



## Paulina Semkowicz, *ALOJA*

*Aloja, goja, encantada* or *dona d'aigua* are some of the denominations of a mythical figure pertaining to oral traditions in all of the territories of Catalunya. They appear in local legends across remote locations, distant from each other, having been passed down multiple generations in the form of stories told to the young by the fire. Yet they all maintain some core common characteristics. These elusive and beautiful *enchanted*, or *water women*, live in bodies of fresh water ranging from springs, fountains, gorges, wells, streams, brooks, to lagoons, lakes and rivers. They are not witches but they have magical powers, mostly bestowed upon humans in either blessings or curses, in response to their willingness to help them when in distress, and their compliance to keep the enchanted's existence a secret. Water women inhabit underwater castles, sometimes in dealings with the devil, and they come out to the surface to do their washing, which they lay out on the banks of the river or lake to dry by moonlight. If a human, often a shepherd, is so lucky to come across their presence in the forests of the mountainous valleys, they often do so by finding these towels, cloths and sheets on the rocks or the grass. If humans are so clever and opportune as to steal one of these pieces of fabric, fortune is guaranteed to them and those in their house in health and riches for the rest of their life. But if they get caught, the *aloja's* punishment can range from turning them into stone, to cursing them with never getting any richer or any poorer, no matter how hard they try. In reward for a man or woman's help, like breastfeeding their water children, or assisting them when found hurt, an *aloja* often gifts things such as a skein of yarn that will forever keep giving, or a bundle of rye that will turn into gold. In many stories, they marry human men, only to disappear years later, after the husband reproaches their true nature in a quarrel.

This folklore literature is dominated by motives of mystery, fear, perplexity, deviance, the distinction between good and evil, and the fragility and corruptness of the human constitution. In a practical sense, the stories might be read as cautionary efforts, or to explain facts of life such as why wives left their husbands and were never seen again; and in a transcendent sense, they might account for the need to capture the unfathomable magnitude of nature happening before our eyes. Symbolism and personification are powerful tools for channeling and understanding natural phenomena in all cultures - humanizing and anthropomorphism have allowed us to comprehend and construct the limits of our relationships with the environment and our role inside of it.

In a cave near Espinavessa, water drips and the right combination of humidity and light produce an ecosystem of geological layers and textures, crawling plants and mossy nooks and cavities where one can see shapes, imagine inexplicable occurrences and feel as though something larger and ungraspable is taking place.

ALOJA continues Paulina Semkowicz's series of atmospheric spaces, which set up a potential scenario for an imagined action to unravel. In her first gesture of sculptural dimensions, she creates an omniscient presence that presides over a habitat made of dripping pigments, both a background and a painting. In her native Poland, the *Chochol* is an object-turned-character, a key figure of the folklore literature work and theatre play *Wesele* (the Wedding) by Stanisław Wyspiański. Made of straw, traditionally a protective structure for delicate trees or rose bushes in the winter, it becomes a key and active player in the narrative when it has the power to captivate and hypnotize the guests, gathered around it in a devoted dance, who become subdued to its influence. The main character in ALOJA has a central disposition too, one that induces circular gathering, much like a bonfire or the idolization of a pagan icon. With a burned-like quality that comes from the characteristic black clay of La Bisbal and its tradition of ceramics,

ALOJA alludes to humanoid shapes, almost coming out of the sticks, branches, rocks, stalagmites, towering sand formations, and detailed textures found in the alcoves of the caves. It encloses and embodies the ghosts and the spirits of nature, our own fears and projections, our fascination and our vivid and picturesque confusion.

- Sira Pizà

Paulina Semkowicz (b. 1980, Krakow) lives and works in Vienna. A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków (Painting, MFA Degree, Diploma with Distinction 2006; Postgraduate Degree in Scenography, 2013) and Faculdade de Belas Artes, University of Porto, Portugal.

Her work uses painting to create transitable narrative spaces, where absence and presence become key in the experience of the viewer. Informed by her trajectory in theatre painting, she transforms backgrounds into active scenarios of contingency, playing with themes that are elusive yet profoundly resonant.

She has exhibited her work individually at VIN VIN Gallery, Vienna, AT; Galeria Presença (Project Room), Porto, PT; Galerie Laetitia Gorsy, Leipzig, D; Tower, Vienna, AT; Unus-Una-Unum project, FPSW/Program Gallery, Warsaw, PL; Galerie A Suivre, Bordeaux, FR; and Fundacja Atelier, Warsaw, PL. She has recently participated in group exhibitions such as *Moon, she said*, Kunstraum am Schupplatz, Vienna, AT; *TO BE SOMEBODY*, Ansa Voir, Vienna, AT; *BEČ BIJELJINA*, Vienna Design Week, Vienna, AT; *Bijeljinala*, Gallery of the Cultural Center "Semberija", Bijeljina, Bosnia and Herzegovina, BIH; *Until the thread breaks*, Kunstverein Baden, AT; *Across myself*, Kunstmatrix/online, curated by Les Nouveaux Riches Magazine; *Image fétiche*, Galerie Stephanie Kelly, Dresden, D; *APPENDIX*, She BAM! Galerie Laetitia Gorsy, Leipzig, DE; Haus Wien, Simmering, Vienna, AT; *UNCHAIN #2*, WAF Galerie/Kunsth Büro, Vienna, AT; *Breathless Dromedary* curated by Mauve, *In Spite of*, Porto, PT; *Alter Ego 2*, Pryzmat Gallery, Krakow, PL; *En Plein Air*, STUDIOLI, Rome, IT; or *The Eventuality Dispenser*, MAUVE at Fettes College, Edinburgh, UK.

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With the support of Generalitat de Catalunya and Diputació de Girona.