

PARALLEL LINES: SILVIA WALZ AND RAMÓN PUIG CUYÀS

BY MARIE-EVE G. CASTONGUAY

WHILE I WAS STILL A JEWELRY STUDENT in Quebec City, I took a trip to Montreal to visit Galerie Noël Guyomarc'h for the first time. It was 2009, and artists Silvia Walz and Ramón Puig Cuyàs were featured in a dual exhibition. I was still new to the jewelry field, and had thus far been exposed mostly to traditional forms of jewelry. To me, their work redefined notions of form and technique, and its expressionist qualities opened up my mind to a new frame of possibilities.

Walz's and Puig Cuyàs's work has stuck with me and I followed their careers closely. Last fall, Galerie Noël Guyomarc'h hosted *Catalan Colors*, a retrospective exhibition celebrating thirty years of their practices. While the 2009 exhibition demonstrated the artists's shared sensibility in their formal and conceptual approaches, their artistic affinities were even more apparent when decades worth of work were presented side by side.

Since the early '90s, Walz and Puig Cuyàs have lived together as a couple, taught at the Escola Massana in Barcelona, and shared studio space. When considering how their practices developed over the decades, and the porous boundaries between the artists's lives and work, it is impossible to dismiss a certain connection and dialogue between their pieces, or the comparable sequence of changes and discoveries in their art. Placing their work along a narrative thread, I started to imagine the sinuous path of their shared life.

I was lucky enough to spend time with Walz and Puig Cuyàs during their recent visit to Montreal, and talk with them about their lives as partners and artists working in the same field. Sitting in the center of their exhibition at



Ramón Puig Cuyàs
Selene, No. 354 (brooch), 1990
Impressions of Atlantis series
 Oxidized nickel silver, silver
 60 x 150 x 10 mm
 Photo by the artist



Silvia Walz
House of Trumpets (brooch), 1990
Symbols and Signs series
 Alpaca, paper
 90 x 50 x 10 mm
 Private collection
 Photo by the artist



Ramón Puig Cuyàs' studio
(above) and Silvia Walz's
studio (right) at their shared
home in Tarragona, Spain.

Photos by
Ramón Puig Cuyàs



Galerie Noël Guyomarc'h, we had a touching conversation about their story, and the way they navigate creation and personal life. Walz and Puig Cuyàs met in Barcelona in the late '80s, when Walz was on a one-year student exchange at the Escola Massana, at which Puig Cuyàs had been teaching since 1978. Walz recalled that she was not drawn to jewelry while studying at the University of Applied Arts and Sciences in Hildesheim, Germany. "When I came to Barcelona," she recounts, "I discovered another set of possibilities in jewelry making, and developed an interest in this medium."

As for Puig Cuyàs, he recognized in Walz an echo of his personal philosophy of contemporary jewelry: "When we say contemporary, it means everything that shares the culture of this moment," he says. "Other types of jewelry, or conventional jewelry, are anachronistic to me. Each art jewelry piece is made in a specific moment; it is a reflection of that exact moment, of your deep experience of feeling alive and free. This moment is impossible to repeat. The next day will be a different moment. If you work in design, even though you are involved in the work, the moment is not as important. When you make art jewelry, you need to be involved in each moment, each second." Puig Cuyàs's proposition differs from the usual discourse on contemporary jewelry, which often



Ramón Puig Cuyàs
 No. 613 (brooch), 1998
 Archipelagos series
 Silver, nickel silver, wood, glass,
 paper, coral, pearl, acrylic paint
 65 x 65 x 15 mm
 Private collection
 Photo by the artist

focuses on meaning and concepts over material value. Instead, Puig Cuyàs directs his attention on the conditions of making, a vision that is echoed in the expressionist nature of his work. Expressionism is in fact an approach that defines both Puig Cuyàs's and Walz's work, as they provide a visual response to their lived experience.

On one hand, Puig Cuyàs creates visual metaphors expressing the precarious equilibrium through which humans interact with their surrounding world, and his works are imbued with metaphysical and philosophical concepts. On the other hand, Walz evokes the spiritual realm in a humorous way, using a language that references the playfulness of the surrealist movement. Even though the language they use to address their topics does not share the same level of rationalism, the artists share the same sensitivity to how people interact with each other and with their surroundings. But even more importantly, they share the same fascination for the unexplainable, the abstract, the mysterious. Their works act as potential solutions to enigmatic questions.

If we look back at the pieces they created in the early '90s, such as Puig Cuyàs's *Selene* and Walz's *House of Trumpets*, obvious visual elements knit together their work. During that decade especially, a parallel series of transitions are noticeable in the artists' practices. First, both favored wireframe structures, in which volume is suggested through the use of negative space. This can be seen in Puig Cuyàs's series *Impressions of Atlantis* and Walz's series *Histories*, which were both created around the mid-'90s. Later in the decade, both artists started introducing defined background surfaces on which eclectic assortments of forms are arranged in a collage-like approach. For Puig Cuyàs, this transition started with his series *Archipelagos*, and evolved in his subsequent series *Walled Gardens*, *Imago Mundi*, and *Utopos*. As for Walz, she began to work on the series *Ikarus*, followed by the series *Recollect*. In a similar collage-like approach, she started creating intriguing compositions laid on the defined space of a backplane, with various elements that evoke place and people.

The evolution of both artists' work happened almost simultaneously, as if they had together decided to take on these new directions. I was prompted to ask them about the input they have in each other's practice, and how they navigate individual and shared spaces in their work-life environment. Is it natural for two artists who are also partners in life to undergo such parallel evolutions in their practices?

The artists have worked under the same roof ever since Walz relocated to Catalonia, and even shared the same studio space until two years ago, when they purchased their house in Tarragona. "We now have separate studios," says Walz. "I am downstairs and Ramón is upstairs, and we meet in the middle." Before then, their shared studio had been attached to their house, with their benches facing opposite directions. Working from home was crucial in order to pursue an artistic career while raising children, explains Walz. "We



Silvia Walz
 23rd of May (brooch), 2002
 Recollect series
 Silver, textile, plastic
 60 x 70 x 5 mm
 Galerie Noël Guyomarc'h
 Photo by the artist



Ramón Puig Cuyàs
 No. 1774 (brooch), 2018
The Farewell series
 Oxidized nickel silver,
 enamel on steel, reconstructed
 turquoise, obsidian and
 paper with alabaster, ebony,
 reconstructed with coral
 75 x 75 x 20 mm
 Private collection
 Photo by the artist

try not to make a separation between life and creation," adds Puig Cuyàs. "We always looked for apartments that were large enough to hold both the studio and our living space."

Although they always aimed to navigate fluidly between creation and everyday life, they admit to keeping their practices quite private and separate, rarely dedicating time to sharing ideas or discussing each other's work. Therefore, the apparent dialogue between their work becomes even more interesting. "We inevitably influence each other in our work, but we never do it consciously," says Walz. "Perhaps we have a similar way of composing, and we both like to play." For Puig Cuyàs, their shared philosophy about contemporary jewelry is an important link between their respective works: both represent tangible, subjective responses to specific moments in time.

Although they do not directly contribute to each other's practices, Puig Cuyàs and Walz do not deny the connection between their work and their life, and the importance of their shared experiences, individually, as a couple, and as a family. "This connection is sometimes not direct, or not conscious. When I make a piece, it is a reflection of my life in this moment. But the influence of a life event sometimes comes years later. I need some time to transform memories and influences into a creative output," recounts Puig Cuyàs. "If you are not personally and emotionally involved in your own work, it becomes nothing more than formal explorations. Without your personality and your life experiences, maybe you will create nice forms, but they will be empty of meaning."

If life experiences are what inform Silvia Walz and Ramón Puig Cuyàs's work, that could explain why identifying the maker of certain pieces becomes difficult. It is a common thing for artists to draw inspiration from their personal lives—consciously or unconsciously. When life is shared by two artists, the parallels between shared experiences and the work created becomes a lens through which to see the art, and offers deeper and more complex layers of meaning.

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Silvia Walz
 Brooch, 2010
Ikarus series
 Silver, textile, plastic
 80 x 40 x 5 mm
 Photo by the artist