

LILIANA PORTER

A R T E  
P O E T I C A

A SELECTION OF WORKS FROM 1968 TO 1997

SEPTEMBER 15 TO OCTOBER 24, 1998

UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY STALLER CENTER FOR THE ARTS

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT STONY BROOK

STONY BROOK NEW YORK 11794-5425 TEL: 516 632 7240 FAX: 516 632 7354



A  
CONVERSATION  
WITH  
LILIANA PORTER

**Howardena Pindell:** What brought you to printmaking as a sort of basic starting point?

Liliana Porter: I started art school very young. I was about 12 years old, and I was in love with this boy who was a great printmaker. I studied printmaking just to impress him.

**Pindell:** Your father was a film-maker. This is interesting, because when I look at your work, it looks very much like "compositing," which is when film-makers shoot the action in front of a blue screen so they have these isolated characters acting out against something very empty, and then they mix the two. When I look at your "Dialogue" pieces or any of the pieces where you have the isolated figures interacting, it seems very cinematic.

Porter: It's true. Actually, at the moment, I am finishing a short film. I never thought I would get into this! For me, space is a very important factor. In a way, space is almost the subject. The emptiness probably represents that part that we cannot define and that we are trying to come to terms with.

**Pindell:** Do you want to tell us about the film you're working on?

Porter: I see it as a natural step after the series of photographs. I am filming objects such as toys and figurines against a white background.

The film is divided into very short fragments, preceded by a title. They are like vignettes, in a sequence. There is not too much movement of the subjects or the camera. In that sense it's not so cinematic. What interests me is that even when objects are totally still on the screen, when nothing moves, the viewer is aware that time is passing inside that virtual space. The same image in a photograph would be perceived as frozen time.

The first fragment in the movie is called "Perfection." There is a drawing of a circle drawn with charcoal on a white background. After a while, a small plastic monkey starts to crawl over that circle, exactly on top of the line. In another seg-



CHARACTERS FROM THE SHORT FILM *FOR YOU* 1998

opposite: GAUCHO 1995 silver gelatin print 27" x 23"



WRINKLE 1968 photoetching 13 1/2" x 16 1/2"

ment, called "To Fall Down" a wooden penguin starts walking and at one point it falls down. Very soon, you get used to the idea that there is no narrative. Or, rather, that there is a different kind of narrative.

**Pindell:** One of my questions was about the use of narrative, just like in a still life there is a hidden narrative.

**Porter:** Exactly. There is the simultaneous narrative of a still life.

**Pindell:** I selected some of the pieces in this show from your mail art series. Do you want to explain what that project was about?

**Porter:** That was a time of conceptual art, in the sixties. There was this awareness that art was too elitist, so in order to avoid making another "marketable object," an alternative was to create exhibitions by mail: disposable art. My first mail exhibition was a printed page with the image of wrinkled paper and a note that said: "to be wrinkled and thrown away." I liked the idea that by following the instructions, there would be a superimposition of the real wrinkles with the printed ones. The thing and its image would merge. Still, my favorite was a series of shadows for objects. For instance, in "Shadows for Two Olives," you could place the real olives next to the printed illusionary shadows. I liked the idea of reversing time, so that first there is the shadow, and later will come the object that is supposed to project that shadow. And then, you could throw the whole thing away. When I think back, it is a rather moving concept that I had, that some things were disposable and others were not.

**Pindell:** People have often written about your references to Magritte and the influence of Lewis Carroll on your work. Do you want to tell me a little about that?

**Porter:** I was really interested in Magritte's work, especially those paintings where he changes the name of things. He paints a shoe and calls it "The Moon" or paints a horse and calls it "The Door." Magritte was often referred to as a surrealist, but I think he was more a pre-conceptualist. Lewis Carroll also plays with time, language, mirrors. All subjects that interest me. But the artist that I admire the most is a writer, Jorge Luis Borges.

**Pindell:** You seem to be very interested in childhood memories and fantasies. For me, your work is very much about the nostalgic memory of that freedom as a child to create a narrative and to create a fantastic world that

revolves around yourself. Do nostalgia or memory play a part in your work? The objects are from the past and almost seem to imply issues of class by using affordable objects from popular culture. They are pop icons in a way by being a part of almost a throw-away toy culture.

Porter: I know what you're saying, but their value is really more a matter of chance. I choose them, sometimes for a certain expression in the face, and I do not care if the object is new or old, valuable or not. It is also true what you say, that I like most things that are older. Many of these objects are toys, but some are those type of things that people put on shelves or that are even useful for something.

Pindell: I collect too, but I don't use it in my work. For me, it is the memory and innocence of childhood.

Porter: Some people feel that they were children, then adolescents, and then adults. I feel that I carry everything at the same time. In that sense, I don't feel nostalgic. When you are a child, you can really relate to a toy, a person, and a tree on the same level. But then you lose that wisdom because people lose their faith and, as a consequence, their power over things, but that power is really inside you. I think that what I am trying to do is keep that in order to function.

Pindell: I think it helps other people to function too. Do you want to talk a little about the influence of photography on your life?

Porter: My photography started with the wrinkled paper in 1968. I wanted the images to look as real as possible. So, in order to do these prints, I used photographs and translated them into photoetchings. I still was thinking with the mentality of a printmaker. Then I started working with photo-silkscreen. I began using photography as a medium to bring images as objective as possible to the canvas, the wall, or the paper. I also made some photos of my hands for wall installations and a few other black and white photographs, but only for a short time.



MAGRITTE'S 16TH OF SEPTEMBER  
1975 photoetching and aquatint 11" x 9"

**Pindell:** A number of catalogues mention the influence of minimalism on your work.

Porter: I've been called a minimalist because my work was so spare. I don't know if it's true. People think because there is nothing it's minimal.

**Pindell:** I've seen minimal pieces that are just stripped down to geometrics, and I really think the geometry of the form is what was left.

Porter: When I was doing the nails, the nails weren't really the subject. It was more about illusion and reality and about the space. I think that was the time when space began to play an important role in my work. I cannot imagine that piece without the space. The space is as important as the thing itself.

**Pindell:** In the catalogues, a number of writers mention that they felt the space had to do with Buenos Aires and the pampas.

Porter: I didn't live in the pampas. I lived in the middle of the city.

**Pindell:** What is the significance to you of Mickey Mouse and the rabbit and the boat?

Porter: When I was a child, I thought that Mickey Mouse was Argentinean. I think the rabbit started as a napkin holder (in the shape of a rabbit) that broke. I did a silkscreen of this rabbit with its broken ear. It looked very sad. When I did the print, I thought that it was interesting how can anybody be so sad for a napkin holder!



RABBIT 1993 photosilkscreen 14 1/2" x 11"

We are the ones who put all this meaning and symbolism into things and into people as well. The boat, I think, is a journey. The boat appeared at a time when things weren't going so well. I started to do these drawings that were like narratives of this little boat that would drown or burn or something. Then I was reading that chapter in *Alice in Wonderland* where Alice starts to cry and then becomes small and is about to drown in a pool of her own tears. The boat, probably, was the only salvation.

**Pindell:** I wanted to ask you about the function of color in your work.

Porter: I think a lot before using any color, and if the work doesn't need it, I don't put it in. When I began making photographs, I started experimenting with black-and-white as well as color, but the color ones in the beginning seemed phony to me. So that's why the first photos are all black and white. The photograph with Minnie was the first time I really used something red. But the red was essential for this piece.

**Pindell:** When I look at your work, I think of words as well as images. It's as if I'm reading the work like I'd read a sentence or a poem besides reading it visually. Your pieces feel as if they have more of a literary base than the works of some artists.

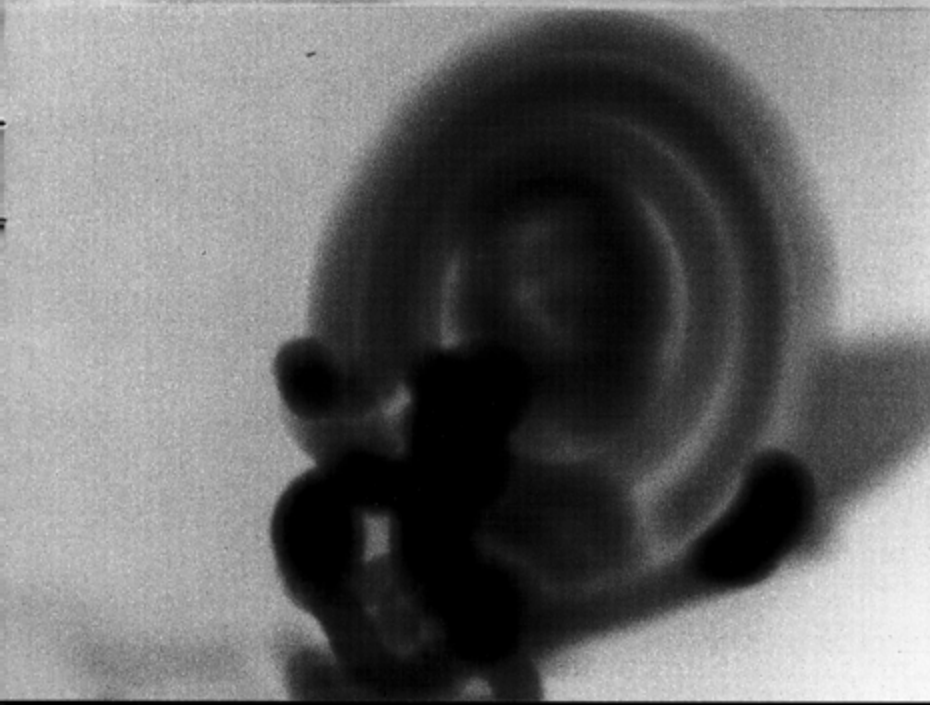
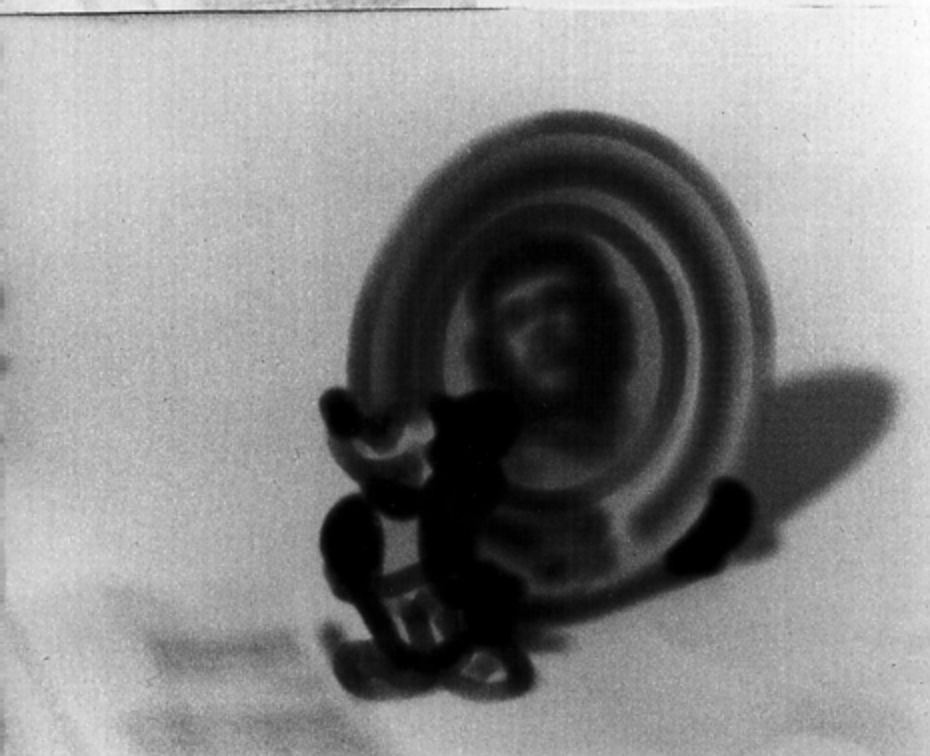
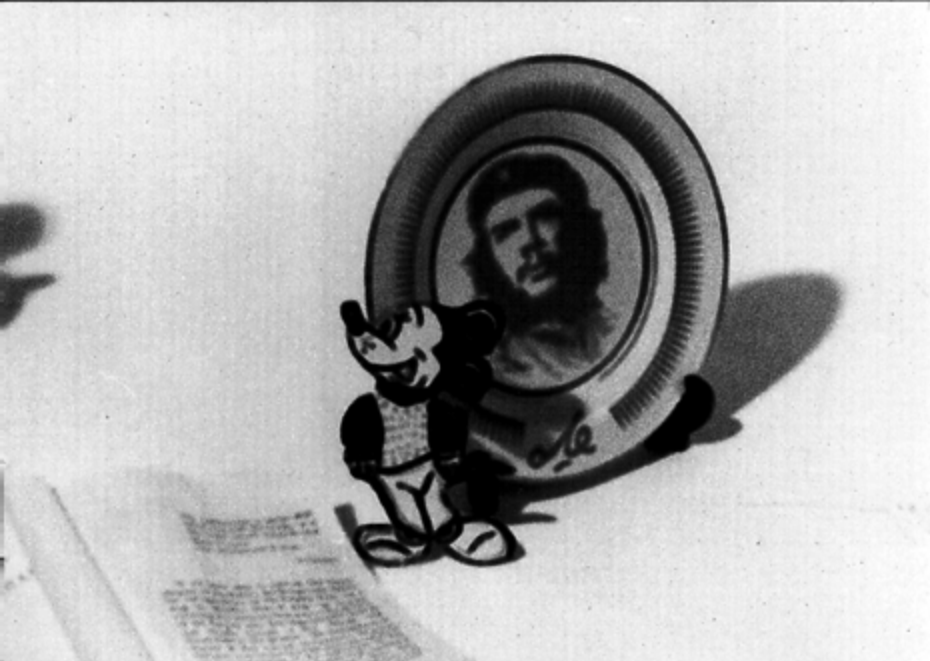
Porter: Probably it is true. I think of the idea first, but then the visual presence is very important because that's the way I choose to say it. I'm thinking in terms of ideas and of words but they will be forms. It's difficult for me to answer that because I'm not aware of how I do it.

**Pindell:** I've noted that your work is like a time capsule. You use toys, objects from a certain period, so you feel like you're in the 1950s.

Porter: It's true, because the images are a perception originated in my childhood. I won't use the Simpsons or Barbie, for instance. Barbie has no meaning for me because I never played with a Barbie.

**Pindell:** Me neither. Is there anything you feel is strongly autobiographical in the work, other than the basic underpinnings?

Porter: No. I think it's only autobiographical because I did it, not intentionally.



LILIANA PORTER was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and has lived in New York since 1964. In 1980 she was awarded the Guggenheim Fellowship. Her work has been shown internationally, and it is represented in numerous important collections such as The Metropolitan Museum, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Clouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon, Portugal; University Art Museum, Austin, Texas; Museo de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires, Argentina; Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; and many others. Currently she is Professor of Art at Queens College, City University of New York.

UNTITLED WITH OUT OF FOCUS CHE  
1995 silver gelatin print 28" x 13"



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**Rhonda Cooper**  
Director

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above: DIALOGUE WITH  
PETRUS CHRISTUS POSTCARD  
(detail) 1995 silver gelatin print  
16 1/4" x 36 1/2"

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