

Exhibition: **At Hand: Works on Paper by
Elena del Rivero**

IVAM Institut Valencià d'Art Modern
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Organized by: **Institut Valencià d'Art Modern**

Curator: Elizabeth Finch

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The exhibition, which can be seen at the IVAM until 10 December, presents drawings and installations by Elena del Rivero produced between 1992 and 2006. The drawings, inspired by the epistolary tradition, form series such as *Letters to the Mother*, begun in 1992, which was followed by other series, extensively represented in the exhibition. Also featuring in the show are the large-scale installations made with paper, in which the artist uses techniques traditionally connected with women's work, such as sewing and embroidery, in her materialization of the creative process.

In this exhibition Elena del Rivero presents the installation [*Swi:t*] *Home: A Chant*, a work prompted by the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. The installation includes the projection of eleven videos which document the creative process.

The exhibition catalogue contains illustrations of the works exhibited, accompanied by essays by Maria-Josep Balsach, Mina Takahashi, Olga Fernández López, Linda Yablonsky and Elizabeth Finch. The show is also the occasion for presentation of *The Book of Dust*, created from videos recorded in the artist's studio after the terrorist attack. This project has been supported by the Spanish Embassy in Washington, the Spanish Consulate in New York and Foreign Cultural Cooperation.

Elena del Rivero (Valencia, 1952), grew up in a family setting which passed on its interest in culture to her and prompted her to study architecture. She was given private drawing classes by the Valencian artist Manuel Sigüenza. Instead of continuing with architecture she studied philosophy at the University of Valencia, from 1971 to 1974. In 1975 she moved to Madrid, where she studied painting and drawing at Estudio Arjona, and various intaglio techniques, including aquatint, etching, and drypoint, in the Oscar Manesi workshop. She started exhibiting her work in 1977 and had her first solo show in 1980. In 1988 she was awarded the Prix de Rome, and in 1991 she moved to New York City, where she was awarded a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant.

In 1992 Elena del Rivero went through a period of intense activity in New York City, Madrid and Jávea, drawing incessantly and noting the date and even the time of each drawing. In the drawings she used various combinations of graphite, white oil paint and olive oil, generally applying the paint with her fingertips or a full brush; pencils were dragged through wet paint and oil, leaving graphite-filled furrows. The imagery that emerged from these processes is abstract yet thematic: some of the works contain groupings of marks that suggest horizon lines, an effect furthered by the colour and the horizontal orientation of the paper; in other works there are circular gestures, as if the sheet possessed gravitational pull.

The first series of these works is called *Letters to the Mother* and contains nearly three thousand items. The first major presentation of this series was in 1993, at the Elba Benítez gallery in Madrid.

Most of these drawings are on paper, though they may also be stitched and embroidered onto fabric, or arranged in lines suggestive of text by applying faux pearls directly to the wall. In her works she accumulates sewn and drawn marks; she mends and conserves and amasses; through these processes labour becomes performative, with paper functioning as the ever-versatile, ever-accepting recipient of actions that she consolidates in monumental drawing series and installations. These works suggest that Del Rivero has been inspired by aspects of American art, particularly its Minimal and Conceptual tendencies, which she imbues with intuitive attention to detail, with solemnity and, when fitting, with irreverence. Her works can be both calculated and left to chance, and, although she prefers to use non-synthetic and even “organic” materials, such as handmade paper and cotton fabric, she does not rule out the use of industrially made objects.

In addition to using paper and drawing and the activities of sewing and embroidery, Elena Del Rivero employs other devices, such as performance and projects involving collective work. As she said in an interview in 1998: “*Many of the contemporary strategies and forms of production, such as video, performance, craft work, the theme of autobiography, the emphasis on plurality and diversity and the questioning of the greatness of western art, were introduced by a collective whose philosophy, practice and aesthetics constituted the basis of the feminist movement. [...] I am aware that their discoveries gave me the strength to shape a vocabulary.*”

As the *Letters* series grew, Elena del Rivera also began to produce larger groups, works that required her to compose much more rapidly and fluidly, integrating collage elements with drawn components and, occasionally, typewriting. In the second group of *Letters to the Mother* the gestures are more reduced and ordered, mostly limited to

repetitions of monochrome marks which form one or more grids. Whereas the first *Letters* boil with turmoil and discovery, the drawings that followed are stark manifestations, sombre and silent presences. From 1994 onward Rivero expanded the reach of the *Letters* with works issued under series titles such as *Letters from the Bride* (1996–97) or *Nine Broken Letters* (2002–04). This latter series, in fragmented, “broken” prose, refers to the brokenness of a relationship. Perhaps the most stunning works in the *Letters* series are *Unfinished Letter (Letter to a Young Daughter)* (1998) and *Echo of an Unfinished Letter (Letter to a Young Daughter)* (1999), each of which contains 600 different sheets arranged in a grid.

Concurrently with the *Letters* series Del Rivero made *Sewing Minimalism* (1994–95), and *Dancing with Minimalism* (1996), two sets of works that gently critique the masculine look of American Minimalism by mimicking its traditional austerity. And in concert with these mass-produced materials and the use of zippers and nylon tulle she also began to work increasingly with handmade papers produced at the Dieu Donné paper mill in New York City. Abaca paper, in particular, allowed Del Rivero to experiment with a surface that resembled skin in its texture, luminosity and resilience in the series *Elle sort beaucoup* (*She Goes Out A Lot*, 1999).

[Swi:t] Home (2000–01) uses the same type and size of paper, but on a scale intended to document a full year in the artist’s life. In this instance, the sheets of paper – twenty in all – were placed on the floor of her studio/home until they filled the spaces. Over a period of months they were allowed to deteriorate. Once cleaned, restored and pressed, the sheets were sewn together to create five monumental *Dishcloths*. The artist documented the project in full detail in a series of books which she calls her “reference library”.

In her project *La perfecta casada* (*The Perfect Wife*, 2000–01) she again tackled domestic themes, in an installation which takes its title from the book by Fray Luis de León, made from a copy of that epistolary treatise on matrimony. The pages were stitched together to form a “bridal train” which questions the power of matrimonial tradition.

Del Rivero’s most recent installation, *[Swi:t] Home: A Chant* (2001–06), which is presented for the first time at the IVAM, is a monumental addendum to *[Swi:t] Home* and to all her works that have touched on themes of domesticity. Soon after the completion of *[Swi:t] Home*, Del Rivero’s studio sustained major damage due to the attacks on the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001. Because she lived and worked directly across from the towers, several thousand pieces of paper were propelled into her apartment and studio when the towers collapsed. Responding to the disaster by integrating it into her art, Del Rivero meticulously cleaned, restored and catalogued all the material that entered through the windows. She burned away the personal names that appeared on them and stitched and embroidered the paper to five bolts of muslin. This work appears in the exhibition alongside real-time videos from the site, in a body of work that consistently dissolves the barriers between art and life.

In New York her work has appeared at the Sandra Gering Gallery, The Drawing Center, Art in General, Dieu Donné Papermill, the Wynn Kramarsky Gallery and the José Bienvenu Gallery, among other places. She has also presented her work at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco; the Whitney Museum of American Art at Champion;

Track 16 Gallery, Los Angeles; and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS), Madrid. In 2001 she was the recipient of grants from the Creative Capital Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. In 2005 she participated in a Rockefeller Foundation residency at the Bellagio Centre, Italy. Her work is included in many public and private collections in the United States and Europe, including the MoMA in New York, the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard University, the National Gallery in Washington, the Caja Burgos Collection and MNCARS.