

Cristina BanBan- “Del Llanto” 1969 Gallery and Albertz Benda Gallery

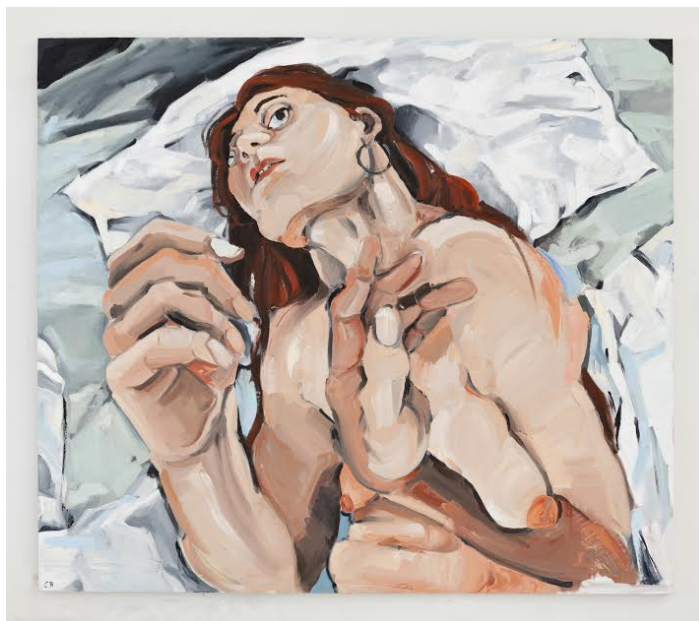


A Las Diez en Casa Photographs by Adam Reich Courtesy the artist, 1969 Gallery, and Albertz Benda Gallery

New York City—Painter Cristina BanBan is doing well for herself. Only thirty-three years young, the Barcelonian artist has exhibited worldwide and has important collectors buying her work. And with two exhibitions happening simultaneously here in Manhattan, one downtown in Tribeca at 1969 Gallery and the other in Chelsea at Albertz Benda Gallery—and during Frieze Week, no less—one can say she is doing very well. The show opened on May 5th, with much of the work already sold!

Interesting then how the press release imprecisely characterizes the artist. It states that BanBan’s new works were created in the last year in a medium entirely new to the artist—oil—and expounds: “BanBan’s densely layered brushstrokes and large, distorted bodies advance her characteristic style and reveal an emergent, still-evolving formal language developing in response to the material properties of oil paint.” It goes on: “Visible underpainting, frenetic brushwork, dramatic drips, and smears of paint emphasize the increased tactility of the medium in contrast

with the plasticity of acrylics and the airiness of soft pastels.” It should be mentioned, tactility, apparent or not, can be ubiquitous to all artists’ mediums and materials—this feature is not particularly identifying. And to any master-painter in oil, plasticity and airiness are easy to render. It’s called skill. The “visible underpainting, frenetic brushwork, dramatic drips and smears of paint” have less to do with the characteristic traits of oil than it does with emphasizing the artist’s stylization of the human form. If anything, it reveals Cristina’s facility as a painter, novice or not, oil or acrylic. What’s most revealing in her enigmatic work, most characterizing and therefore most mentionable is her ability to convey emotion. And emotion doesn’t come packaged in paint tubes—no matter how hard you squeeze them. This trait has everything to do with the very nature of the artist herself, upbringing, background, and personality; it is inherent and inalienable and has more to do with her emotional pictorial verve than any self-pedagogical inclinations she may have. Her own words attest to this:



“Noviembre” Photographs by Adam Reich. Courtesy the artist, 1969 Gallery, and Albertz Benda Gallery

“I definitely focus on how I am feeling because that energy will dictate how the painting will look. I have to connect with myself. Painting is a very honest act for me.”

And her honesty starts with the show’s title, *Del Llanto* (From Crying), which, we must assume, is the emotional state—prior to the ‘honest act’ of picture-making—from where her feelings and art were drawn, and consequently begs the question: For what do you cry, Cristina? After fourteen months of Covid’s misery, lockdowns, and separation, we can only guess. But anyone who lost a friend or parent or wasn’t able to visit grandparents in a nursing home or allowed to fly home can witness all the past year’s emotional angst, uncertainty, and despair in Cristina’s work.

A Las Diez En Casa shows four adolescent ladies half undressed, in slips and bras, lounging on a bed. It’s ten o’clock, yet we’re not sure if it’s morning or evening. Either way, they don’t appear ready to exit the bedroom. Each with iPhone in hand, wine too. It must be night. But then again, time eclipsed

us all this year. Days morphed into weeks, and weeks into months. Each adolescent, an archetype of the four seasons, held on standby. It is infused with hyper anxiety and fear, more discreetly with doubt, desperation, and gloom. It has us sitting on the edge of the bed with them and wondering, too, who'll be the first to receive the unwanted call from the hospital informing us grandma has passed. This is a painting that's the antithesis to living life and to the very time-tested prescription of grabbing it by the horns and running with it.



Autorretrato en Naranja Self Portrait on Orange Photographs by Adam Reich. Courtesy the artist, 1969 Gallery, and Albertz Benda Gallery

Furthermore, most caricature tends to poke fun or make us laugh. In this case, Cristina BanBan's usage of exaggerated forms and figures—in a non-satirical way—doesn't distract or detract from the psychological drama unfolding. In fact, it adds depth and gravitas to the emotional charge. The four young females can be seen as a group portrayal of the same identity (sameness of essential character), or of *oneness*—as in, we're all in this together. But we haven't been. Covid's legacy is that of isolation, loneliness, and social pain. And all its horrible trappings—from depression to lack of connection and intimacy—can be seen in the obstinate and dour eyes looking apprehensively about. Perhaps BanBan's message here is that the world needs each other more than ever and togetherness more than anything before further melancholia kills the beautifully joyous and savored indiscretions of youth. Before life passes us by as we lay dormant at home, waiting for this *mierda* to end.

Returning to the collection's essence, while there is a mature awareness of self, there is also a display of bravura in the paintings, a determination to delve into the private and personal while simultaneously showcasing the professional

de la Haba, Gregory. "Cristina BanBan- 'Del Llanto' 1969 Gallery and Albertz Benda Gallery" *Portray*, 12 May 2021. <https://portraymag.com/2021/05/cristina-banban/>

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grappling with learning the mechanics of oil paint. Most artists fail at one or the other or are incapable of either, whereas Cristina handles both like a fiercely independent artist from *Cataluña*, which, as of this writing, recorded the highest death toll from Covid in all of Spain. The last time so many innocent people were taken in Spain was during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). And it was during this time, another Spanish artist with strong ties to Barcelona, Pablo Picasso, also made paintings that stemmed from tears. His *Femme a Pleurs* (Weeping Women) from 1937 was Picasso's prompt response to the horrific bombing by Nazi and Italian Fascists in the Basque town of Guernica that killed hundreds of innocent people, mostly women, and children.

In *Mater Dei* (Mother of God), we've something more akin to Goya's *Maja Desnuda* (a derogatory 18th and 19th-century Spanish term for low-class) than to the *Rokeby Venus* by Velazquez and his model of modesty, and sensuality, fertility, and love. *Mater Dei* lacks all the coyness and grace of Velazquez' Roman Goddess and throws shame to the wind. There are no religious or mythological elements, no accouterment other than the blood-stained white fabrics (panties or kerchief?). The harsh rendering of the bedsheets mimic, perhaps, the harsh reality of some yet unrealized truth setting in- the trials and tribulations of womanhood. It is chaste only in so far as it is pure (honest) and simple in design. And perhaps the title is mere diversion? Something to ponder as we immediately think TMI (too much information). But who other than a Spaniard would paint the Blessed Virgin Mary bleeding from her crotch. The Catholic church chastised Caravaggio for painting *his* saints with dirty feet. Imagine if Spain's Inquisitors caught up with BanBan? She'd be hung in no time. No exaggeration.



Mater Del Photographs by Adam Reich. Courtesy the artist, 1969 Gallery, and Albertz Benda Gallery

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Spain's history is shrouded in blood. It is the land of *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway's treatise on bullfighting. Spanish lore even suggests the red colors in the country's flag are symbolic of blood, both of the peoples' bloodshed and the bulls killed in the ring. And no church in Spain is without a blood-soaked crucifixion on its walls. Two of the greatest books on Spain are blood-drenched: Ronald Fraser's brilliantly detailed *Blood of Spain: An Oral History of the Spanish Civil War* and journalist Michael Carr's riveting *Blood and Faith: The Purging of Muslim Spain, 1494-1614*, detailing "the largest act of ethnic cleansing in European history" prior to the Holocaust. In *Mater Dei*, however, we are witness to the bleeding that makes life possible and not, historically, the sort that signals life's end. Unless, of course, this is a miscarriage. *Is it Cristina?* From the unabashed expression on the subject's face, all we can reckon is that she's not the only one uncertain about her vaginal discharge—and that red is the color of strength and intense emotion. In bullfighting, the red capes are used not to force the bull to charge—it is the motion of the *muletas* that does *that* because bulls are colorblind—but purely as spectacle. And, just as importantly, to mask the spilled blood of the bull that drenches the capes in the final moments of their existence. There are zero maskings in this very personal and private exposé by Cristina BanBan.



Del Jardin de Maria

But it's *Del Jardin de Maria* that truly reflects BanBan's effulgence as a painter. It is where a simple figure crouching in a garden to pick a flower is made to appear sinful—akin to going out in public without a face mask. The young girl is caught in the dastardly act. And she will be punished. The solicitude in her eyes portends this. *Del Jardin de Maria* is a tour de force of melodrama like Roy Lichtenstein's 1963 *Drowning Girl*. But greater still, it captures the same sort of a psychological landscape, a portrayal of a young person's state of mind rather than an actual place with a name and identity, as one of the most iconic paintings of the 20th century: Andrew Wyeth's, *Christina's World*. With his subject, Christina Olson, a neighbor who suffered from a degenerative disease leaving her unable to walk and could only crawl across her family's property—this, the scene depicted in *Christina's World*—Wyeth wished “to do justice to her extraordinary conquest of a life which most people would consider hopeless.”

Cristina BanBan has turned the year's hopelessness on its head and transformed her psychic tears (those expelled from the frontal lobe during strong emotional responses) into a celebration of the human spirit by heightening *our* empathic awareness with her art. We can only imagine what Ms. BanBan will produce in years to come as the art spirits continue whispering all of life's beautiful mysteries, magic, and truths into her ears. —de la Haba