way she has shared her journeys with us and now they become ours as well.

Susan Aberth

Susan Aberth received her PhD in Art History from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York; her dissertation was on the art of Leonora Carrington. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Art History at Bard College in New York, where she specializes in Latin American Art. Her last book, *Leonora Carrington: Surrealism, Alchemy and Art*, was published by Lund Humphries in London, United Kingdom and by Turner in Madrid, Spain.

A JOURNEY BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH

Grimanesa Amorós produced a video, capturing the singer Susana Baca performing on stage, singing *La noche y el día* (The Night and the Day) and pirouetting, almost weightlessly, like a bird. Baca, a charismatic Peruvian singer, performed live in Spanish before an audience of Icelanders with Amorós' video behind her. In the video, as if challenging her cinematic attempt to capture the impossible—the ethereal appearance of flying, Amorós turned the camera toward Baca's bare feet, which, while moving to *Se me van los pies* (My Feet Are Leaving) in imitation of the words of the song, kept her on the ground. Baca's pirouetting gradually turns to rhythmic stomping, its sound revealing the presence of the stage below. While the audience is transported through the boundless space of music, another lasting song follows.

Fusing various cultures in and through contemporary art has resulted in a new form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, one that is based on a synergy of experiences revealed polyphonically, through different mediums. The singer and the artist were reunited in Amorós' video piece, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 2005-6. Here Baca, invisible to the eye of the camera, sings with her voice conveying a yearning to reach a distant place and expressing the anxiety experienced when stepping onto a shifting land that is divided between reality and dreams, neither here nor there. The central stage belongs to an artist-wanderer, who reaches maturity by realizing the obvious: that sharing our experiences in a polymorphous world through art requires journeying, which unavoidably, quietly, brings us closer to other people—and to ourselves.

Amorós' new video takes us on a trip to the world of the indigenous people who live in remote places far up the fjörds in Central-western Norway, in an absolute wilderness. Their festooning presence “up there” is both concrete, evasive, and suspended, as Amorós wishes, between heaven and earth. From their homes, one would expect that these quiet people would observe the world undergoing gradual yet rapid transformations, but instead, they seem to be oblivious to those changes. As if oblivious to those transformations in the outside world, Amorós videotaped the Norwegian landscape and seascape in their natural state, only accidentally disturbed by human activities. In her video, Amorós “flies”—revealing vistas mostly inaccessible to the pedestrian dimensions of life around her, integrated into nature. The camera's movement (paralleled by the artist's fluid mobility) is like a dance to defy gravity, not unlike Baca's classic routine on stage.

Our attention shifts back and forth to New York City, more precisely to the Patterson housing project in the Bronx, which the artist videotapes with the same intensity as the Norwegian dwellings. It is difficult to say what kind of similarities Amorós has discovered in those two locations (is it about isolation?), but their shared strangeness seems to be familiar. The sites' common presence is open-ended to speculation, which belongs to a mental space in-between. Perhaps what unites those two places in Norway and New York is the presence of a third place—a non-site—one that can only be experienced subliminally, out of the camera's eye, as a space behind the bending horizon, and from which an imaginary journey may begin.

A slow train from Cusco to Machu Pichu travels down the mountains, taking a wandering writer to a stop in the Peruvian jungle. From there, he walks for three days to reach the famous ancient ruins, which represent the end of a civilization. The site is first seen from a peak just above it: the remnants of human dwellings—houses, palaces, temples and tombs. They appear thrust up from the ground like a spectacular coral reef firmly pressing against lush, green vegetation, rising from the shadow with the brilliant sun. The picture is postcard-like, and not unlike the one that, once upon a time, an artist experienced on a small Norwegian bridge under a fiery sky swirling with a delightful anxiety. The world continues to reveal its endless potential and fragility to the wanderer as he experiences the Peruvian soil under his feet—and he sings.

Marek Bartelik

Marek Bartelik is an art historian and art critic specializing in 20th century art and theory of art. He teaches contemporary art at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art and regularly contributes to Artforum.

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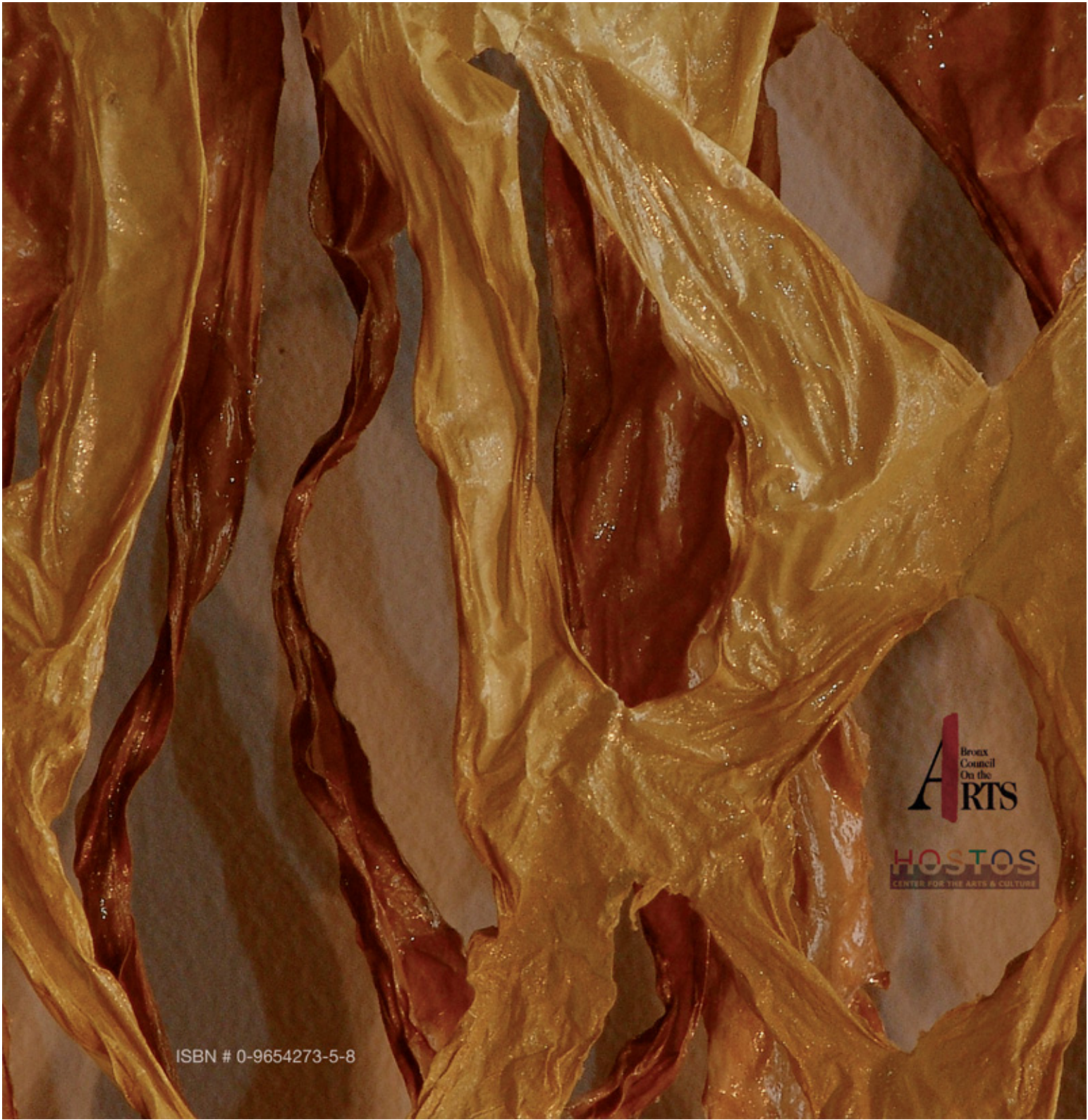
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