

Concha Jerez, the ‘sniper’ of self-censorship at ARCO: ‘We have trusted too much that freedoms work on their own’.

The National Prize for Plastic Arts has turned obituaries into works to discover forgotten women, from those persecuted by the Gestapo to sex researchers.



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Nancy Wake, the partisan most wanted by the Gestapo. Catherine Leroy, war photographer. Hélène Rochas, epitome of Parisian elegance. María Maluenda Campos, a ‘Mother Courage’ in Chile or Cheikha Rimitti, legendary lady of the Algerian ‘rai’. They are some of the protagonists of *En memoria de*, one of the works by Concha Jerez exhibited at ARCO, Spain's most important contemporary art fair, which held its 44th edition in Madrid last week.

This artist from the Canary Islands, who has been awarded the National Prize for Plastic Arts and the Gold Medal for Merit in Fine Arts, discovered these women through their obituaries published in the newspaper *El País*. Her great surprise was that she had never heard of them before, despite the relevance of each one in her field.

The author explains to this newspaper that she is in the habit of keeping obituaries and decided to use them to compose this work, to make these and so many other women forgotten by history visible. To do this, she has brought them together by eliminating the ‘noise’ that surrounded their biographies in the pages of the newspaper, with black strokes of varying thickness. Among them is María Giralt, described as a ‘tireless activist for democracy’, who died in 2012. Her participation in anti-Francoist actions led to her being arrested on several occasions, one of them for supporting the Asturian miners' strike in 1961.

Frenchwoman Hélène Rochas, who was dubbed the 'sophisticated pantra' by the American press, was in charge of expanding the business she inherited from her husband, Marcel Rochas, founder of the famous perfume company of the same name. She was 28 years old when she took the reins of the company, becoming the youngest director of a company in France. It was she who decades later launched the famous Eau de Rochas cologne.



Two of the women protagonists of 'In Memory of', a work by Concha Jerez Museo Reina Sofía

She died in 2011, as did Chilean María Maluenda, who presided over the first session of Parliament after Pinochet's departure. This actress and former MP, born in 1920, was an active fighter for human rights who had to overcome the brutal murder of her son, whose throat was slit by agents of Pinochet's dictatorship. Her struggle made her one of the leading figures in the transition to democracy. Another outstanding woman is María Telo, the jurist who, during Franco's regime, promoted the reform of the Civil Code that put an end to the obedience of wives and marital leave in 1975.

The problems of self-censorship

Concha Jerez (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 1941) studied piano at the Royal Conservatory of Music in Madrid and Political Science at the Complutense University, and began her career as an artist in 1970. Critical analysis of the media has been one of the main themes of his work, making censorship and self-censorship extremely present in his career. It was precisely to these that he dedicated his first major installation, Autocensura, in 1976.

'I wanted to unite them with other self-censored writings in dialogue with everything that cannot be said, what they could not say in their time and for so many anonymous women who are not in the obituary but nevertheless had their importance', Concha Jerez comments on her creations. The artist began to produce these works during Franco's regime, but did not stop addressing this issue once the Transition and the current context arrived.

'I continue because there is more and more self-censorship', she laments, pointing out that if at other times the problem was to talk about politics, now there is a reluctance to discuss other issues such as gender and those related to the world of work. The author states that society *'is always trying to improve'* and that there are 'things' that have improved, but not all of them.

'There are things that were done in another era that cannot be done now, even in the smallest details. We have to be very careful, because there is no growth in freedoms', he warns about what he sees as the big problem: *'I think we have been too confident that freedoms were going to work on their own. And no, we have to fight for them all the time'*. For Concha Jerez, this is the way to ensure that human beings do not become *'manipulable material'*. *'We are being manipulated all the time, we are seeing it now, for example, with the control of social networks. People are very clueless,'* he says.
Artists as *'snipers'*.

Immersed in a context of constant doubt about the veracity and suspicion of every piece of news, knowing how to identify it in order to avoid manipulation has become *'very complicated'*. In the face of this, she defends the function of artists as *'snipers'* and of art as long as it *'gives food for thought and moves the neurons'*. But not only from political art, the Canary Islander indicates that it can be achieved through abstract art, because *'it creates other types of sensations, it makes you breathe. And human beings need to breathe. He can't be conditioned all the time by the economy'*. *'Societies and politicians are allowing ourselves to be dominated by the economic situation',* she maintains.



'Beyond the newly painted wall world', by Concha Jerez ARCO MADRID

The artist considers that there were other periods in which the prevailing ideal for deciding where to go as societies was to improve, and that in addition to artists as 'snipers', there are other relevant figures such as journalists and scientists.

'Perhaps nobody sees them because they are in their laboratories, but they are still discovering things that help society a great deal. That's why money needs to be devoted to these things,' he argues, in contrast to a current trend that he detects and criticises: *'What's the point of this story now in Europe of arming ourselves to the teeth? For nothing, to destroy us all. With what it costs, not just a frigate, but an unlucky plane, research, art, so many things would be boosted'.*

'It's absurd, it's a lie. The only way we can defend ourselves is with our ideas, playing the role of snipers and not allowing ourselves to be dominated by it', he concludes.