

IN SARA LI AND ANA K'S KITCHEN

Stories of identities, sweets, cannibalism and feelings

Separate two lovers. Put butter, as thick as a baby, in the saucepan. When the butter is hot, kill the crying lovers, empty them and then let them fry together. Remove them when they are a beautiful pale colour. Make a sauce with flour that is added to the butter. When the flour is a dark brown colour, add two litres of stock or water. Season with salt, pepper, lily of the valley (if in season), thyme and bay leaves. Put the lovers into the saucepan with a dozen baby onions and add some mushrooms fifteen minutes before serving. Blows and wounds may also be added.

Roland Topor¹

La cocina caníbal (*The Cannibal Cook Book*) is the title of a unique 1970 cookery book in which Roland Topor talks about some edible properties of the human being, based on the belief that *humans are the best food for mankind* and their flesh is *undoubtedly the best and most appropriate for body requirements*. The French writer and illustrator also points out that cooking is not a science but rather an art in which personal feelings are extremely important².

It is clear that black humour is the main ingredient of this cookery book. The bid for irony, which believes in the intelligence of the reader to complete the meaning of the work, hides a critical look on the world, as what is not serious usually converges with what is terrible and we are almost always deceived by appearances. According to Milan Kundera, what is comical brutally reveals the insignificance of everything to us, depriving us of certainties, which is why it is cruel (compared to tragic, offering us the beautiful illusion of human nobility)³.

All of these questions may serve as an initial approach to the stories of Sara Li and Ana K, the sweet-toothed Siamese twins, an epigraph that brings together the latest work by the artist, Rosalía Banet. The narrative used, apparently funny, but well nourished in meaning, as we will see, has a thread linking this series to previous works. Its origin lies in the Love Butcher's, the place where feelings are cooked, an establishment in which the cooks Li, Kath, Sara and Ana select human fragments to make delicious cakes. These four women want to be mothers. They want to create their greatest culinary work by mixing all of these destroyed identities, but they do not have enough raw materials to make a whole person, so they create a double being in a single body. Sara Li and Ana K are therefore born from the piecing together of fragments of corpses, like Frankenstein's monster. They are twin sisters joined together by one of their upper limbs and, like *The Two Fridas*, the beautiful double self-portrait by Frida Kalho in 1939, following her separation from Diego Rivera, represent the duality of personality and perhaps the division of many women into alternative identities. They keep away from normality. In this respect, they are monsters, like the Siamese twins in Madame Tetrallini's circus that Tod Browning filmed in *Freaks* (1932)⁴. Their clonal nature is not the result of biotechnology,

¹ Topor, Roland: *La cocina caníbal* (*The Cannibal Cook Book*). Tropo Editores, Zaragoza, 2008, page 83.

² *Ibid*, pages 15-18.

³ Kundera, Milan: "Sixty-seven Words", in *The Art of the Novel*. Tusquets, Barcelona, 2004, pages 140 and 149.

⁴ Curiously enough, actresses Daisy and Violet Hilton, Siamese twins who shared the same circulatory system ended up working in a grocery store.

but they have been shaped by the hands of their mothers, through the luck of eugenic practice, without any scientific pretensions. Here, Rosalía Banet violates the opening myth of the Genesis, according to which God created Adam and then Eve from one of his ribs, as well as the laws of reproduction of the human being. The paternal figure disappears and instead, we have four working women and mothers (matrilineal heredity).

I wish to become a gourmet. I do this because I feel it will enhance me as a human being. That is, it will better me and make me a more valuable person to myself and others. I will be more knowledgeable about the good things, the things that make life pleasant.

Martha Rosler⁵

In a 1974 video entitled *A Budding Gourmet*, artist, Martha Rosler, refers with obvious sarcasm to the reasons for which she wants to become a good gourmet. A year later, she made *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, in which she names the different cooking utensils alphabetically whilst demonstrating their potentially aggressive functions. Sara Li and Ana K, heiresses of this tension between public and private around which the work of the North American creator revolves, also wish to be good gourmets, like their mothers.

In 1973, the historian, Lois W. Banner, raised the following question: *'Why women have not been great chefs'*, opening a new crack in the feminist debate started by Linda Nochlin in 1971 by asking why there have not been any great female artists. Haute cuisine, like the cultural elite, has traditionally been a male area. Women, who were traditionally shut away and made invisible in the domestic area, were responsible for cooking; however, when this activity began to gain certain public appreciation, men made sure that they took the limelight. Therefore, we have famous chefs and gourmets, as well as great designers, scientists, politicians and strategists, that make up exclusive elites that often veto women (a good example of this are the "male only" gastronomic societies). Something similar has occurred in plastic arts. The perfect example of the author-creator inherited from modernity is that of a unique being, a kind of solitary genius hero, who is almost always a white, heterosexual, individualist and profoundly original man. Rosalía Banet proposes another type of artist that may have multiple identities, positioned in a private space but which may also be expressed in public, questioning gender rules and the role that women have been playing throughout history, and which destabilizes any type of cultural hierarchy or identity building of an exclusive nature.

Sara Li and Ana K subvert the artistic practice through cooking. Hard-working and imaginative, the sweet-toothed Siamese twins cook delicacies that even leave Brillat-Savarin⁶ dumbfounded. They embody what is excluded, not only due to their dual physical condition and mixed identity (countering individualism shown in the history of art); but also by performing a job, carried out by women in private, usually assigned to lesser arts. Their disability could have led them to social isolation, but against all odds, they have become great chefs. They have known how to create their own culinary language and a successful business: *Las Golosas* Sweet and Sour Preserve Factory with all of its marketing (from which the author's critical positioning towards the culture of show business and consumption is deduced). As creative women, they have not been

⁵ Rosler, Martha: "A Budding Gourmet", 1974. Cfr. *The House, the Street, the Kitchen*. Cat. Exp. Centro José Guerrero, Diputación de Granada, Madrid, 2009, pages 208-209.

⁶ Famous gourmet who published the first culinary art treaty in 1825: *The Physiology of Taste or, Meditations of transcendent gastronomy*.

discovered by any protective male, as has occurred throughout history. They alone have brought about their own success and now they are fashionable chefs. Their picture appears in fashion magazines such as *Vanity Fair* (they recently posed pregnant on the cover) and they have even answered Proust's⁷ famous questionnaire. They still live in the house, they continue to work and breed in it; but the roles have changed significantly. Their activity is therefore openly political and deconstructive.

Sinister (Das Unheimliche) is anything that must remain secret and which becomes manifest.
Friedrich Schelling⁸

On a formal level, Rosalía Banet makes her stories almost like a tale, halfway between children's books and 3D cartoons with plasticine. Everything develops in a charming domestic environment, full of happiness and harmony. Her house is simple, happy, sweet and colourful. It has a halo of perfection, but it also has a certain kitsch perversion. The drawing and modelling of the figures is synthetic, with rounded shapes and soft shades, almost always in pastel and spot colours. The formats are small. Both the sweet-toothed Siamese twins and their friends are practically the same: sketched humanoids with the minimum of elements; without a generic, pre-established, defined, stable identity.

Everything seems to indicate that Sara Li and Ana K lead a normal life. They have many friends with whom they celebrate birthday parties, Christmas, St Valentine's Day and with whom they have afternoon tea and go on picnics. They usually hang their photo albums on the internet and they have had their own blog: <http://saraliyanak.blogspot.com> for the past few months. However, this complacent, intimate, homely image turns sinister. What we perceive at first sight is a trick, as under this sweet, naive, innocent and ingenuous atmosphere, we can see that something macabre is happening. Like their mothers, the sweet-toothed Siamese twins cook fragments of cut up, mutilated, wounded bodies. From their sweet and sour preserve factory, where they prepare jars of lovers' hearts, foetuses, crunchy fingers, dry eyes or fresh tongues that have brought them so much fame, they get the raw materials to prepare exquisite desserts and recipes: dried hearts of lovers, heads of young children, ladies fingers, dried eyes in their juices, fresh tongues in vinegar, brochettes of the five senses, offal jellies, Venus bosoms or tarts of veins or white penises with chocolate and cherries. In a world in which appearances are predominant (whose effect lies precisely in the suspension of what is sinister)⁹, what is inside comes out, casting doubt on a visual culture that favours the surface look.

⁷ In this questionnaire, they indicate some of their preferences: scavengers, who waste nothing, as their favourite animals; their favourite books, those of the Zen master and chef Edward Brown, *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel or *Babette's Feast* by Isak Dinesen; their favourite poet, the artist, Roland Topor and his inspiring book *La cocina caníbal (The Cannibal Cook)*; their fiction heroine, Georgina, the main character in Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and Lover*, and in real life, Sister Bernard, the best cook of souls; their heroes of fiction and in reality, the Gingerbread Man and Isei Sagawa (the Japanese cannibal who ate a western student); their favourite artists, Sonja Alhäuser, César Martínez, Vik Muniz, Cindy Sherman or Marco Paulo Rolla; the gift they would like to have, the beauty and wisdom of Sonia La Mur, artist Isaac Montoya's alter ego; their motto: *Eat and let yourself be eaten*. See the blog: <http://rosaliabanet.blogspot.com>

⁸ Cfr. Trías, Eugenio: *The Beautiful and the Sinister*. Ariel, Barcelona, 1996, page 17.

⁹ *Ibid.*

At times, the twins offer succulent get-togethers for other Siamese twins, the Penis Family, Eli Love, Crying Girl, the Gingerbread Men and the Chocolate Man, their love. They are insatiable and end up devouring each other (and savouring each other). Food becomes a coded representation of desire: devouring and being devoured (against the anguish of emptiness), cutting up bodies and recomposing them, eventually releasing the repressed instincts of the unconscious) the sub-realists knew this well). Freud maintained that one of the instinctive desires of the human being is precisely eating each other, in spite of the fact that cannibalism has traditionally represented one of the fears of meeting the wild (power is reaffirmed by reporting what is uncivilized of the other). However, in the Siamese twins' house, cannibal impulses are released, perhaps as an expression of sexual and loving desire.

Cooking fragments of bodies, mixing identities, eating each other, in reality oneself, is in some way profaning what is by consensus forbidden¹⁰. Devouring fellow human beings has been an activity repeated by the human species since prehistoric times (something that is shared with other animals). We are aware of religious ceremonies (without going further, the Catholic Church celebrates an act of symbolic cannibalism in the Eucharist: *Take and eat, because this is my body*), ritual practices of primitive cultures and episodes of history, with very different meanings, cannibalism has a wide culture. Fairy tales are plagued with stories of cannibalism (allegories that identify fantasies and desires, but also ancestral fears), our bodies are constantly dissected in real life, art provides numerous examples that represent fragmented bodies and anthropophagical proposals (from classic Greek-Roman sculpture to the entire iconography of martyrs and from Goya to Zhu Yu), and literature and films have been full of fictional characters (such as Clapet, the butcher in *Delicatessen*, or Doctor Hannibal Lecter) and even real episodes related to this drive. To the permanence of the platonic model and Judeo-Christianity in art and the discredit of the sensitive body, many artists have responded with a nihilistic practice, what Onfray calls *kynic art*, carrier of passion and impulses that uses the transgression of certain taboos and whose working material is: "scatological corporal waste (urine, excrements), physiological *residual waste* (hair, nails, blood), *pure waste* (glossolalias, screams, regressions, trances, neurotic scenes, psychotic dramatizations), *waste of living beings* (putrefaction, filth, corpses, offal, bones, human fat, prosthesis, rubbish bins, dust), *waste from iconic reality* (parasite, murky, torn, stained, creased)"¹¹. Art is testimony of how the body is now more than ever a battlefield *where the human ego is seeking its shape*¹² and its true identity.

Coming across the divided and dismembered body causes us horror, disgust repulsion. Thanks to scientific-technological advances, it seems that we know ourselves better than ever: however, when the body opens and what is inside (what makes up the subject) is revealed (becoming an object) in fluids, offal or organs, we are deeply disturbed. The barriers that protected them have been broken down and therefore their unity has been lost (this ego built in the Lacanian mirror stage): *How can it be limitless?*¹³. Julia Kristeva defines abjection as that which defies any class of dualism imposed by the symbolic order

¹⁰ However, "eating is a way of moving shapes, of structuring matter differently, but under no circumstances does it imply infringing on order". See Onfray, Michel: "Brief theory of the Scandal", in *Cynicisms. Portrait of the Philosophers called Dogs*. Paidós, Buenos Aires, 2002, pages 125-126.

¹¹ Onfray, Michel: *The Force of Existing. Hedonist Manifesto*. Anagrama, Barcelona, 2007, pages 156-157.

¹² Cortés, José Miguel: *Order and Chaos. A cultural study into monstrosity in art*. Anagrama, Barcelona, 2003, page 124.

¹³ Kristeva, Julia: *Powers of Perversion*. Siglo XXI, Mexico, 1989, page 10.

without being a subject or object. The abject disturbs identity; we face our vulnerable condition by bringing impulses that have been contained to light, desire is its ally, and threatening this illusionary stability on which we lay our subjectivities.

I have devoured so much that I have reached the anthropophagy of myself. The inside has rejected me and has thrown me up. I am thrown up in image but I still exist in a mirror. I am a pure divided reflection.

Cindy Sherman¹⁴

Sara Li and Ana K, who due to their duplicated nature live with their fellow selves, face their own splitting and dissolution of the ego in their kitchen (something which also awakens the sinister feeling from Freud's point of view). They do not set out to hurt other beings, but to outwardly express their fears, frustrations, suffering, emotions and feelings (like Tita, the main character in the novel by Laura Esquivel, who was able to install her own moods in the diners, or like Babette, the maid and yesteryear luxury chef conceived by Isak Dinesen, who was able to eliminate hostility and fill a strictly puritan moral community with happiness through her dishes)¹⁵. What the sweet-toothed Siamese twins cook is precisely the impulses that are repressed and hidden inside them. What their preserves contain is their own offal, brains and hearts. Their recipes are a type of exorcism, a way of purging their bowels of this symbolic monster that lives inside their being. They cook themselves. They expose themselves.

The supposed violence of their work is presided by an ethic of care. Traditionally, women have carried out the tasks of caring for others. They have taken on the domestic tasks, what is least appreciated and what is not public. They have co-existed with pain, illness, insecurities, fears and bitterness. These women, cut up as objects in literature and art, are now responsible for dissecting, but also for healing the wounds. Rosalía Banet expresses this in two videos that are set on an aseptic and ambiguous stage, which could be a kitchen, an operating theatre or a mortuary. In one of them (*Offal Cake*), a beautifully dressed housewife cooks and dissects bodies, like a forensic scientist, using the organs to prepare an offal jelly, and in the other (*Comestible 04*), we see another faceless woman, dressed as a nurse or doctor, who carefully extracts some eyes from a jelly, compared to the Buñuel's vomiting eye, this one is vomited and is kept for later in a preserve jar, and then sews and stitches up the holes, like a surgeon. In a society that stigmatizes illness¹⁶ and the difference lies in the fact that this cooking of symbols tells us how deeply fragile and vulnerable we are.

Cooking is more than preparing foodstuffs. Eating is more than consuming. Art is not an accident, according to Martha Rosler.

Marta Mantecón

¹⁴ Cfr. Fernández Polanco, Aurora: "Devorar", in *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*. N° 637-638, 2003, p. 53.

¹⁵ See Esquivel, Laura (1989): *Like Water for Chocolate*. Salvat, Barcelona, 1994 and Dinesen, Isak (1958): *Babette's Party*. Nórdica Libros, Madrid, 2006. Both novels were made into film adaptations by Alfonso Arau (1992) and Gabriel Axel (1987) respectively.

¹⁶ La tesis doctoral de Rosalía Banet fue sobre arte y sida en el contexto español. A finales de los noventa pintó una serie de *Santas* (veíamos a Judit introduciendo en el horno la cabeza de Holofernes, a Santa Lucía cocinando ojos o a Santa Águeda con sus pechos listos para servir) que enlazan formal y conceptualmente con este trabajo.