

(article for Profiles of Artists - Printmaking Today)

Title: The Desert Inside and the work of Cecilia Mandrile
Carinna Parraman, March 2018

A theory developed in the 1920s by Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy proposed that all human beings are connected by a chain of mutual connections.¹ How does this observation link with Argentinian artist Dr Cecilia Mandrile?² We first met in 2000, when Cecilia was a PhD researcher at the Centre for Fine Print Research, University of the West of England, Bristol. How she came to be working at CFPR, is a serendipitous example of the printmakers' chain of connection.

Discussing Mandrile's preparation for her exhibition *The Desert Inside*³ we explored the changes in her practice, her connections established through travel, memory and experience of places, re-envisioning older themes in her new work, alongside her long established relationship with printmaking and giving *life* to found materials.

But how do we begin? At the first IMPACT Conference (1999), Alicia Candiani⁴ described how Latin American artists were working "on the margins ... of economic, political and cultural decision making".⁵ Candiani suggested that many were navigating their way around the *system* or even a way out of the country. By leaving their country, artists such as Mandrile, have evolved to become itinerant travellers.

In 2000, Mandrile's research explored the relationship between photography and Latin American emigrant artists, including Alfredo Jaar, Graciela Sacco, and Felix Gonzalez Torres. Her installations involved inkjet printing onto paper and fabrics. The fragmented images of hands, heads and limbs were converted into soft three-dimensional dolls or *Quitapenas*, which were stitched or bound to found objects. These dolls are not toys, but travelling companions or sorrow dolls. Occasionally during Mandrile's travels, dolls in need of rest were left behind, or to safeguard a loved one, or as a placeholder to ensure a future return.

The dialogue between the nomadic and the domestic is primary to her work. With long practiced expertise, Mandrile's studio can be fitted into a suitcase, meaning she can work anywhere - even in a desert. Side by side with her suitcase of *Quitapenas*, she has travelled across many countries, exploring the relationship of tangible and shadow, and representing the experience of the *migrant's wound* into a graphic translation.

"My on-going travelling project is my reflection on solitude, not only as a physical and emotional state, but also its vindication as a space of reconciliation: the solitude of the traveller, the solitude of the illness, the solitude of the departure and the solitude of arrival."

It is difficult to fix Mandrile to a particular process: she is a crafter of materials, assembler of objects, creator of miniature and temporary installations, recorder and photographer. In searching for material inspiration, she is resourceful with found objects. Her early work

¹ Frigyes Karinthy, Chain-Links (1929, Everything is Different)

² ceciliamandrile.com

³ Exhibition "The Desert Inside" (El desierto adentro) March 22 – May 24, 2018 at Museo Emilio Caraffa, Cordoba, Argentina. www.museocaraffa.org.ar

⁴ Alicia Candiani is international artist and independent scholar in Buenos Aires, Argentina. She is the founder and current director of Ace International Artist in Residence Program. Candiani is one of the invited key-note speakers at the forthcoming 10th IMPACT conference, Santander, Spain, 2018.

⁵ First IMPACT Multidisciplinary Printmaking Conference, Bristol, 1999

combined small printed heads onto linen or gauze fabric, which were stitched or bound to found objects such as bottles, twigs, pegs, screws, pins, even figure-shaped rocks.

A further characteristic of Mandrile's work is the interplay between temporary and substantial, as exemplified by *Playing Solitaire in the Desert* (2014). Her primary resources are the sun and sand of the Wadi Rum Desert in Jordan, and a small stack of cards with cut-out figures, which she uses to create multiple-images by sprinkling sand inside the shapes, or as a mask to create multi-layered solar prints, or as a frame by placing the cards on top of the red rock. Analogous to the game Solitaire, the variables and multi-layered figures may be unlimited. Mandrile photographs each composition, leaving no trace behind; even the solar prints, if not quickly fixed, may fade.

"I consider my work a constant exploration for aesthetics that portray displacement, a rehearsal on mending incompleteness, an acknowledgement of impermanence and fragility and their documentation to reflect and re-search on new means of holding on. Even the transferred, fired and fixed are fragile."

Asking Cecilia about the choice of titles for her new work *Constelacion* and *Apátrida*, she explained, *Apátrida* in Spanish means home-land-less or father-less. We discussed whether *Constelacion* may be a metaphor for our many connections invisibly linked as a constellation of stars, to which she agreed, *"yes, as in constellation, we can still see and reflect upon them, even though stars or people are distant, and when we close our eyes, images can return to us and remain vivid despite time and place. Although far away, solitude becomes a closeness and a common landscape."*

Although Mandrile's traditional practice involved photographing, scanning and printing, her recent work demonstrates her return to drawing by creating soft inky figures, which are transferred onto blue-prints and plates. These represent a departure from the blurred photographic faces such as the passport-style *ID series (Intensively Displaced)* at IMPACT South Africa (2003). These 2017 portraits are closely observed, wistful, some eyes are open, suggesting they have just woken from a deep sleep.

Discussing her return to drawing and choice of materials for *Constellation* and *Apátrida*, both incorporate printing onto reclaimed or rescued materials from her home. The first series of *Constelacion* drawings are transfer-printed onto cream ceramic plates. Her paternal grandmother taught Cecilia how to paint, and when she inherited her grandmother's English dinner-set, she decided to use these as alternative canvases. The second series of *Apátrida* drawings are printed on architectural blue-prints rescued from her late father's studio. *"They depicted the conceptual layout of a possible home. Overlapping an imprint of my displaced figures, resting on his blueprinted 'idea of a home' made absolute sense, a printed dialogue, that was just waiting to happen."*

In preparation for her exhibition in Argentina, Cecilia returned to CFPR in January 2018 to develop some new work, including machining small round relief blocks of her sleeping *Apátridas (Sorrow Dolls)*, which she used to press into clay, and a printed folded and cut book entitled *Latitude*, in collaboration with Chilean writer Lina Meruane

Returning to the *Quitapenas*, we considered their fate. Mandrile, reflecting on the impact of travelling, *"the very physical wear and tear on them is also a mirror of our aging process and our journey through life: their lives, aging, displacement, memory and survival of these wandering figures feels natural to me, and also mirrors the balance of survival of an artwork."*

There are two sides to Mandrile's methods of working: temporary and insubstantial - scanning objects, solar prints, layered sand; and that appear substantial - works that are fixed through firing onto ceramic, print, embossing onto paper and hand stitched.

Constelacion gives a sense of her work, that as points in time and space, we are somehow connected. Look up and these same stars can be seen whether in a desert in Jordan or New York City, and as points of navigation, stars can guide us in our travels. Maybe as our knowledge of navigating by stars is lost we are reliant on other chains of connection to help us.

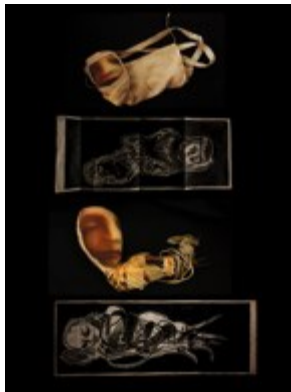
Biography:

Dr Carinna Parraman is professor of design, colour and print, director of the Centre for Fine Print Research University of the West of England Bristol, and chair of the IMPACT printmaking conference.

Thumbnail images with captions:



1) *ID (Intensively Displaced)* Inkjet print on paper (2003)
Constelacion, Screenprint transfer prints on ceramic plates (2017)



2) Dolls from the *Perfume of Absence* project, Inkjet print on canvas, hand stitched and attached to found materials (1997-2000)
Apátrida (Sleepers) Pigment print and oil on architectural blueprints (2017)



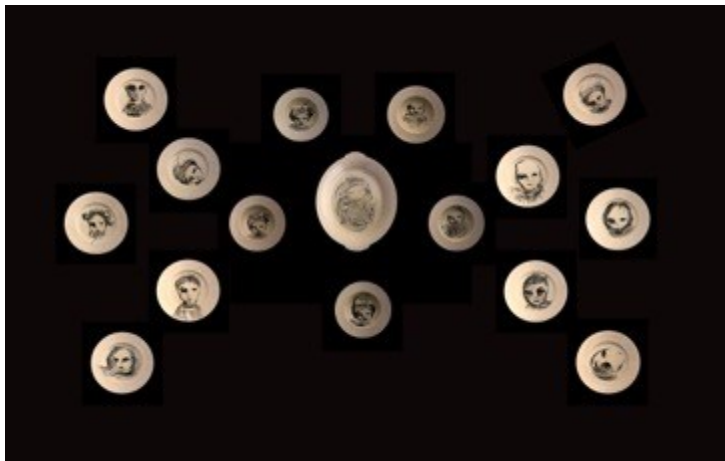
3) *Latitude* Travel diary in collaboration with Lina Meruane. UV printed folded book-work, published with Impact Press, Centre for Fine Print Research, UWE, Bristol, UK (2018)



4) *Stateless (Sorrow Portraits)* Computer numerically control machined relief stamp, pressed into clay, in collaboration with Centre for Fine Print Research, UWE, Bristol, UK (2017)



5) *The Desert Inside (Solitaire)* Laser cut cards on recycled cardboard, Travel journal in collaboration of Gill Saunders, Senior Curator of Prints, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. Published with Impact Press, Centre for Fine Print Research, UWE, Bristol, UK (2014)



6) *Stateless (Constellation)* Installation and screen-printed transfer onto Grindley Art Deco English porcelain (1940s-2017)