



Ana Gallardo

Drool that Dribbles from My Mouth to Clean a Wound, the Way Dogs Do

The text deals with the artist's attempt to restore the old paintings by her mother, using saliva as a cleaning agent. The act of restoration creates an intimate connection between the works, the artist and her deceased mother.

I've always found soft and slimy textures repulsive. Anything that is gelatinous makes me retch, so drool falls into one of those categories of things I used to dislike. I think of my old woman's drool. I always took care to ensure that mine would not be a drooling mouth.

Till now.

Since I started to age, I've been discovering the characteristics of my changing body. And as a result, I've been refining my tastes. I use parts of me today that I didn't know existed when I was young and others that once disgusted me.

During this time, I have discovered my saliva, which I believe has numerous properties. I feel it has grown thicker and heavier over the years. Now, when I say what I think without thinking about what I'm saying, my profound and pitiless saliva is there for me. It plays an essential role in controlling my anxiety because when I'm assailed by stress, it floods my entire mouth, flowing between my teeth and the linings of my lips and soft cheeks; it constantly saves me from suffocating due to the dryness that develops at the back of my throat.

I discovered all this recently, during my artistic practice, while in the process of ageing and conversing with other old bodies of all genders.

In the world of art, being an old female artist who was invisible when young is quite the fashion today. Everyone, regardless of their gender, is desperately seeking an old woman of their own



to discover and resurrect; an old woman with murky saliva. So I decided to find one for myself, my own old woman to resurrect, and I fixed on my mother.

(I think of Chantal Akerman's *My Mother Laughs*.
And I soften.)

One day, I came across some love letters my mother wrote to my father during their fanciful courtship. From these letters, I learned of the furious desire she felt for artists and the tremendous fear and violence she suffered because she belonged to a circle that would not allow her to do things according to her own lights. A woman constrained by class, religious and gender violence. There was an evident great desire, a voraciousness for a world that was close but beyond her.

I think of her mouth watering.

María del Carmen, my mother, died millions of years ago when I was a girl barely seven years old. I never understood what had happened to that woman who set about dying so young. I wondered why she painted what she painted; whether she wanted to be another kind of artist, like those women artists who lived their lives amid cigarettes, wines and a studio that smelled of other ways of working. Because—at that time—she was painting still lifes and portraits.

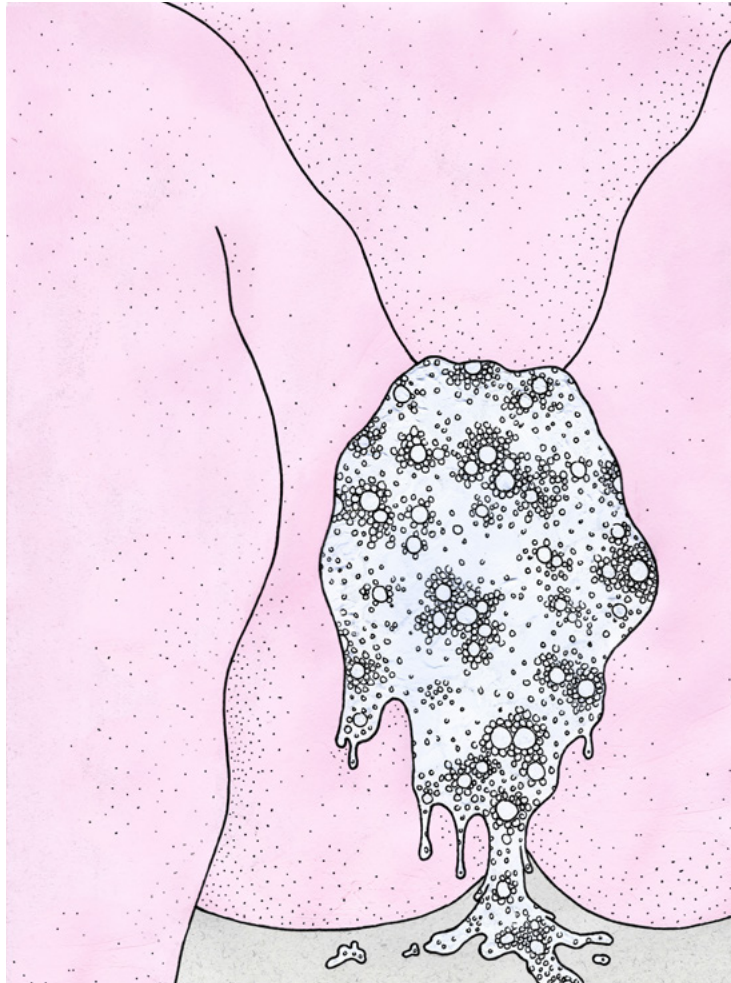
It was at that moment, when I read those letters, that I realised I was hearing her voice for the first time. I hadn't known what her tone was and that she was a woman, not just my mother. I understood then that I had to go looking for her paintings and restore them with my own hands. I found seven. The first were five oils that were here in Mexico City, where I've been living for a number of years. They were hanging on the walls of a staircase. Due to their position high up, I think they were difficult to clean and so they were dirty. My mother did these paintings in Mexico City when she came from Santander to visit her siblings, as part of her family was Mexican. She came by ship with my grandparents and my other aunts and uncles. At that time, she would spend her afternoons working in a big empty old house owned by the family in the north of the city. Then other paintings suddenly fell into my hands. I heard that voice from the beyond telling me I was right about what I wanted to do. My mother, dead for millions of years, was asking me to avenge her.

When I started to think about restoring these paintings, I was beset by doubts about the restoration process. How do you decide to undertake restoration work and what does such an arrangement imply? I wondered whether this is a decision taken collectively. And if it is collective, when you begin to work on the pieces and on the assigned space, does that act become individual? I wondered whether the memory of the restorer doing the work carries any weight. I pondered on the political power this action has on the writing of a historical chronicle.



I liked feeling that whatever the gesture I decide to make, it will always be an authoritarian, hierarchical and fictional gesture. I like to feel I am undertaking this restoration as I see fit, telling the story as suits me.

And then one day, I come across my mother's paintings. They are really very dry and the surfaces are marked. And, yes, they are forgotten, as if cast aside. And I begin to understand that there is something there, in that material, that it is inhabited by resistance to oblivion; that the paintings live as if in wait in secret resistance.



On the back of one of the oil paintings I discover a half-completed painting: it is a body, legs shown as if in a huge zoom from the lower part of the hips to the knees, painted in a raw flesh pink; between these legs is a black triangular blot, a woman's pubis. It's not finished. Something that wanted to exist but could not. And I understand it was a failed attempt.

But what do I know.

On the front, the original and important piece, is a still life: it shows a table with a hanging dead bird and a tablecloth, a basket of fruit, something of that ilk. Both sides have numerous layers of material; the canvas is hard, cracked. It's obviously dry, but you can feel the time and effort it took. I wonder how I can work out what I have to restore, which of the two sides I'm going to



deem more significant than the other. On the reverse of another piece there are lines and dots made with a fountain pen. These drawings are mine or my sister's, but I know they're mine, I appropriate them in a violent act, because I'm older. Each time I remove one of the frames that hold them, I check the edges, I inspect everything, between the stretcher and the canvas, hoping to find something more.

I resolve, then, that I'm going to set about restoring these "rescued" paintings. I ask Chema, a restorer by profession, to teach me how to do it and they explain the properties of saliva to me. They say it's the best stuff there is for cleaning with because the pH is very wise, or something like that. And that lots of restorers prefer to continue using the same method, the way it used to be done before chemicals.

So I decide to clean my mother's paintings using my own saliva.

I discover that I like sitting at my table, with a lamp that illuminates us over the painting. Strange lighting.

First, and unfailingly, I wipe a white cloth over the surface and remove the dust that has accumulated over the days of life.

Then I try to concentrate.

I run my hand over the entire surface, attempting to kindle a memory.

..... (darling mum)

It's as if I'm trying to catch something that I can't grasp.

..... (darling mum)

I begin to moisten the first swab. I put it in my mouth and soak it using my tongue, which I roll up. I tuck the swab into the roll of my tongue and when I remove it, a thread of saliva dribbles out at the corner of my mouth, and I rub it across the painting. The initial sensation is very complex. I realise it has a kind of hallowed effect on me, as if I want to get inside the saliva and go on a disgusting watery journey to see what I don't remember. I do the same with another damp swab and a conversation with the grime starts. A swab goes black, dirty, utterly filthy; and another thread of my saliva, also dirty, is left hanging from my lips, and I grab it using the swab, lower it to the canvas, and I rub. Another salivary swab makes a color appear in a suspicious way.

And so, dribble by dribble, I gradually discover layers of brushstrokes, the traces of palette knives dragged with difficulty across impossible colors, some overlaid on others. Almost like a scab. I record a huge struggle to make an image appear through a color that always proves dirty. You can feel that this palette is inundated with sadness, tedium, loss, delight, sense.



To salivate is to paint on the forgotten. My saliva, my drool, my mother's and my grandmother's and my daughter's and my sister's drool.

My drool reveals something that used to be. I understand then that if I clean using only my saliva, an emotion kindled by these suffering paintings appears. And I go deeper into those things that I think I also recall. My drool describes to me a woman standing in front of an easel with a canvas, attempting to resemble a dreamt-of moment, perhaps a fictitious idea of desire. I continue working away with the swab soaked in my dirtiest drool and I keep seeing these layers that prove tedious, boring, one covering another for no apparent reason. The color is clearly impossible. It looks dirty where dirt isn't wanted. And my saliva lifts the dust that has settled and been there forever, covering that process that came to naught in a bid to do battle with a defeat. My drool cleans that small enduring patch of land, that land of abandonment, that land putting up resistance. And when my drool cleans, it seems to be painting, as if a color is appearing, as if it can be seen at last.

Someone sees it.

I get another swab and wet it with my saliva, but first I rinse my mouth out because I'm drinking red wine. And I rub away using the swab soaked again in my drool, and I gradually reveal the damage, the areas that have cracked, the patches with no paint, empty places where the material has lifted off, scratches, craquelures, opaque spots; holes in the slashed canvas, canvas pierced right through as if by the pointed toe of a shoe. And I ask myself what am I doing. If I restore as I ought according to all the rules, if I repair the works, if I add what is missing to them, if I close the broken bit, if I touch up a sliver of broken paint, I believe I'm changing history.

Just by using saliva on the paintings, I have discovered a thread. It's there.

If I restore the paintings, I'm hiding the profound damage they have undergone.

That hole made by a pointed toe tells me a lot more than if I close it.

Blocking the wound.

I go back to the reverse of the painting with that sketch of legs with the female sex.

I clean that other side and the layers of annoyance are palpable.

It's important to write that it is evident there was an intention



for something else.

These paintings tell that it was never possible to cross to that other thing that is at a point of fear. Perhaps it was only possible with the sacrifice implied by dying.

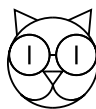
If I make repairs, I repair the profound damage we have experienced.

So I just drool.

It was more than three and a half decades ago when my parents erected that storage room. Last summer, while visiting them, a feeling of nostalgia propelled me to check on that back part of the garden and the secret gate I used to pass through on my way to school and back, in my childhood. This was something I hadn't done since I finished school and left home. As I was walking around, suddenly, at the very top of the storage room's wall, between the bare black lava stones, I caught sight of something pale green. I drew nearer to the storage room. It was nothing but the caper plant, sprouting anew, this time from between the cracks in the wall.

BIO

Ana Gallardo's work proposes art as a place of rebellion and transformation. She deals with different levels of violence and currently focuses on the violence of the aging process. Since the early 90s, she has been carrying out a series of independent projects. Currently, she coordinates Imán escuela, La Verdi Cdmx and teaches at Soma, Mexico.



Wild Papers editor: Ingo Niermann

Translation from Spanish: Sue Brownbridge

English copy-editing: Rosanna McLaughlin

Illustration: Eva Fàbregas

Graphic design: Ana Domínguez Studio

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