

Marta Cárdenas was born in San Sebastián in 1944. Fascinated with painting and drawing from a very early age, she enrolled at the San Fernando Academy of Fine Arts in Madrid in the sixties, before later moving to Paris. Throughout her career, her work evolved from a highly intimate figurative language towards expressive abstraction as a result of her direct connection with nature. Her works from the eighties and early-nineties are indebted to oriental culture and evince a great interest in calligraphic gesture.

In 1996 her painting underwent a complete transformation following a trip to India, which opened up for her a whole new range of formal and chromatic possibilities. Around this time, she also modified her working method: first of all, by opting for a form that strikes the attention in a certain way; then using this form to make manifold variations; and, finally, following meticulous analysis, giving shape to the final composition. Documentation of this process, her works and life experiences can be found in over three hundred sketchbooks she has filled over the course of her life's work.

Here, in the following pages, this acclaimed artist, whose works have been seen in major group and solo shows, gives us some interesting insights into her life and work. Her replies, written in diary form, speak of her fascination with and talent for writing.

Prado y bosque (otoño). Detail, 1987

Oil on canvas
80 x 130 cm
Inv. nº. 7000



Question: You discovered painting at the age of thirteen. When did you realize that you wanted to become an artist?

Answer: Friendless, a misfit, the smallest and shortest, I always felt like the ugly duckling of my class. And of my school, run by strict nuns from 8 to 8. My life changed without any warning at the age of thirteen. On my own, I started to paint like there was no tomorrow and to write with equal gusto.

MARTA CÁRDENAS

Inspirational Women Artists
in the BBVA Collection



I enrolled at Asociación Artística and started drawing with Jesús Gallego, the best teacher you could hope for. And I ended up studying Fine Arts. There was a college degree to be an artist but none if you wanted to be a writer. Now I'm glad because I love my profession. On the other hand, nothing stopped me from writing whatever I wanted in my notebooks, as can be seen in the over three hundred that make up my diary. I was hooked from the very beginning: very seldom have I ever left home without oil sticks,

pens, colouring pencils and a notepad.

We lived in San Sebastián but as there was still no art school in Bilbao at that time, I studied in Madrid where I stayed with my grandmother.

My irrepressible self-confidence, somewhat tempered today, meant that I was soon running all over the place and getting to know everybody. At eighteen, in San Sebastián, I wrote to Eduardo Chillida, who adopted me a little: we visited each other's studios, always with Rafael Ruiz Balerdi. Later, Rafa, who like me was hibernating in Madrid, introduced me to Oteiza who fired my cylinders even more, launching me into space (...).

Abstraction was what I liked the most. After trying it out, without conviction or results—nature was the only thing that could make me concentrate—I decided to look for it, or better said to discover it, in my surrounding environs: it was there in every nook and cranny, calling out to me. Without me having to look for it.

What did it matter whether the origin of those drawings was abstract or not? Was it really so important that they depicted recognizable subject matters? I could always assess them by turning them upside down and I often did just that while working on them.

When I graduated in 1969, I got a six-month scholarship from the French government to go to Paris, where I stayed a further four months doing odd

jobs. It marked a before-and-after for me.

Question: What about your works prior to your encounter with abstraction?

Answer: At the School of Fine Arts in Madrid it was all about greys. Appreciating them made me feel like a profound, reflexive person. They were seen as serious, professional, adult and I believed that it was a style that would set me apart.

Winter or summer, I painted in my family's damp holiday home in the north. I liked the silent rooms, which I lit with low-watt bulbs to enhance the mysterious atmosphere. In my first solo show—at the HUTS gallery in San Sebastián, around 1970—my greys were well received by the Chillida brothers and young fellow artists I admired, like Ameztoy and



Río (invierno), 1987
Acrylic on board
76 x 100 cm
Inv. N° 7164

Zuriarrain, with whom I formed a group and exhibited in Bilbao and Durango.



Caserío Iborla (Ibarrola). Photograph: Marta Cárdenas
Image courtesy of the artist

Question: In 1980, these scenes gradually opened up to the outside world and you started to paint abstract plein air landscapes full of light. How did this metamorphosis take place?

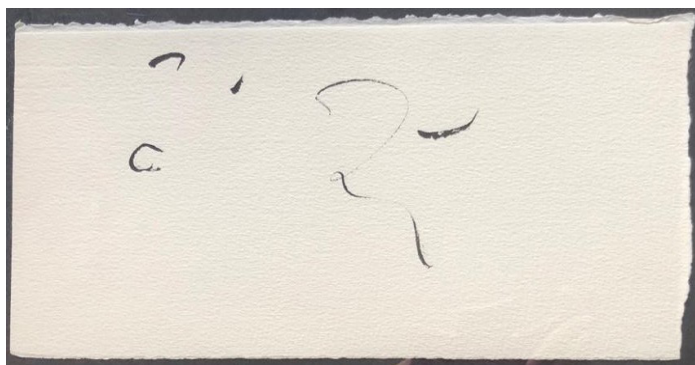
Answer: In 1979, we were living near Alpedrete. In June I was recovering from an operation and had to walk. The sun was shining. One Tuesday, just a few metres from home, I glimpsed the golden sparkle of a jumble of plants. I returned to the spot, at the foot of an oak tree, with pad and pastels. By Friday I had a trolley with foldable easel, box of oils and primed boards. I was entrapped by the light and colour just a few steps from home!

Question: The BBVA Collection has two of your works from 1987 in its holdings: *River (Winter)* and *Meadow and Forest (Autumn) I*, which speak of your search for a simplified landscape, largely configured by empty space, lighting and brushwork. What are the elements of nature that struck you the

most when it came to depicting them and could you tell us a bit more about this process of synthesis?

Answer: Plein air landscape painting is fun but it has drawbacks which you don't have indoors with stable light. You can avail of time at will, but when it comes to "subject matter" it's all about capturing what you can when you can. Because, before you realize it, it is no longer there: or it starts to pour down, or a cloud crosses the sky. Little by little I learned the techniques I needed. To hone my skills, and armed with my wonderful Japanese brushes, I lost myself in certain kinds of sketches.

Taking advantage of a move to Madrid, I applied for authorization to paint in the zoo (...). One day, an ordinary little sparrow, pecking around on the ground, revealed to me the secrets of Goya, Rodin and so



Hípica
Sketch with goose feather.
Image courtesy of the artist



El Campillo (by the end of 1980) Image: Tim Hunt (Courtesy of the artist)

many others: sketching it without taking my eye off the model. Without looking at the paper. After that, it was all surprises and fun... but, admittedly, I had to throw away eighty percent of the sketches.

To study colour, I started with small sketches in pastel or gouache. As I went along, I applied a ground of water-based paint in a neutral tone in consonance with the atmosphere. With any soft stick you can do this in four strokes: it's a breeze. For larger pictures the method is the same but scaled up by days for each phase. Everything, including the ground, done in nature with the precise light and time. I also followed these same guidelines when painting triptychs: lining three canvases up on three easels and painting them simultaneously from one end to the other. The foldable easels well tied with ropes. That way, on at least three occasions, I managed

to reach 390 centimetres from side to side, with a height of 81 centimetres. Taking possession of the field with brush in hand, I darted from one end to the other like a deer. What joy!

Question: Your painting changed radically after a trip to India in 1996. Suddenly, nature gave way to a new visual language. What was it you discovered that triggered this new phase?

Answer: At the age of fifty-two this trip to India completely changed my relationship with painting. At the time I wrote to my sister, "one week after arriving here, rather than ready, I am impatient to get to work. Two things are pulling me. It's like being yanked along by two big dogs on a leash: on one hand the play with this whole new palette and my eagerness to capture its sheer vitality and life; on the other, the use of abstraction, an unrequited love from my twenties when Informalism was at its height. Now this is going to come from the gut: despite my best efforts, back then, it never came out."

What surprised me the most about the colour of India is the sheer variety. In European clothes or fabric shops you almost always see the same ludo colours more or less saturated or more or less light, and toned down not to be too aggressive. In India on the contrary you see a thousand tonalities of each colour, and not because the dyes have faded, as they are sold like that in shops. It's amazing to see the way they are able to combine them! Their criteria are so different from ours! What light and what life they bring out from those combinations!

How boring and bland everything must seem to them over this side of the world! Having left my oil sticks behind in Madrid and with my camera broken during the trip, I took notes of all the combinations I liked: I made about twenty very detailed descriptions, inventing codes with numbers and letters to record the exact characteristics of each colour.

On returning to Madrid I was not the same person. Whether I knew it or not, I was going to paint completely differently. It was a moment of euphoria, with everything still to be discovered.

Question: You have said that throughout your life you have filled more than 300 sketchbooks. They are a crucial part of your practice and are currently the main support for your artistic work. When did you start to use them?

Answer: During my time at college I filled notebooks one after another. At that time I preferred earthy sticks, from brick red to deep grey, taking in browns on the way. I was drawn towards interiors; and views of buildings and streets, especially when broken haphazardly by trees.

Time dragged tediously in the classroom. I used to drop down to Bar Flor on my own or with a fellow student for a tea, and I'd make quick portraits of people having coffee, or I'd draw a sketch of the two musicians on the little podium who were providing the background atmosphere. I would start by pulling a piece of oil stick horizontally across the page which, depending on the pressure, would darken or

lighten the soft lights and shadows of the interior. The main thing was to capture the atmosphere: and I didn't want any discordant blanks on the edge of the page. To finish, I'd use the stick held vertically to mark some important lines or stains.

And so, without realizing it, my hand was preparing itself for the synthetic landscape that one day, twenty years later, it would end up painting. Moving towards pastels was natural and fun. We would see where it would lead me.

After the trip you just mentioned, my notepads took on a different air inspired by patterns and colours from other places. On the paper they led to all kinds of unexpected worlds as I fervently filled up the pages.



Sketchbook of bogolano o bogolanfini. Mali. Ink. 2005

Image courtesy of the artist

Question: One can currently note a more concerted effort to reduce the gender gap in the art world, to recover women artists and create new references that will draw a broader panora-

ma. Who were your references when you started out? Were there many women among them?

Answer: We used to spend the summer in Mamelena, our old farmhouse with orchards and gardens in Ayete, San Sebastián. I was about twelve.

One day there appeared this tall beautiful stylishly dressed woman with a nose as long as herself. She had studied in Paris with top artists and you could tell. She was called Menchu Gal and was a painter.

She came to make portraits of the three sisters. I can't remember mine nor Maria Rosa's but I can still see Elena, who was really pretty, sitting in a high uncomfortable place next to the stables because it had the light Menchu was looking for. My family still has those portraits.

I suppose that's where it came from, the unstoppable outpouring of paint that came over me. I only know that, at the time, I wrote her long, hefty letters. Now and again I got a reply in handwriting as big and self-assured as herself; unfortunately, I remember little of the content.

I can't forget the profound impact, many years later, of discovering online the Finnish painter Helene Schjerfbeck. Her way of using light and colour, but especially the expressive density of the stillness turned me upside down. A fantastic model, an exemplary artist, whether or not she existed for galleries. And, furthermore, innovative: in 1904, in Paris, she was already at the forefront of the avant-gardists.

Question: The situation over this last year has underlined humankind's enduring need to reinvent itself in order to adapt to changing circumstances. Although there is no substitute for the experience of travelling, Internet has become a basic form of discovering other places in the world and their ways of thinking. As an artist whose work has been profoundly influenced by your study of other cultural expressions, what opportunities have you found in the use of digital tools to explore cultures and civilizations?

Answer: Goya didn't need internet to continue inventing until his death.

Computers give me little more than headaches and, in extreme cases, vertigo. The more I reject them, the better my health. Admittedly, it helped me discover amazing remains of old civilizations. And also other civilizations very different from ours, where artists, who at most are considered magicians or craftsmen, often surpassed in beauty and expressiveness the best creators from here, the moneyed world.

I have borrowed ideas from all I discovered in prints and crafts from these peoples. I could see them in the street, in my own district in Madrid, without internet. During this century so far I have been trying to capture something of that wisdom hidden inside people everywhere, here and there, then and now. As I said, I've filled hundreds of notepads: first studying the details—of colour, composition, form—that caught my attention and then, on the following pages, developing them following my own fantasy. Always ending up with something unexpected that, as a re-

sult, spurs my desire to paint, which is my will to live, the magical essence that keeps us alive at our age. All this became part of my baggage naturally, forming a whole with what I inherited from Rome, Greece, Italy, and from what I discovered from China and Japan in my forties ... and, by that stage, sometimes on the internet.