

## **GRETTA'S PROCESS by Harry Pye**

### **Introduction:**

Gretta Sarfaty Marchant is an artist who lives and works in London. Since the 1970's she has exhibited in major museums and galleries around the world. She has shown at The Pompidou Centre in Paris, Palazzo dei Diamanti in Ferrara, Museu de Arte de São Paulo, Internationaal Cultureel Centrum in Antwerp, and at the inauguration of the Trump Tower in New York.

Her works extended from performance, DVD, digital art, collage and photography, to the more traditional paintings drawings and prints. In 1983 she decided to interview and paint the 50 most important and influential people in Brazil. The final work entitled Self-Portrait of Brazil was made into a book published in 3 different languages, and the paintings were exhibited at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo-MASP and the Museu Nacional de Belas Artes do Rio de Janeiro.

In 1985 Gretta curated, directed and wrote the script for a multimedia Art Opera event entitled La Maja - Goya Time. The art performance took place at 'Quando' in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, New York. For this project she interacted with 100 artists from different fields including painters, musician, actors, dancers, poets and the maestro composer Butch Morris and art critique Sandro Dernini. The concept was to bring Goya's paintings to life.

In 1993 she was approached by the director Arthur Penn to be the art consultant for the film The Portrait, starring Lauren Bacall and Gregory Peck. The story was based on Gretta's life using her paintings and Soho loft in New York for the film sets.

In 1997 she had her first solo show in London, entitled Reflections of a Woman at 'Wolseley Fine Arts' in Cork Street.

In March 2002 to inaugurate the opening of the gallery 'Sartorial Contemporary Art' in Notting Hill, she exhibited The Myth of Womanhood and Youth Versus Gravity, wallpaper installation and video-DVD. In October 2008 Gretta moved Sartorial Contemporary Art to 26 Argyle Square near Kings Cross. For more info visit [www.sartorialart.com](http://www.sartorialart.com)

### **Harry Pye asks Gretta Sarfaty Marchant 12 Questions:**

Harry: You and I have worked together and known each other a while. We have a lot in common but one big difference between us is that you believe in God. Was there ever a time in your life when you didn't believe that there is a higher power?  
**Gretta: "No. I have always believed. Always. I also believe that things always happen for a reason."**

You were born in Athens, Greece. Can you tell me what first comes to mind or how you feel when somebody mentions Athens in conversation or you hear it mentioned on the news?

**“My memories of Athens are very happy and positive. Until the age of 40 when I was of my life. The Acropolis was one and a half blocks away from where we lived. It was my playground! I think now there are lots of strict rules. People are worried the remains will get damaged so there are lots of signs saying “Don’t Touch”. But when I was growing up you could do what you liked and run around and do whatever you liked and climb everywhere. I had a nanny. She was a young woman who was more interested in her boyfriend than in me. This meant I had lots of freedom. My creative outlet was the piano which I started playing aged five. I was very active. My mother and grandmother both loved to cook. There was always company around. It was the fashion then for children to be plump. My mother would stuff me with food till I became a ball. But I was a cute little ball. I was very bright and I could get away with being very naughty with the other children. I would dress as Dracula then turn out the lights and scare the other kids. I was really wicked.”**

Do you have brothers and sisters?

**“Yes, my sister is two years younger than me. We also had lots of cousins around to play with as well. I was the oldest and I was the boss. I was very confident. By the age of five I could read the newspaper. My mother wanted me to be Number One. And when I went to school I was the best at math and other subjects. This all changed when our family moved to Brazil - then I became the worst in the class! My poor mother was traumatized by the move to Brazil and that reflected on me. My dyslexia became a lot worse. I went from number one to number zero.”**

A lot of children find changing schools traumatic - what were the worst aspects of the move?

**“The main thing was that I didn’t speak a word of Portuguese but because my mother was so competitive, she refused to let me drop a year. It would have been better if I had started my new school in the year below as then I would have found it easier to catch up.”**

I like the black and white photos that you made of yourself when you were a young woman in Brazil. In the photos you are basically making yourself looking unattractive - what’s the story behind them?

**“I became interested in distorting my face to make it appear horrible and ugly because I wanted people to see what I was like in the inside and what I could do as an artist. It bothered me that I was being dismissed for being just a pretty face. Although Brazil has a good history of strong, independent and important female artists, my interest in Body Art came from wanting to be taken seriously for my artistic ideas and not judged by my looks. I was reacting to sexism. But, once I got that out of my system by doing that work where I distorted my face, I could move on and just do whatever I wanted.”**

Such as, exhibit and perform in some European countries?

**“In Paris my work got seen by a few people and one woman who really liked it worked for the art press. There was a 2-page feature in Flash Art magazine about me which led me being invited to show in Italy. My mother is Italian, so I had no trouble with the language. And so I went and stayed in Italy for one**

month. I got myself a studio in Milan and for many, many years I spent 3 or 4 months there a year. I had a gallery that represented me. And I would travel and do shows in Germany and Belgium. It was great. I was selling lots of work. My paintings that incorporated lace were very popular. I only have one or two left but I hope I can bring one to Leeds. I knew then that if I carried on with the lace paintings I would make a market for myself. But I was becoming bored and wanted to move on and do different things.”

You have a very impressive claim to fame about being in a film. Can you remind me of your brush with movie world legends like Lauren Bacall whilst living in New York? “In Soho I had an artist’s studio in a loft. Arthur Penn, who’d directed *Bonnie & Clyde*, was looking for an artist who could paint portraits and who also had a studio that would look good on the film. After meeting me and coming to the studio I was selected. I attended script meetings because they had to adapt what they’d written to fit in with my loft. The artist in the film was a painter who’d had trouble with their parents. The character had spent tall her life trying to prove herself to her parents - and that was my life. So, little by little, the film became more about me. Lauren Bacall had a great wit and amazing charisma but, like all actresses are, she was a little bit vain and insecure about her image. But the other star of the film, Gregory Peck was not only gorgeous on the outside but also one of the nicest people I’d ever met in my life. Despite being in his 80’s, he was still so handsome. And it was very exciting to work with Arthur Penn who is of course a fantastic director. So it was all a great experience for me.”

So what was it that brought you to London?

“I was attending a wedding in Europe and I met and fell in love with my husband Richard. I felt happy about settling down with someone because I’d done so many things with my life.”

You spent quite a lot of time in Japan in the mid 1990’s. How did being in Japan changed your work?

“I started going to Japan because of my husband Richard. We would spend about 10 or 12 days there twice a year. Richard would go there to buy antiques. I used to enjoy walking the streets and observing people. I loved exploring different locations and watching people’s behavior in Japan. Obviously, origami is the big thing there. And so, in my spare time I would go and study it. If you look at the tiny squares in work the *Myth of Womanhood* series, you can probably see the influence it had. I also made lots of collaborative work with my assistant Camila. I felt like a child again - maybe because Japanese people have a childlike quality. The way they laugh, and smile is quite childlike and very charming.”

Meanwhile back in London you and your husband owned a racehorse and you had two exhibitions of horse related paintings. Did you fit in well with that crowd? Did you miss going to the races?

“I don’t think you need to own a horse or even place bets on them winning to enjoy the races. Those horses are such beautiful animals. I got such thrill seeing them in the stables. It was nice, but the social aspect of mixing with the

people... I don't know. I really just concentrated on my art and observing the horses."

Your next project couldn't have been more different really. You seem to jump from making realistic paintings of horses to then doing computer collages or re-mixes for your series, "Youth Versus Gravity" - what was all that about?

"I was drawn to the new technology of what computers had to offer. I didn't know how to even turn a computer on and type my name. I started to manipulate my image but also it was around this time I became a grandmother. I was fascinated by my grandson. I wanted to make work about the myth of how when woman age they lose their sexual attractiveness. And so "Youth Versus Gravity" is about me and my grandson. This show took place at Sartorial in Notting Hill. It was the first show at the gallery. After that there was a show with me, Hugh Mendes and Stella Vine. Then there were shows featuring works by James Jessop, Gavin Nolan, Jasper Joffe, you, Mikey Georgeson, Sweet Tooth, Cyclops, James Unsworth..."

And now you have a new enormous gallery space in Kings Cross and you collaborate with all these different artists. It feels like a very exciting new chapter in Gretta's Progress story. Do you ever feel so happy you could burst?

"Yes, all the time. Running the new gallery in King's Cross is a lot of work but very exciting. And I am delighted to show old and new work in Leeds. Britain is the most civilized and polite places I've ever been. I like British people a lot. They are reliable, creative and exciting."

POSITIONINGS: GRETTA'S PERFORMANCE ART

### Never Understand Me

Perhaps when we think into performance, into the notion of performance art and how this medium as an art form operates, we can ponder the 'body' in relation to itself or the body as a subjectivity unto itself?

When we are witnessing performance art, the body or bodies are always these potent carriers of meaning, a confusing junction of potential readings that say as much about *us* as they do about the performer(s). Essentially what is going on is the fundamental question of 'what is the self?' This question can be asked and often is with much effect in all the arts and humanities, but in performance the real time *affect*, the living moment, with living bodies and their memory goes on and gives it this very direct and often unnerving edge.

Performance is different from say theatre or film by this very upfront exchange that upsets the normal relations of spectator and performer. The latter forms revel and hide behind narrative structure, are obliged to go through a story-telling process and by this the spectator is always at least one stage in remove from what is being spun out. With performance that remove is shortened to somewhere near, or at breaking point. Narrative is not an obligation. But of course, there is always a narrative, our own narrative, which performance is so perfectly primed to disrupt.

Our own subjectivities as spectators, our bodies and their relations to everyday narrative are put to the test. Performance of all the arts by its very reality breaks through the distancing effect of representation. An example of performances potential for 'punctum' can be related to an event we all experienced seven years ago that was the 9/11 atrocity. As the composer Karl Stockhausen controversially noted 9/11 was one of 'the greatest works of art ever'. The difficult reactions to this comment are understandable but assume that art is something that is all about pleasure and in some way removed from reality. Perhaps we should say then, that that moment was one of the greatest pieces of 'performance art' ever...

### **You Shouldn't Be Watching Yourself Like That**

It is 1979 at the Pompidou, Paris and a crowd gathers. Across a bed encircled by flowing draperies of lace a young woman who appears to be naked also appears to flaunt herself. We cannot see clearly, our eyes need to attune to the suffused light, the subtle blemishes that the temple of lace will at first refuse. Then, as our eyes settle and our expectations adapt, we accept that what wallows amongst the soft linen, the quilts and the cushions is a woman pleasuring herself. But our eyes need to adjust further, for something else lurks amongst the silky depths of this sensual and ethereal chamber. The black small shape that flows in unison with the young woman's desires is a cat. The feline, the animal, the wild metaphors of wanting and wanting to become animal become real as we watch the indulgent woman frolic, desire and love this most symbolically potent of creatures. The three shades of desire cross into our sexual charge, our moral landscape. These are the **Evocative Recollections** as realized through the conduit of Gretta's body. Three subjectivities. But there is a fourth.

We will try not to be colloquial. Or local. Or noisy. After-all a whore is a whore. A duchess is a duchess. A slave is a slave. We will try not to be obscene when all around is obscene. But there is noise. There is obscenity. And denial and condemnation are in the air.

### **La Maja 'the Whore'**

It is New York 1986 on the Lower East Side. In a converted church a performance is about to begin. Time has shifted and we are on the cusp of the 1800's at the presentation of Francisco Goya's new paintings. The Spanish Royal Family in glorious procession enter the artist's atelier. But Goya has made some 'mistakes'. First, he is on love with the Duchess of Alba. The beautiful Duchess: the free woman of Spain. She is sick of the Moor inspired repressive veiling of women that still lingers in Spanish society. She is inspired also by her newfound freedom since her husband the Duke of Alba died and left her free. She flirts with Goya. Goya flirts back. A notorious painting is about to be unveiled. The royal family will be displeased.

Gretta wrote **La Maja in Goya Time** in collaboration with Sandro Dernini and the intention was to create an 'Art Opera' based around the two controversial paintings by Goya, 'Naked Maja' and 'Maja Clothed' as well as Goya's subversive oeuvre in general. With the live performance of avant-garde composer Butch

Morris freshly penned music in attendance this is indeed what it was. Like **Evocative Recollections** the focus of the performance is Gretta's body. Gretta is La Maja and La Maja is Gretta. It is a very lavish and playful performance that reveals in theatrical costume/posturing and musical mayhem. What is crucial to this performance is Gretta's intention that the audience are part of the spectacle. They do not sit but stand and when the royal procession arrives, they arrive through the audience. This simple placing immediately colludes the audience into what will unfold. The joy of the royal family/s arrival to see their favorite court painter's newest creations which quickly descends into shock, confusion and anger is encouraged to be part of the audience's reaction. Goya's 'private view' becomes a violent chaos as guns go off and the royal family try to relinquish their dignity at sight of La Maja's 'indignities'. Throughout all this Gretta/La Maja remains defiantly silent before finally offering herself in sacrifice to be burnt at the stake.

### Through a Glass Darkly

*' "The body". What is to The Subject? Not the qualities of its moving experience. But rather, in keeping with the extrinsic, its positioning. Ideological accounts of subject formation emphasize systemic structurings. The focus on the systemic had to be brought back down to earth in order to be able to integrate it into the account the local cultural differences and practices of resistance they may harbor. The concept of positionality was widely developed for this purpose.'*<sup>1</sup>

As Brian Massumi goes on to say in his account of the grid model, how can the grid itself change, if we are to escape the cultural cages that can nullify our subjectivities? In performance there is no doubting 'the unbearable lightness of being'. If grids have a tendency to 'position' us (so often unfairly ignorantly), it is the body that surely repositions the grid.

In the 1980 performance **Change and Appropriation of an Autonomous Identity** (a collaboration with Elvio Becheroni) Gretta is seen slowly breaking her way through a paper cage-like structure. She is dressed in red to symbolize a Communist resistance to the Capitalist dominance that is so prevalent and important to the plight of South American countries like Brazil (where she lived and was brought up). The motion of this gradual taking apart of the grid structure is painstakingly slow and meditative. The audience are being asked to 'wait'. But when she finally makes her way through this jungle of gridded structure and appears to be free at last she cannot help but to make way back into the familiar and comforting structure that she so wanted to escape.

Gretta has said herself that **Change and Appropriation of an Autonomous Identity** is about the difficulty of one ideology up against another. We live in times where the clashing of ideologies is very acute. Whether that be Capitalism next to Communism, Islam and the West, man in relation to woman, trust versus exploitation, the global and the local... the list goes on. This writer wants a re-evaluation of Communism. Gretta... she 'just' wants progress...

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, Duke University Press, 2002, p.2

**Olly Beck**  
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