



INVERTED SKY

ERIKA HARRSCH
March, 2012



AUTOMORPHO NUMISMIA - KOREA

2011, Three-dimensional cutout hand-painted giclee print on archival cotton paper. 10 x 8 in / 25 x 10 cms
Inside of entomological box. 16 x 8 x 3 in / 40.5 x 20 x 7.5 cms



AUTOMORPHO NUMISMIA - MEXICO

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The Beauty of Flight

By Richard Vine

Erika Harrsch's new body of work encompasses entomological boxes, kites, sculptural clouds, paintings of butterflies sweeping en masse across glowing skies, and a "cash cube" aswirl with paper butterflies—all reproducing portions of various national currencies. Personal liberty here seems inextricably linked both to the rhythms of nature and the flow of global finance. But just how—and what that linkage means to the artist and to viewers—is revealed in the way the work itself came to be.

Over the last eight years, Harrsch has established the butterfly as her signature motif. For this multicultural artist—born and raised in Mexico (with Spanish, French, and German antecedents) and now living in New York—the colorful winged creature, with its multistage life cycle and symbolic association with freedom, is much more than a convenient and charming visual device. It is also, in effect, an emblem for Harrsch's own artistic life, which in turn parallels a much larger historical process. The butterfly is, in her work, liberation incarnate.

Harrsch's youth was spent largely (when she was not in Mexico City) on a family ranch in Chiapas, south Mexico. As the children of a landowner and businessman (her father, a skilled pilot, owned a charter air company), she and her brother were socially privileged yet close to the earth, interacting daily with farm animals and intimately attuned to the cycles of agriculture and surrounding nature. Enthralled with planes, ultra-lights, motorcycles and hang-gliding, the young Harrsch was sometimes flown at her father's command to distant cities for an afternoon's shopping; yet he also insisted that she confront the realities of physical existence. He once took her, for example, to view a stillborn calf, awash in a river, that was to be the family's supper that night—a delicacy whose origins he wanted her to fully understand.

This idyllic life ended abruptly when her father lost his business during a major downturn in the Mexican economy. Instead of attending a university, Harrsch continued the independent art studies and apprenticeships she had undertaken from the age of 12 onwards—now going to Italy for a year and then joining the art community in San Miguel de Allende. Armed, as a result, with exceptional technical skills in painting, printmaking, sculpture, and even photo conservation and retouching, Harrsch arrived—suitcase classically in hand—in New York in July 2001. Although she fell into a brief, unfortunate marriage, she soon emerged artistically when her work, at first timidly revealed, was quickly taken up by curators at the 2006 Houston Fotofest and elsewhere.



Harrsch's early images express a disturbing sense of confinement. In the self-portrait photo and video series "Traps" (2003-04), we see her nude from the waist up but curled in a ball (sometimes, indeed, a fetal position) with her back to the viewer. It is as though, bent double in a confining space, she exists only to be gazed at; yet she recoils in shame or (worse, perhaps) a sense of inadequacy. Other sequences from the series show the artist applying to her face and body, and then slowly pulling away, the kind of adhesive traps that capture rodents alive, rendering them unable to take another step and thus forced, struggling vainly, to await their fate. Here, both in close-up stills and in video footage, we see Harrsch's skin—especially on her face—stretched and separated from the underlying muscle and bone, grossly distorting her features, as she slowly extricates herself from the horrific goo. Several commentators have compared her work, in this phase, to that of the ill-fated Ana Mendieta.

It is heartening, therefore, to find that Harrsch soon adopted the mature butterfly as a sign of sexual reawakening and individual autonomy. In the photo series "Imago" (2003), the insects are shown like mounted specimens, their wings fully spread and their bodies replaced by human female genitalia. (The term "imago" refers to the ultimate, glorious phase of the creature's life, following the stages of egg, caterpillar, and chrysalis.) The vaginas, personally shot by Harrsch, represent women whose nationalities are as various as the color, pattern, and species-type of wings they conjoin. Such images, which recur in many forms in Harrsch's oeuvre, suggest release and growing empowerment, both for the artist and for women in general—once their own biological nature is squarely faced, and psychologically embraced.

Harrsch's selection of the butterfly has both an intuitive and a scientific dimension. In 2004, she made the acquaintance of the entomologist Eric Quinter at the New York Natural History Museum and, with his guidance, began serious independent study of lepidoptera, especially the annual migration of Monarch butterflies from throughout the U.S. to wintering preserves in Mexico. Harrsch's investigation proved rich in artistic potential. Not only are the Monarch gatherings overwhelming in both sight and wing-beating sound, but the entire journey of roughly seven months and thousands of miles is made by several generations of butterflies, no one of which lives long enough to complete the round trip. The artist found in this mysterious inherited travel pattern, and in the navigation capabilities necessary to complete it, ideal metaphors for the realization of innate human—especially female—potential.

PAPILIONUMISMIA EPHEMERAE EUROPEAE (EUROSPECIMENS)

2011, Three-dimensional cutout hand-painted giclee print on archival cotton paper. Each box 20 x 15 x 5.5 cms / 8 x 6 x 3 in
Collection of twenty-three boxes, each with a specimen. (Obsolete European Currencies replaced by the Euro)

In 2009, Harrsch began making butterflies with partial images of various world currencies, altered in scale or other features to comply with each nation's monetary regulations. The bills, cut into butterfly shapes, are sometimes presented in static arrangements such as Eurospecimens (2011), featuring 23 samples from across Europe in the pre-euro days, displayed in entomological boxes and accompanied by a list stating when each national currency went "extinct." The work brings home a hard truth known to every lepidopterist (and perhaps every economist): that one often kills these beautiful creatures in order to gain knowledge of their life cycle and movements. More heartening, then, are Harrsch's artworks that simulate liveliness (animal and fiscal alike), blending the swirling flight of butterflies, and their long-distance migratory routes, with the circulation of money both at home and across the globe.

Harrsch's recently commissioned mural for the Eaton Corporation suggest a parallel between the flight patterns of Monarchs, swirling within groups or migrating over vast distances, and the worldwide shipping flow of the corporation's diverse products. Cash Cube (2011), a clear phone-booth-size box filled with Harrsch's currency butterflies, invites visitors to immerse themselves in the fluttering rush that occurs once the door is closed behind them and a powerful blower comes on. Smiling, often grasping for elusive banknotes, they seem to immediately comprehend—and, simultaneously, experience kinesthetically—the playful lesson of the artist's construct. Money surrounds them, alive with energy, yet is as hard to seize in one's hands as a butterfly wafting through a summer field.

Harrsch's butterflies come alive metaphorically at the nexus where folklore meets sociology and economics crosses philosophy; where the Brothers Grimm encounter Betty Friedan, Adam Smith and G.W.F. Hegel. Many fairy tales ("Cinderella," "Sleeping Beauty," "The Ugly Duckling") concern the unfettering and transformation of a once-suppressed being. This is the personal, psychological version (rooted in the anxieties of youth) of a model made universal by feminists arguing for women's rights, free-market economists advocating the unrestricted mobility of labor and capital, and Hegelians seeing history as the gradual teleological emergence of Geist (Spirit, Mind, Consciousness). Harrsch adds to this paradigm a recognition of art as play, and play as a mode of salvation.

This text was excerpted from an essay commissioned by the nonprofit VisionIntoArt for the 2012 River to River arts festival in New York.

INVERTED SKY

2012, Mixed media on canvas. Acrylic and collage
96 x 78 in / 245 x 200 cm



TWIST

2012, Mixed media on canvas. Acrylic and collage
71 x 47 in / 180 x 120 cm





CAVE

2011, Mixed media on paper. Acrylic, pencil, ink and collage
40 x 55 in / 100 x 140 cm



MELT 2012. Mixed media on canvas. Acrylic and collage. 71 x 47 in / 180 x 120 cm



SKY IS NOT FALLING 2012, Mixed media on fiber board panel. Acrylic, ink and collage. 24 x 18 in / 61 x 46 cm



CUMULUS

2012, Cloud Sculptures, Mixed media and Acrylic on styrofoam and polyurethane foam

Small: 28 x 20 x 12 in. approx

Medium: 40 x 20 x 20 in. approx

Big: 60 x 50 x 30 in. approx



US DOLLAR KITES

2012. Mixed media on nylon ripstop spinnaker fabric
Carbon and fiberglass rods
Each approx. 85 x 45 in / 216 x 115 cms

* The real kites will fly at the River to River Festival, NYC 2012.

Biography :

Born in Mexico City, Erika Harrsch has lived and worked in Mexico, Italy, Germany and since 2001 in New York. Her multidisciplinary art practice employs resources that include drawing, painting, photography, video, animation and installations as a scenario building based on elements in both artificial and natural environments. Presenting intimate aspects of the human condition, inviting and seducing the viewer to evidence their direct contact with reality through the sense perception. For more than six years Harrsch has done research with an entomologist, immersing into the world of Lepidoptera. Has used butterflies in her work as a metaphor to address matters of identity, gender, nationality, migration and the relationship of human beings upon their own nature and fragility. These visual metaphors could be perceived through a plurality of perspectives, crossing and blurring boundaries to achieve a poetic image.

Harrsch has participated in several Art Biennials including: Fokus Lodz Biennale, Poland 2010; Beijing 798 Biennale, China 2009; and the 5th International Media Art Biennale-Media City Seoul; Korea 2008. Her work has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions at galleries and museums in Mexico, USA, Brazil, Argentina, Korea, China, Belgium, Germany, Italy, Sweden, Spain, UK, Poland, Turkey and Syria. Presented in museums such as the Whitney Museum of American Art at the Live Whitney series, Bellevue Arts Museum, WA, the Göteborg Konstmuseum in Sweden, the Musée de la Photographie a Charleroi in Belgium and the Seoul Museum of Art in South Korea.

Artist's Acknowledgements :

To my father Luis Harrsch whose passion to fly, showed me the path
and to Luis Harrsch Jr. who's existence beyond the clouds accompanies my flights.

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ERIKA HARRSCH

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