

GRIMANESA AMOROS

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"Amoros' Voyage"

Essay by Robert C. Morgan
Interview by Quincy Troupe

MARCH 5 - 27, 1993

JAVIER LUMBRERAS FINE ART

Contemporary Fine Art Since 1985

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Show curator: Mercedes Bustillo

Director of Publication: Sara Lif Fisher

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Photography of artwork by Eric Guttelewitz, NY

Edited of interview by Steve Kalanian (Milenium Management), NY

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WHERE MIND MEETS BODY

The Expressionism of Grimanesa Amoros
by Robert Morgan

Grimanesa Amoros is a Peruvian artist who now resides in New York. Her paintings suggest a certain explicitness. To speak of the explicit in an artist's work is to suggest a certain directness. Her paintings speak without encumbrances and without hesitation.

Grimanesa refers to this sensation as "positive aggression". When an artist speaks directly there is little room for purely formal or technical maneuvers. Amoros is not concerned with maneuvers; yet her paintings are filled with the means by which they come to exist as paintings. This implies that the process of painting—of constructing an image—is an essential part of her work.

Given her abrasion to the purely formal, one may discover an absence of disguise in these paintings. In lieu of disguise, there is an inwardness, a means of working that is inner-directed and without any compulsion to conform to some outward standard of artistic acceptance. The explicitness in Amoros' paintings is based on a need to speak directly. There is a paradoxical aspect to her work as well.

To speak of paradox in these works is to realize that the implicit desire and the explicit manifestation of desire are completely one in the same. They are part of the same continuum, the same breath. Desire is made forthright instead of hidden. It refers to an elan or spirit force in nature, a kind of infinite substance that cannot be easily concealed or coded or made into something it is not.

A decade ago, there was a lot of talk and sociological theory related a movement called Neo-Expressionism. These artist were primarily German or Italians. Americans also borrowed from the movement. Often what characterized these artists' works was a re-introduction of the figure into an Abstract Expressionist language. Naturally, De Kooning was seen as a mentor to the movement—particularly in his famous "Women" series from the early 50's.

Another counterpart to Abstract Expressionism in the 50's would be the CoBrA movement in

Grimanesa Amoros es una artista peruana que reside actualmente en Nueva York. Sus pinturas sugieren algo explícito. Hablar de lo explícito en el trabajo de una artista es sugerir una cierta rectitud. Su pintura habla sin tapujos y sin vacilaciones. Grimanesa se refiere a esta sensación, como a una "agresión positiva". Cuando un artista habla directamente, queda poco espacio para lo puramente formal o para los malabarismos técnicos. A Amorós no le interesan los malabarismos; y así su pintura está llena de significados que la hacen existir como pintura. Esto implica que el proceso de pintar (de construir una imagen) es parte esencial de su trabajo.

Dado su desgaste de lo puramente formal, se puede descubrir una ausencia de disfraces en estos cuadros. En lugar de disfraces, encontramos cierta interioridad, sus medios apuntan a la introspección sin compulsiones que conduzcan al conformismo con lo superficial o a la vana aceptación como artista. El carácter explícito de la pintura de Amoros se basa en una necesidad de hablar directamente. También en su trabajo hay algo paradójico.

Hablar de paradojas en estos trabajos es darse cuenta de que el deseo implícito y la manifestación explícita del deseo son completamente una misma cosa. Son parte de un mismo continuum, de un mismo aliento. El deseo es más bien descubierto, no oculto. Se refiere a un elan o a una fuerza espiritual de la naturaleza, una especie de infinita substancia que no puede ser fácilmente oculta o codificada o hecha de la nada.

Una década atrás, se habló mucho de la teoría sociológica concerniente al movimiento llamado Neo-Expresionismo. Al principio estos artistas fueron alemanes o italianos. Los americanos también tomaron prestado de este movimiento. A menudo los trabajos de estos artistas fueron caracterizados como una reintroducción a la figura dentro del lenguaje del Expresionismo Abstracto. Naturalmente De Kooning fue considerado el mentor del movimiento (particularmente por sus famosas series

northern Europe—particularly the works of Karel Appel and Asger Jorn. While coincident with the American Abstract Expressionists, these artists are often overlooked or underrated in relation to their American contemporaries. The so-called Neo-Expressionists from the early 80s are related indirectly to both sectors.

I mention this brief history to point out something essential about the expressionism of Grimanesa Amorós. Amorós does not follow the tradition of a simulated stylization, as in the case of many of the Neo-Expressionists—ranging from Polke to Schnabel, or from Fetting to Salomé. Instead, she evokes the directness of the immediate post-World War II expressionist with a particular leaning toward CoBrA. In this sense, the large scale aspect of the figurative abstraction is not a primary issue in her paintings as it was for De Kooning. While many of her paintings are large in scale, it does not seem a primary issue. Rather it is a means to accommodate the image. The real issue is the expressiveness of the image, interrelationship between the figurative elements, the half-human, half-animal signs that occupy the space of her canvases.

I cannot help but think of early works by the Dutch CoBrA painter Karel Appel, but this is somewhat superficial. The term “expressionism” is a culturally coded term. Expressionism is not a universal language that escape its cultural boundaries so easily. When one speaks of expressionism it is important to designate what kind of expressionism and where it came from or how it happened to be that way. It is, indeed, possible that expressionism may traverse beyond the boundaries of cultural specificity and move into the realm of the universal.

In the case of Grimanesa Amorós, I believe this happens. There is a kind of universality about these figurative forms. The expressionist manner of painting these figures and heads and pulsating natural forms is extraordinary, and it is possible to say that they exist as a universal language—perhaps as a kind of resistance to the logotype concept that pervades the mass mediated image-world on an international scale. But what concerns me most of all in Amorós paintings is the fact that they do come from a highly-charged imaginative state of mind—a state of mind that is deeply in touch with nature and with natural forces that occupy the world of human events.

“Mujeres” desde principios de los años 50).

Otra contrapartida al Expresionismo Abstracto en los 50 sería el movimiento CoBrA del norte de europa (particularmente Iso trabajos de Karel Appel y de Asger Jorn). Coinciendo con los expresionistas abstractos americanos, estos artistas a menudo pasaron inadvertidos o fueron subestimados en relación con sus contemporáneos americanos. Los así llamados Neo-Expresionistas de los años 80 están indirectamente ligados a ambos sectores.

Si hago mención de esta breve historia, es para señalar algo esencial sobre el expresionismo de Grimanesa Amorós. Amorós no sigue la tradición de una estilización aparente, como es el caso de muchos de los Neo-Expresionistas—desde Polke hasta Snaebel o desde Fetting hasta Salomé. Ella evoca, en cambio, lo directo de los expresionistas inmediatos a la segunda postguerra con una cierta inclinación hacia CoBrA. En este sentido, el gran formato propio de la Abstracción figurativa no es el recurso principal en su pintura como lo fue para De Kooning. Aunque mucho de sus cuadros son grandes, no parece que esto sea su recurso principal. Es más bien un recurso para acomodar la imagen. Su principal recurso, la expresividad de la imagen, la interrelación entre los elementos figurativos, signos semihumanos, y semianimales que ocupan el espacio de sus lienzos.

No puedo evitar pensar en los primeros trabajos del pintor holandés de CoBrA Karel Appel, pero esto es un tanto superficial. El término “expresionismo” es un término culturalmente codificado. El Expresionismo no es un lenguaje universal que escape fácilmente a sus límites culturales. Cuando se habla de expresionismo es importante designar qué tipo de expresionismo, de dónde vino o cómo sucedió. Es verdaderamente posible que el expresionismo pueda llegar más allá de sus límites culturales específicos y moverse en el reino de lo universal.

En el caso de Grimanesa Amorós, creo que ocurre esto. Hay una especie de universalidad sobre sus formas figurativas. La forma expresionista de pintar estas figuras y cabezas y formas naturales palpitantes es extraordinaria y es posible decir que ellas existen como un lenguaje universal—quizás puede ser una especie de resistencia al concepto logotípico

Peru is a country filled with many rich cultural traditions. It is a diverse landscape, a mountainous country that also touches water. There are the influences of the ancient Incas and the numerous communities of mountain peoples. There is the Asian influence and the European influence. Peru is a country filled with colorful contrasting elements coming from all socio-economic strata. It is the land of the great Nasca line drawings that map the perspectival relationships and determine distances for travelers walking from one place to another. There is the magic of the sky and the sun, the heat of the plains, the deep green vegetation, the poetry of the natives that intervenes and mixes into the cultural soil, thus creating immensely fertile sources for multi-cultural resonances.

In such a terrain—both physical and conceptual—source of Grimanesa Amoro's paintings. This explicitness does not substitute for other levels of subtle allegory on human behavior. Her paintings carry more than a single message. They are not directed at making an air-tight case. They are expansive and open. The strong use of primaries—reds, yellows, and blues—are not naively put on the surface, but are given a spirited sensual connectedness. The colors function as a network and possess a formal consistency that seems innate. Yet there is an ambiguous quality about Grimanesa's figures—a solitude, a haunting effect.

There is a recent painting with three figures—two red, the other blue. The two red figures are presumably male and standing with erect penises. While the female figure is kneeling, touching herself in an explicitly erotic gesture. It is a beautiful gesture—inviting and alluring. Each of the figures is an amorphous shape—not atypical for Amoros. They resemble cellular animals, basic life forms. They are, in other words, quite extraordinary. The expression is more than one-dimensional, and the connection is unmistakable—both metaphorical and humorous.

In another painting two large blue figures, copulating with one another, are confined within a yellow space. Behind what appears to be the female form is another small figure as if implying reproduction or perhaps a fetish of some kind. What is striking about this painting is the degree of intensity that one feels in relation to the space and the pull of the forms within the space. They

que invade el mundo de la imagen mediatizada a escala internacional. Lo que más me interesa en todos los trabajos de Amorós es que estos provienen de un estado mental altamente cargado de imaginación—un estado mental que está profundamente en contacto con la naturaleza y con fuerzas naturales que ocupan el mundo de los acontecimientos humanos.

Peru es un país lleno de muy ricas tradiciones culturales. Es un paisaje diverso, un país montañoso que también baña el mar. Hay influencias de los antiguos Incas y de numerosas comunidades de pueblos montañosos. Hay influencias Asiáticas e influencias Europeas. Peru es un país lleno de elementos coloridos contrastantes procedentes de todos los estratos socioeconómicos. Es la tierra de los grandiosos dibujos de Nazca que crean un mapa de relaciones perspectivas y determinan distancias de los viajeros que caminan de un lugar a otro. Hay la magia del cielo y el sol, del calor de las llanuras del verde intenso de la vegetación, de la poesía de los nativos que interactúan y se mezclan en el terreno cultural creando así una imensamente fértil fuente de resonancias multiculturales.

Es semejante terreno—tanto física como conceptual—se puede localizar la fuente de la pintura de Grimanesa Amorós. Ese carácter explícito no sustituye a otros niveles de sutil alegoría del comportamiento humano. Su pintura lleva más de un simple mensaje. No apuntan a hacer una caja de aire enrarecido. Son expansivas y abiertas. El fuerte uso de los colores primarios—rojos, amarillos y azules—no es inocente en la superficie, sino que proporciona una relación de viva sensualidad. Los colores funcionan como un sistema y poseen una consistencia formal que parece innata. Esta es una cualidad ambigua de las figuras de Grimanesa—la soledad—el efecto de persecución.

Hay un cuadro reciente con tres figuras—dos rojas y otra azul—las dos figuras rojas son presumiblemente masculinas y se mantienen en pie con penes erectos, mientras que la figura azul, femenina, está arrodillada, tocándose ella misma en un gesto explicitamente erótico. Es un bello gesto—incitante y seductor. Cada una de las figuras es una forma amorfa—algo típico para Amorós. Recuerdan animales celulares, formas básicas de vida. Son en otras palabras, bastante extraordinarias. La expresión es más

suggest forms that might be from Inca tombs or Indian erotic sculpture at Konarak. The origin is less relevant than their power to incite a passionate incident that connects abstractly with the forms. They have a certain emotional weight and spatial volume.

The psychological metaphor are evident throughout Amorós' new work. I am looking at a large female head with another smaller amorphous head inside with three other amoeba-like figurative forms at the periphery. There is an emotional story, some unresolved conflict, that is being explicated, described through the artist's forceful visual means. Another abstract figurative painting, also completed last year, represents an ecstatic couple copulating. This time the figures are red and yellow pulling away from one another, yet completely bound, locked into a euphoric union.

In reading a passage by the Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, I am struck by the following comment: "A peaceful country: means in many countries of Latin America, "a well-kept cemetery"" and sometimes "healthy man" must be read as "impotent man".(1)

The accuracy of this statement is perhaps more in the sub-text than on the surface. It suggests the problem of language; that is, what happens to the meanings of words when they go from one language to another, from one geographical place to another, from one set of experiences to another. Language cannot be assumed. It is a difficult task to come to terms with things and ideas. Language is the medium, but so much is implied in the content of what is being said or written.

I want to comment on this problem of language in relation to the recent paintings of Grimanesa Amorós. Language is more than speech. It is a cultural code. It is a way of thinking, of acting, of believing. It is a means of communicating with the body as well as the mind. In the northern hemisphere of America, in the United States, there is a tendency to separate mind from body, to think without feeling. In the southern hemisphere it is quite the opposite. Thinking and feeling go together. They are not discrete. They do not exist as separate entities from one another.

This notion of thinking and feeling is part of a cultural tradition and language that may be

que unidimensional, y la relación es inconfundible—tanto metafórica como humorística.

En otro cuadro, dos grandes figuras azules que copulan con otra están confinadas en un espacio amarillo. Detrás de lo que aparece una figura femenina hay una pequeña figura que implica reproducción o quizás un fetiche de alguna especie. Lo que resulta chocante de este cuadro es el grado de intensidad que se siente en relación con el espacio y la atracción de las formas dentro de ese espacio. Sugieren formas que podrían venir de tumbas Incas o de las esculturas eróticas indias de Konarak. Su origen es menos importante que su poder, que incita a un incidente pasional que conecta de forma abstracta con la forma. Tienen cierto peso emocional y volumen espacial.

La metáfora psicológica es evidente a lo largo de los nuevos trabajos de Amorós. Miro una ancha cabeza de mujer con otra cabeza amorfa más pequeña en su interior y con otras tres figuras en forma de ameba alrededor. Es una historia emocional, un conflicto no resuelto que está siendo explicado, descrito con los medios llenos de fuerza visual del artista. Otro cuadro de figuración abstracta, terminado también el año pasado, representa una pareja estática copulando. En esta pasión las figuras son rojas y amarillas separándose la una de la otra y aún así completamente unidas, encadenadas en una eufórica unión.

Leyendo un pasaje del escritor uruguayo Eduardo Galeano, me llamó la atención el siguiente comentario: "Un apacible país": esto significa en muchos países de América Latina, "un cementerio bien cuidado", y algunas veces "un hombre saludable" puede significar "un hombre impotente" (1).

La precisión de esta declaración aparece quizás más en el subtexto que en la superficie. Esto sugiere el problema del lenguaje; quiere decir, lo que ocurre al significado de las palabras cuando pasan de un lenguaje a otro, de un lugar geográfico a otro, de un conjunto de experiencias a otro. El lenguaje no puede ser asumido. Es una difícil tarea llegar a un acuerdo entre las cosas y las ideas. El lenguaje es el medio, pero el contenido implica mucho más de lo que puede ser dicho o escrito.

Quiero comentar este problema del lenguaje en relación con los cuadros recientes de

perceived as foreign to Americans who were born and raised in the United States. In most South American cultures, however, it is more natural to think and to feel than to think apart from feeling. In the United States, we have the Princeton SAT exams to prove that those who think apart from emotional content are somehow superior in intelligence from those who feel their thoughts in a profound way. This standard of intelligence is very problematic for those who have been raised in Latin American countries. In these cultures, intelligence is defined quite differently. To feel one's thoughts is considered more intelligent than to ignore one's feelings. Perhaps in the United States, it is possible to be smart, but "smart" is not the same as being intelligent by Latin American standards. This is true in the novels of Llosa Marquez, and Fuentes; it is true poetry of Paz, Neruda, Parra, and Cardinale; and it is true in the paintings of Grimanesa Amorós.

To feel one's thought as a natural continuum, as an erotic impulse that charges the mind and the body, is a way of life. It is a way of understanding art. Grimanesa Amorós is an exemplary painter who represents the mind/body as a means toward another reality, a magic reality, where the soul comes in contact with its essence and moves freely through the paths of existence.

(1) Eduardo Galeano, "In Defense of the Word; Leaving Buenos Aires, June 1976" in Multi-Cultural Literacy, edited by Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 1988; p.1

Grimanesa Amorós. Lenguaje es más que un discurso. Es un código cultural. Es un modo de pensar, actuar y de creer. Es un medio de comunicación con el cuerpo tanto con la mente. En el Hemisferio Norte de América, en los Estados Unidos, existe la tendencia a separar la mente del cuerpo, a pensar sin sentimiento. En el hemisferio sur, es bien al contrario. Pensamientos y sentimientos van unidos. No son discretos. No existen como entidades separadas las unas de las otras.

Esta noción de pensamiento y sentimiento forma parte de una tradición cultural y de lenguaje que puede ser percibidas como extranjeras para los americanos nacidos y criados en Estados Unidos. En la mayor parte de las culturas sudamericanas sin embargo, es mas natural pensar y sentir que pensar sin sentimientos. En los Estados Unidos tenemos el SAT de Princeton para probar que aquellos que piensan sin contenido emocional son, en cierto modo, superiores en inteligencia a aquellos que sienten sus pensamientos con profundidad. Esta estandard de inteligencia es muy problemático para aquellos que han sido criados en países Latino Americanos. En estas culturas la inteligencia es definida de forma bastante diferente. Sentir los pensamientos es considerado mas inteligente que ignorar los sentimientos. Quizás en los Estados Unidos es posible ser listo, pero "listo", no es lo mismo que ser inteligente segun los estandares latinoamericanos. Esto es verdad en las novelas de Vargas Llosa, Marquez y Fuentes; es verdad en la poesía de Paz, Neruda, Parra, y Cardenal; es verdad en los cuadros de Grimanesa Amorós.

Sentir los propios sentimientos es un continuum natural, como un impulso erótico que carga la mente y el cuerpo, es un modo de vida. Es una forma de entender el arte. Grimanesa Amorós es una pintora ejemplar que representa el cuerpo-mente como un medio hacia otra realidad, una realidad mágica, donde el alma esta en contacto con su esencia y se mueve libremente por todos los senderos de la existencia.

A Conversation with Grimanesa Amoros

October 31, 1992, by Quincy Troupe

Quincy Troupe: Let's Talk about the name of your recent show and what you were trying to do with the paintings. You said that the name of the show was Voyage?

Grimanesa Amoros: The relationship that I had with the title of the exhibition, The Voyage is that my paintings are constantly changing. I once heard that the only thing that never changes is change itself. We are always in constant change and we have to accept how to approach every new challenge. If we are at peace with ourselves, we can accept living in the process of continuous change. So I call this series of paintings The Voyage, because it reflects all the things that I have done previously. It is also a voyage because many souls have travelled between Africa and South America. All the people and animals that can be seen have migrated millions and millions of years ago from one continent to another. The voyage is the reflection of the feeling I try to portray.

QT: I see that in these paintings you are using strong primary colors, reds... blues... yellows... greens... and, some shadings of white. Can you talk about the use of color in these paintings?

GA: The use of colors comes very natural to me. I am a colorist by nature. I would say the excitement of the painting's themes brings out the colors in me. I am not interested in work that portrays myself, I try to project my paintings away from myself. I laugh a lot when I see these paintings. When you laugh at something, it is a very elegant way to feel; you are defeated.

QT: The paint is applied very thickly. Can you talk about how you worked?

GA: I have been always interested in sculpture, but I haven't made the time yet to dedicate to it. So I think this is a start. I have always been interested in textures because your eyes do not get tired just looking at one part of the painting.

QT: From time to time, your paintings have been sensual and erotic, and in these two, you have men showing their penises, and you have the symbol of fertility in the fish not to mention these people in certain positions. Can you talk a little about that?

GA: I love it. I think that part of our life is an encounter with sexuality. I just love to be able to paint exactly what I feel. Sexuality is in everything we touch; everything we see. I think that it is funny the way I put sexuality in my paintings. It's done in a very playful way. If I make a big penis and someone is touching it, it makes me feel great. I really love it, because I think it is wonderful just to do it. Sometimes I put animals, because they do it too, so why not incorporate them.

QT: How would you say your paintings have changed over the last three years?

GA: I am freer. When I get into the canvas, I don't have any fears or limitations. That's something I was scared of before. I used to have a lot more fear than I do now.

QT: I have heard a lot of talk that the next wave of painters who are going to be big in the world, are Latin American painters, and not western or European oriented painters. What do you think about that?

GA: I think you are right, actually. I think that Americans are now realizing the importance of Latin American Art. They see something really fresh, full of colors, very honest, and not just following patterns of style just to please art critics. This is very important. Most of the Latin American painters I know paint, but they also Live! They have a life, they have fun, whereas Americans are most concerned about their careers and they don't spend time dreaming. I believe that dreaming is crucial if the painting is to be magical.

QT: Do you feel more comfortable now that you made a full circle? Is your work more complete?

GA: Yes, absolutely.

QT: From here, where do you think your paintings are going to go?

GA: I play it day by day. I have no idea what I am going to be doing over the next three months; I just do it. Each painting is completely different. I don't know where I'm going to be in the next 10 years. Maybe I'll be dead, but I think that death is in each day, because when you are living, things are dying at the same time.

QT: I want you to talk a little about the application of the paint. How you put the paint on and how you layered it.

GA: I start from a watercolor base. My paintings are completely abstract at first, then I see forms moving and I begin to draw with black acrylic paint. I add thick color in some parts, while leaving the transparencies just the way they are in other areas. I use a lot of mixed media, gels, salt and other kinds of material, sometimes paper. Sometimes I put so much in a painting it's hard to see that it's a real collage.

QT: In this painting, there is a red man with a blue woman holding his penis, I guess a green background and another little red man off to the side with his penis up. Do the colors of the figure have any significance?

GA: Not at all. When I start painting, I just start putting colors and that's how they come out. I have no intention, for that man holding his penis to be red. It just comes naturally.

QT: I was thinking that he was aroused or something. So it's the relationship of the blue against the red that you're interested in?

GA: Yes in this particular painting. I make my composition based in the color, more than in the forms, so it just happens to be that if I put blue in a certain part, that painting will require yellow against it, in another area, that's how I play with color.

QT: That white figure in the painting there is almost like a figure that came out of some of your older paintings. It's interesting, I like it, but it seems so incongruent with the rest, which seem primitive in a sense. Can you talk about that?

GA: Yes, I have had a very strong drawing background. Sometimes I like to put something very figurative against something very primitive. Why not?

QT: The last thing that I want to talk about is the painting of your deceased aunt. Can you tell me her name and talk about its significance?

GA: My aunt's name is Luz Celeste. Celeste is the name of a color, which means blue. And Luz means light. So the name of the painting is "The Power Of Light".

QT: What's the male figure? Do the heads on each figure have a significance to you?

GA: Yes, she's holding on to his penis, which is alive! That's the way things start. This is a painting of what we are going through right now in New York City and in the whole world. Because if you look behind that man, there's another man, so it's a gay relationship, and there is a woman also masturbating another woman right? So this is a lesbian/gay relationship. It's hard to explain. It has to be something about our times, because we live in a time when we feel so out of control. I think art can lead us to another state of mind. Anyway, what you see, or what I see, in the paintings at any given time depends on our current emotional state. I like my paintings to evoke new and positive thoughts, I want people to feel a sense of spirituality and vibrance. Can these contradicting terms accurately describe our current world, for reality is an illusion, but it is also Life...



"FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH"

Acrylic on Canvas, 1992
50" x 40"



THE POWER OF LIGHT

Acrylic on Canvas
84" x 48"