

Carmen Calvo (Valencia, 1960) is one of Spain's most salient conceptual artists. Throughout her career, Calvo has experimented with manifold materials and techniques, with a particular focus on ceramics, installation and photography. Her aspiration has always been to create a thought-provoking body of work that explores the depths of the human being.

Her work has been exhibited regularly both inside and outside Spain, most notably at the Venice Biennale, where she exhibited at the Spanish Pavilion in 1997 jointly with Joan Brossa. Calvo's work is also in many major public and private collections, like the BBVA, which possesses an exquisite work on paper characteristic of her earlier period.

In 2013 she was awarded Spain's National Visual Arts Prize in recognition of her tireless experimentation in new expressive media as well as her exploration of the role played by the image in the construction of both subjective and historical identity.

**Question:** Throughout your career you have built a highly personal language in which you use a variety of techniques and processes to probe our collective identity. Your beginnings were connected to pottery, as one can see in the work from Writings series from 1983 in the BBVA Collection, coming from a larger body of work you started to produce in the 1980s. Where does your fascination with ceramics come from, and how did you decide to apply it to art?

**Answer:** *I had a more or less classical training, studying at the School of Arts and Crafts and the School of Fine Arts, both in Valencia. My earliest*



*Serie Escrituras (Detail) 1983*  
terracotta and acrylic on paper  
112.8 x 77.2 cm  
Inv. n°. 841

# CARMEN CALVO

Inspirational Women Artist  
in the BBVA Collection



Image courtesy of the artist  
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works with clay can be traced back to 1973. Having said that, what I used in *Writing series* (1983) is not the clay used in pottery but rather earthenware, the white material employed in ceramics. I have been using it for years. When I was young I worked in a ceramics factory that produced figurines and pieces depicting traditional hunting and dance scenes based on eighteenth-century models. So, ceramics has always been part and parcel of the materials I use, just like marble, glass, wood, lead, and so on.

**Q:** With the passing of time your practice has gradually evolved and in your later work you started to incorporate elements from outside the usual reper-

toire of art materials. One might even say that they have some kind of relationship with archaeology, be it through ancient artisan working methods, be it through the accumulation of elements from the past that speak of recovering memory. What inspired you to move from those early arrangements of fired clay to compilations of found objects? How did you shift from manual work to the labour of collecting and gathering?

**A:** I would say that I continued working within the same language of forms and objects, perhaps changing from ones I made myself to others which I sought out or discovered by chance. I follow the age-old formula of “painting”, only I do it with objects.

**Q:** In your more recent output you make use of your surrounding reality to create new visual and conceptual settings that encourage the viewer to question their own life. How would you define these unusual hybrid creations that are somewhere between painting, photography, collage and installation? In them, is it the work that chooses the object or image, or, on the contrary, is it the image or object that determines the composition?

**A:** My creative process is completely conditioned by my gaze. I observe what is happening around me every day and then recount it. So, my work is the end result of the world I see. It is a journal of sorts. Which is why the human figure and portraiture are so central in my artistic narrative.

**Q:** Right now, we are witnessing an increasing number of initiatives to recover and vindicate women artists in order to add greater plurality to the contemporary art world. Who were your references when you were starting out? Were there any women in particular?

**A:** Fortunately, there has been a lot of progress in the role women play in the art world. Having said that, we also have to be aware that there is still a long way to go. As far as female references are concerned, my mother was an example of how to fight and live in freedom with a passion for life. She came from a generation who had to struggle in times of hardship, both in everyday life and in culture.



*Serie Escrituras*, 1983  
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**Q:** The situation we have gone through this year has brought to the fore the need to reinvent culture in order to adapt it to the circumstances. Although the digital image of a work can obviously never replace direct contemplation of it, do you see any opportunities for the use of latest technology for experiencing art and for disseminating art and culture?

**A:** Let's hope that what we are going through comes to an end soon and we can all return to our normal lives. Nowadays, new technology plays a critical role in communication. And also in the visual arts, as well as cinema and theatre. I would say that it is useful as a tool for exposure and for raising awareness. But no matter how crucial, I believe that technology cannot replace the direct experience of seeing and feeling. Direct contact and an exchange through the gaze are key elements in my work.