



1: Virgin of Guadalupe, View of High Altar.

## THE SPANISH 'REPORT'

Lyn Plummer

For many years I was married to someone who was a Patrol Officer in the Australian Administration of Papua New Guinea and then an officer of the Australian Joint Intelligence Organization (J.I.O.). Much of his time was spent report writing. He was expected to observe situations, verify intelligence about certain groups' and individuals' activities, analyse the data and report on events and the possibility of the effects of future actions or dealings that could be considered of interest in terms of cultural conflict or security.

Then back in the national capital, as Head of the Office of Current Intelligence (O.C.I.), daily reports were expected on the desks of the Ministers for Defence and Foreign Affairs by 8.30am each morning. No flamboyant adjectives, no emotive descriptive phrases could embellish them. Not that there were no personal traumas, dramas, or loss, for those involved in the report's identified situations. 'The report' simply did not provide space, for the variety of circumstances or for the situations.

How can a succinct report deal with facts *and* reactions, underlying yearnings and inspirations? How can it describe in detail an incident-filled day, or for that matter, a month saturated with objects, shapes, colours, textures and smells, underpinned as this particular month was, by such a deep-seated longing to experience the culture and spaces of Spain?

Many teenagers are influenced by particular romances with certain cultures and places and later their careers are shaped by these yearnings. Ancient Peru, Papua New Guinea and Spain were for me three such romances. Peru remained a fascination only. My enthrallment with Papua New Guinea became a reality when I went to live in the PNG Highlands at age twenty-four. Subsequently PNG became home where I became a practicing artist and also continued my studies of the people, customs and art forms. These studies and understandings have continued to inform my art practice.

But it was Spain that lingered throughout all these years as a constant, silent reference point. As an adolescent all things Spanish were irresistible zones of attraction. Notions of contemporary Spain conjured up images of flamboyance, strength and strange religious customs that seemed to be historically entwined with the rituals of its exotic past. From that angle of distance, in those immature days, the culture appeared sumptuous, fierce and passionate.

My sculptural practice since 1980 has embraced, amongst other issues, an enquiry into the nature of ritual. During the intervening years this examination shifted to encompass comparisons between Third World and European cultures and insights into psychological conditioning. After 1990 and a

prolonged visit to Europe, my research moved to include Christian iconography and ritual and its concentration on penitence, sacrifice, lavish opulence and sexuality; and as Ralph Body noted, it “explores the skin as thin membrane between the personal and the worldly. A surface charged with conflict and inscribed with memories of pleasure and pain.”<sup>1</sup>

In 2004 art historian Domingo Córdoba was introduced to my work. As a Spanish Catholic whose main field of research had been at the time seventeenth-century Spanish Baroque art, he was attracted to research my installations further for their references to the historical and spiritual and their critical comment on the rituals of violence mixed with sensuality and sumptuousness. Domingo Córdoba and recently Susan Verdi Webster, author of *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain*,<sup>2</sup> made note that some of the installations and sculptural elements closely resemble the ambience and structure of the articulated sculptures used in the processions of the Spanish religious events,<sup>3</sup> especially those of the Easter processions. It was suggested that I visit Spain during this festival to observe the processions. I was fortunate enough to realise this aim and the nature of the experience brought with it many insights into not only the history of Spain, but also the culture and its contemporary manifestations.

Observing the Semana Santa processions in the smaller provincial towns and cities invites another level of involvement not possible in the areas much more popular with national and international tourists. Jaen and the not far distant small mountain village of Zuheros were the destinations that were chosen for this ten day festival. Here a number of smaller and more intimate, yet very moving, processions and services provided the opportunity to be drawn into not only the processions, but also the excitement of the preparations and the interactions of the participants and their relatives. Many members of the local families are members of the confraternities (some five hundred years old), and some choose to process as Costaleros carrying the heavy ‘paso’ of either the Virgin or of Christ. This is a private choice and an act, possibly of penitence and/or as a supplication.

The average family with a large number of siblings, spouses and many children could be seen to represent a microcosm of contemporary Spanish conditions. Ranging, as it can, to include many



2: 'Nazarenos'.



3: Women in the costume of the 'manolas'.

varied attitudes to old and new beliefs and pastimes, it may today typically represent returned expatriates, members of devoutly religious Catholic sects, urbane sun lovers, who regularly race to Mediterranean apartments for holidays (holy days), and often younger offspring, some of whom rebel against family duties and others who appear quietly resigned to their familial commitments and subsequently acquiesce to the immobilising consequences. Such family bonds and schisms seem to represent the shifting attitudes and social dynamics of the population at large.

It is still a prevalent trend for family members to make great sacrifices to travel long distances in order to come together for Easter rituals. Involvement in these ceremonies can become more poignant and turbulent where the pilgrimage is intensified by an accident or a tragic event. The rituals are then exaggerated by added responsibilities to support older family members. During historic and solemn festivals, when coupled with the added demands of such circumstances, it would not be unexpected to find clashes surfacing between differing values, especially between devout attitudes and hedonistic predilections.

Tensions and pressures characteristically oscillate from crescendo to murmured ebb during such periods. While visitors may only 'sense' the consequences as they skirt around the edges of the dominance of the society's and the family's homage to the matriarchal influence, recognition of a cultural condition where historical layers of power have been traditionally wielded over the individual, nevertheless becomes apparent.

Earlier, in discussions on the other side of the world with Domingo Córdoba, I had reviewed Spain's apparent movement toward secularisation, especially as it enters another 'golden age'. In a sense, observation from close quarters invited new layers of complexity and challenged those abstract notions. It revealed a society proud of its history and cultural individuality and steeped in the strength and power of the family; and how enormous tensions are now surfacing within the fabric of the family as it is exposed to the sectors bringing pressures to bear, to either sustain the status quo, or to acquiesce to the lure of globalisation.

As I filmed the many processions, noted the carnival atmosphere surrounding the pageants,



4: Processional band.



5: Detail: 'paso' of The Virgin Mary.

(mixed with awe and solemnity) and the high fashions of the gathered audiences, I pondered the contemporary shifts away from penitents choosing a role of agony often drawing blood to simulated pain during these ceremonies. I began to understand that the power 'to control' within the culture still has strong sway in the provincial cities and small towns, even given this shift away from the actual injury. I realised that the power of 'the cut of the flesh' is now implanted in the cultural memory and that although it is now an abstract reference and challenged by the shift in national and personal aspirations, it still holds immense power as a symbol over the individual's private responses and aspirations in a great many cases.<sup>4</sup>

On my return to New Zealand, it was suggested that I prepare a brief report on Spain. So I have tried to fit this dynamic experience of living and interacting – into so few words. To accompany these words – the stipulated number of photographs. These must suffice to represent not only the overwhelming presence of vitality felt in both the contemporary rituals and their accoutrements, such as that of the Semana Santa,<sup>5</sup> but also in the nearby, ancient, archaeological sites.

In these sites one can only stand as insignificant witness to outstanding creative endeavours and also take note of the importance of the layers of conflict that are still evident between liberal thinking and religious fanaticism. My colleague and I observed and discussed at length the conflict between the Catholic regime and the Moorish, as the two fought for political, military and social supremacy, as well as for the same geographical locations. They seemed to present an allegory of today's conditions.



6: 'Costaleros' hidden from view by the drapes of the 'paso'.



7: 'Costaleros' at rest.

This is exquisitely manifest in the architectural sites, especially in the houses of worship. Here the restraint and contemplative silence provoked by the decoration and shapes of the Moorish architectural spaces is threatened by the agitated and twisted, gilded surfaces of the Baroque spaces introduced by the Catholic conquerors. Such Baroque spaces prevail across Spain and still host throughout the year all manner of religious rites demanding some level of participation. Now these are in conflict with the 'new baroque', the design, entreaties and new indulgences of the contemporary lifestyle.

The pilgrim is, however, even now called to travel and to bear witness to the sumptuous and often solemn experience. An ostensibly secular guided tour can slip seamlessly into a religious experience as a group is led, for instance, from the Cloisters of the Monastery by a meandering route on and up into the heart of the Cathedral of Guadalupe.

Pleas for the supplication of believers from around the world seem to issue from The Virgin of Guadalupe. For she is the patron saint of all of the Americas and all those other lands conquered by Spain. She can be glimpsed, in the centre of the high altar of the Cathedral built in her honour, cloaked in one of many splendidly embroidered vestments (richly stitched with silk, pearls and precious stones), enthroned in an opulently carved and gold-leafed, revolving niche, flanked by fresh flowers arranged daily. (See image 1\*.)

When the faithful follow the priest along the corridors in the very centre of the cathedral and up the wide curving staircases carved out of blood-red marble to the sacristy, the Virgin turns her back on the altar. Those praying and



8: Rose petals floating on to the 'palio' of the Virgin.



9: Nuns watching as the procession begins.



10: Rose petals on the Virgin's 'manto' as she passes under the nuns' tower.



11: Lyn Plummer; detail: *Novitiate Velate*, 1994, steel, fabrics, tissue paper; oil paints and mediums, 260 x 100 cm, photograph: Rodney Browne.



12: Lyn Plummer; *Novitiate Velate*, 1994, steel, fabrics, tissue paper; oil paints and mediums, 260 x 100 cm; and *Triptych*, 1994, timber, paint fabric and tissue, 1 x 220 x 196 cm, 2 x 220 x 93 cm, photograph: Rodney Browne.

watching from below see her disappear as she revolves to face inwards. The gathering is overawed. They tentatively encroach to within centimetres of a sacred icon of the church, watchfully guarded by her Franciscan monk. Inert yet emotionally potent, she silently blesses those standing before her in the opulent sacristy under its gigantic crystal chandelier.

While in awe and drawn into the atmosphere and reality of that magnificent past, one can be excused for thinking that the stern demands and seduction of the symbols of these abstracted rituals are still very much in command in the present life-blood of Spain.

The annual Semana Santa pageants unhurriedly process towards the cathedral of each city as they have done for the past five hundred years. These pageants are at all times flanked by confraternity members, unsettlingly cloaked in 'túnicas' with high-coned hoods masking their faces and identities. (See image 2.)

The women are in mourning, dressed as 'manolas' in black, with their 'peinetas' draped with long, black, lace shawls. (See image 3.)

The contemporary rituals are still accompanied by blaring, high-pitched trumpets and the incessant, slow beat of kettle drums, with the players now belligerently following the procession with their gelled hair and designer sunglasses. (See image 4.)

The massive weight of the Virgin Mary's 'paso' (image 5) and that of Christ are carried along the historic path of each confraternity, at a solemn gait, with a reverential, undulating motion by penitents or 'costaleros', many still choosing to process barefooted. (See images 6 and 7.)

We arrived in Jaen in the early afternoon of Palm Sunday to witness the first procession of the season as it emerged – under the watchful eyes of the confraternity charged with the responsibility and honour of staging the inaugural pageant each year – from the dark church interior into the spring sunlight, heady with the aroma of orange blossom. After many deliberations and instructions within the adjacent square, it began its unhurried journey of reverence and remembrance, of excitement and pride. The processors and onlookers are showered with rose petals – hovering momentarily on the hot updrafts – which had earlier been torn from the cloister bushes and piled into huge shells of woven cane. (See image 8.)

The nuns of a Silent Order<sup>6</sup> energetically toss the petals from the monastery tower. (See image 9.) Their turret lookout ensures their ordained seclusion while they offer their colourful, ephemeral and unvoiced blessing for this segment of the Semana Santa ritual. (See image 10.)

At the conclusion of all these travels and many ceremonies, and considering the manner in which I had been accepted into the churches, processions and homes, I was left with a sense that in Spain, life, art and values are still tangible and visible and can be understood to have merged. I again pondered on one of the issues I have been exploring in my work for the past fifteen years, namely that 'the body/flesh is memory'. It seemed there in Spain to have been acted out with these concepts becoming enmeshed. As Allen S Weiss has noted:

The body *is* memory, where the wounds inflicted in initiatory ceremonies and vindictive punishments become the scars that remain the trace of one's own suffering, a suffering that creates both self-consciousness and its ethical double, social consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

The resultant, abstract symbol is laden with the coalescence of these rituals, sacrifices, actions, artefacts and historical analyses and is deeply scarred into the historical flesh/body/memory of many of Spain's inhabitants. This 'social consciousness' – and its ethical control – remains an active force today in decreeing the interactions and reactions of the people of Spain.

\* All photographs by Lyn Plummer; 2006, except 11 and 12.

- 1 Ralph Body, "Cantata: A Play of the Trace II" (An Installation by Lyn Plummer- Hocken Gallery until 1<sup>st</sup> April), *Critic 2 te arohi* (Dunedin: University of Otago Magazine, 29 June, 2005), 38.
- 2 Susan Verdi Webster; *Art and Ritual in Golden-Age Spain: Sevillian Confraternities and the Processional Sculpture of Holy Week* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1998).
- 3 "...I did review your web site, particularly the recent exhibitions, and I definitely see what Domingo Córdoba saw! How interesting that you had never seen Semana Santa." (Email: in conversation with Susan Verdi Webster; May 2006.)

- 4 "The scar turns the body into an icon. The intensity of the knife's passage and the memory of the blood's flow are transformed into a symbol – the mark of passage into society and its regulated systems of value and exchange. These marks transform lived time into historical destiny, where the past (as memory and the unconscious) ordains the future. This passage into culture is the inscription of the fantasmatic upon the symbolic: it is sublimation. Ritualistic tortures are but the signs of this 'civilising' process, indicating the 'use value' of the symbolic as a psychic force which instills meaning within us." Allen S Weiss, *Iconology and Perversion* (Melbourne: Art and Text Publications, Art and Criticism Monograph Series, Vol. 4, 1988), 16.
- 5 The rituals surrounding Semana Santa constituted one of the main areas of deliberation and the focus of the journey was to document these and the accoutrements produced as an archive for new work.
- 6 The Orders are still widely engaged in the embroidery of ecclesiastical vestments. However, today the most famous specialist workshops that prepare the Semana Santa cloaks and costumes for the articulated sculpture figures employ members of the gay fraternity.
- 7 Allen S Weiss, *Iconology and Perversion*, 15.

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