

ArtSeen

Cristina BanBan: *Del Llanto*

By **Alfred Mac Adam**

Cristina BanBan's *Del Llanto* is the perfect answer to the tedious, inevitable question, "And what have you been doing during the pandemic?" She's been mighty busy, so much so that she's filled two venues, 1969 Gallery in Tribeca and albertz benda in Chelsea, with her efforts: over 30 works in oil, acrylic, pastel, and charcoal. But she has not only produced: she has evolved. Confinement for BanBan has worked like forcing flowers in a hothouse. She has left behind her previous caricature or cartoon style and blossomed into an early maturity. In Spanish, we might say she has achieved "plenos poderes" (full powers).



Cristina BanBan, *La pena de Pilar*, 2020. Oil on canvas. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery.

The collective title of this double show is *Del Llanto*, which might be translated as “concerning weeping,” in the sense of an essay on or an interpretation of tears and their consequences, grief in particular. But in Cristina BanBan’s Spanish culture the word “llanto” transcends tears. In 1935, Federico García Lorca published his poem “Llanto por la muerte de Ignacio Sánchez Mejías,” about the death of a bullfighter, so “llanto” can entail elegy or lamentation as well as crying. In BanBan’s case, both meanings hold true: the tears shed during this year of pandemic loss and the elegiac, commemorative mood that prevails in all our lives.

So being acquainted with grief, following Freud, opens two paths: mourning and melancholia. Mourning we overcome; melancholia is a pathological condition, one that afflicts the distracted, abstracted women who populate BanBan’s paintings. This entire body of work might best be construed as an exercise in sublimation, not in Freud’s sense of the transmutation of erotic energy into art but in the translation of felt grief into images of grief.

Take *La pena de Pilar* (*Pilar’s Sorrow*, 2020) at 1969 Gallery. The Pilar in question is staring into empty space, into the mirror of her sorrows. She stands in a room with walls, curtains, furniture, but the room envelops her. Her own enormous hand—one of BanBan’s signature elements—clutches an object, possibly an article of clothing, but Pilar is going nowhere. In fact, nowhere is where she is, with another huge hand resting on her head, either comforting her or stifling her. She is locked in the eternal present of the painting, like a character in an Expressionist movie set, confined, a prisoner of her grief.



Cristina BanBan, *Escena en el baño*, 2020. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery.

BanBan's use of the room as a framing device derives from a painterly tradition, particularly portraits of women by Picasso and Joaquín Sorolla. In this body of work, the setting is an important factor, first as an acknowledgment of tradition and second as a means to reinforce her central theme, grief as a form of self-incarceration. It also constitutes a visual irony in that it lends a pseudo reality to BanBan's distorted figures, as in the superb work on paper *Escena en el baño* (Bathroom Scene, 2020). In this dark-hued pastel drawing, the allusion to Picasso, especially in the angles of the woman's face, is strong, even if the subject of women emerging from the bath derives from Degas.

The works hung in the albertz benda space show BanBan moving in new directions. Yes, we still have her large-handed women lounging in a daze on beds, but we also have a new preoccupation with the artist's studio. Art about art emerges here as a major subject.

This we see in two acrylic paintings: *Estudio. Septiembre 2020 I* and *Estudio. Septiembre 2020 II* (both 2020). While independent pieces, their being hung in close proximity invites us to think of them as pendants. The first is a profile view of the artist in her studio. She is either staring into empty space or staring at II, with two portrait faces set on an easel, tubes of paint in front of them. The small portraits are real paintings hung nearby—*Autorretrato en naranja* (Self-Portrait in Orange, 2020) and *Retrato de mujer joven* (Portrait of a Young Woman, 2020)—so the cumulative effect is to immerse us in BanBan's productive process.



Cristina BanBan, *Escena en el baño*, 2020. Mixed media on paper. Courtesy the artist and 1969 Gallery.

Works that take steps in yet another direction include *Bodegón con Lucian* (Still life with Lucian, 2021), an oil on canvas, and *Xavi en el estudio* (Xavi in the Studio, 2021), soft pastel and oil pastel on paper. Here we have people other than BanBan's gigantic women: Xavi in fact is a bearded man. But the point is that BanBan has incorporated an entire tradition into what might be a snapshot of the present. The still life contains the genre's obligatory table and flowers, the essential figure of Lucian, but it also contains an open book showing figures possibly by BanBan but more likely by Lucian Freud, who is recontextualized, made into the subject of a painting rather than being its creator. The portrait of Xavi catches a young man in the same state of bewilderment that captivates BanBan's women, but imposed on his chest is a huge hand, the hand of the artist asserting herself, taking control of her space. And this is perhaps the lesson of the entire show: confinement, isolation, and grief properly handled lead us into insights about ourselves and our powers. This is certainly the case of Cristina BanBan.