

The Art of Antonella Trovarelli – Creation Through Chaos

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Abstract

This paper gives voice to bold and experimental Italo-Argentinian Antonella Trovarelli. Most recently artist in residence at *Abra Espacio* contemporary art gallery in San José, Costa Rica, her professional trajectory has taken her from strength to strength. Breaking ground while at work at Museo C.A.V. La Neomudéjar in Madrid, Trovarelli has made an indelible impact creating in her designated studio in the Associations Lab section of former brutalist and cutting-edge regional contemporary art space Zapadores/ Ciudad Del Arte Museo Siglo XXI; a politically activist, visual accompaniment to the Neomudéjar avant-garde art center in the vicinity of the Atocha railway station in an obscure part of Madrid proper. The provocative pieces at transfixed Zapadores contrasted starkly with the notion of art as beauty. Rather, covering an expansive art space that has since ceased to exist, were works that hurled us back to Spain's dark Francoist past. Images of executed soldiers, and torture victims shocked into silence. Audiences were reminded of the brutality of a regime that haunts Spanish citizens to date. Trovarelli, in turn, engages with identity and migration politics through abstract, primitive and anthropomorphic figures that verge on the grotesque, challenge the viewer and leave room for interpretation. This paper argues that Chaos is needed for a creative spark to fly and draws on Stewart Elliot Guthrie's anthropomorphic theories pondering what role animal symbolism plays in Trovarelli's art, if her skeletal figures can escape their liminal space in the existential margins, and what diasporic message is conveyed through her art.

Keywords: art, Argentina, Italian diaspora, Antonella Trovarelli, essentialism, anthropomorphism

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Introduction and Scaling It All Down to Basics (Not So Basic After All)

Our discourse is specifically concerned with identity and belonging, migration politics and movement across cultural borders and divides as well as about how people, artists and visionaries concerned with the human condition maintain and express their identities through diverse cultural forms – including written, visual, figurative, and material culture. The paper takes an interest in the idea of identities in motion or unfixed identities that can be said to be in flux when the subject that once belonged in a certain culture and was steeped in that context decides to move away from reality as they know it, taking with them their key learnings and discoveries as takeaways to draw from and expand further on as they themselves enter a new cultural and political context and thereby are compelled to reexamine their own shifting identity. Antonella Trovarelli is a perfect example of an artist proud of her multiethnic and racially diverse national heritage, who reexamines what it means to be Argentinian with Italian heritage in an international setting as she now carves a space for herself in Europe and Madrid. Hailing from the historical city of San Rafael in the southern semi-arid region of Mendoza, at the intersection with Chile and the Andes, Trovarelli is informed and influenced by the fate of her European forefathers, their departures, physical and metaphorical journeys, and new beginnings in faraway lands.

From Italy to Argentina to Spain; homes away from home. Trovarelli, fuelled by a creative mind, explores what it means to be human in an increasingly technocratic, non-human or, rather, non-humane universe governed by a set of identity politics that she herself cannot always relate to (and where autocratic leaders in East and West are incapable of seeing the bigger picture; stuck in a dogmatic mindset not in keeping with that of global citizens moving with the times who have to adapt flexibly to new conditions and situations; and we may wonder if we have learnt anything from the global pandemic?). Artist and visionary Antonella Trovarelli – free, bold and beautiful – uses anthropomorphic imagery as a semi-political platform to work from, allowing her to share her queries, ideas and ideals. As an experimental artist with Madrid as her more permanent place of residence since 2015, she has carved a new space for herself and allows her spirit to run wild as an artist in residence crossing boundaries and opening new horizons. I first met Trovarelli while she was fervently at work at aforementioned Zapadores/ Ciudad Del Arte Museo Siglo XXI, a “[c]ontemporary art cultural space in Fuencarral” and “[o]ne of the sites where Franco’s army would learn to build railroads, bridges and trenches” (MadridNoFrills, 2019). Converted to fit modern requirements, this is (was):

‘a city of art’ that hosts all kinds of artists, gallerists, associations, curators and museums, who seek to create a space for reflection and is committed to the new voices of art. ‘...’ It is also home to a citadel of artists with the studios of self-managed artists, an Associations Lab, which boasts its own workspaces, and a specific hall to develop their activities, such as conferences, exhibitions, workshops or debates. (<https://www.esmadrid.com/en/tourist-information/ciudad-arte-museo-zapadores>)¹

After the permanent closing down of this popular and mindboggling extensive artistic space in the summer of 2024 for urban development reasons – a drastic move from the point of view of the importance of safeguarding cutting-art art spaces (perhaps rather than “galleries,” which seems too lame a word in the context of Zapadores) which sparked public outcry – Trovarelli was invited by artistic director Néstor Prieto to move her studio to the other cooperative

¹ Note that this website has since been removed.

headquarters at the central Museo La Neomudéjar. She now works full time in a building that “used to belong to the old Atocha station, and the end of the railway line went right up to its door, where materials were unloaded directly from the freight wagons” (Welcome to Madrid, 2019).

Trovarelli’s abstract art is drenched in earthy intense colours and presents us with figures that come across as confronting at first and verge on the grotesque but that are closer to us than what we may initially have realised. Drawing on “essentialism”, or *esencialismo* in her native Spanish, Trovarelli’s art corresponds theoretically and in essence with what Stewart Elliot Guthrie defines, when referring to the anthropomorphic form, or “anthropomorphism” (from the Greek *anthropos* – “human” and *morphe* – “form”) as “pervading human thought and action” and “the interpretation of nonhuman things and events in terms of human characteristics” (Guthrie, 1993, Preface). Often drawing a link between anthropomorphism and religion, which he feels clearly needs a theory, Guthrie argues that “... anthropomorphism is not restricted to religion but pervades secular thought and actions as well so that human features seem to appear throughout nature and even among artifacts” (Guthrie, 2012, p. 1).

He explains, “[w]hen we first see something (e.g., a shadow in an alley) as human or humanlike but later see it as something nonhuman, we may call our earlier interpretation anthropomorphism” (Guthrie, 1993, p. 2). More specifically:

Inevitably and automatically, we all anthropomorphize. We see punishment in accidents, faces in clouds, and purpose everywhere. Such illusory perceptions tell us more about ourselves than about the world. Most arrestingly, they tell us about the kind of thought and action, and the kind of experience, we call religion. (Guthrie, 1993, preface, viii)

Fast forward to today and Antonella Trovarelli’s skeletal art – where colours express chaotic states and conditions that, when expressed through certain patterns, reflect emotions, opinions, standpoints and desires, scale it all down to basics – lays bare the essence of who we are. And, most probably, there is something divine in that. A dizzying possibility of stepping away from surface hype and artifice and, rather, stepping into our authentic selves (alter egos?) if we dare. Trovarelli’s primitive yet silently expressive anthropomorphic figures are inspired by what she has observed in nature and in partially inanimate objects. When these arresting visual and geological formations and observations, with the artist drawn to shells, stones, bones and carcasses, are depicted on canvas they have been physically transformed into angular figures that reflect and come to represent our concerns, preoccupations and preferences and stand out from any given crowd. Upright and forthright and with nothing to hide, Trovarelli’s skeletons clad in outfits that make a statement, symbolically become our alter egos and may come across as macabre and most definitely confronting at first sight. And yet, at closer observation they begin to make sense, come across as liberating, and serve to set us free. Reassuringly devoid of layers of human pretence they lead the way forward into our acceptance of difference and a welcoming of free mind and free will. With that they engage in identity politics and suggest that it is quite possible for us to keep shifting and embrace new – as well as our true – identities. And on a larger, macro-level, society, which moves through its own chapters also on a collective level, ought to do the same. Trovarelli’s art offers an alternative way for us to view and consider our fellow citizens and the world around us. Just like Guthrie’s theorized “faces in the clouds” – where these imagined faces spring from our need to humanize and make sense of what we see in nature – may exist, or not, depending on the way we look at it, and should

have nothing to hide either. There is most definitely something divinely superior in that liberation from everything that weighs us down.

Post her Costa Rica sojourn, Trovarelli's focus and approach have shifted somewhat as the external landscape seems to gain an increased initial presence on canvas. But, again, it is the chaos of colours that does its own talking and where these bold brush strokes resemble a landscape that then morphs into figures (the figures or characters thus become a part of the land, in a Gaia-like fashion and in line with the primordial idea that “[i]n the beginning, there was chaos—a vast, formless expanse. From this primordial state, essential figures and elements emerged”) (Mythology Worldwide, 2025). Trovarelli is now embarking on a slightly different path and informs me (in a voicemail from 25 December 2025) that her figures and the next step in their visual metamorphosis from animal state to increasingly human look-a-like:

.... are the same characters who previously went through [this] process of transformation. They shed layers of what they have acquired and inherited from institutions, family, education, the church, the state, etc., until they reach the essence of what we all have in common, as in the first series... until all they have left is their naked bodies stripped to the bones – a metaphor of bones, which is that we humans all have in common.

Having gone through this stripping away of concepts, they enter society and wear clothes, wear skin, wear scars, but now they can materialise from there, creating a collective process by being able to physically inhabit the urban space.²

As has been suggested, Trovarelli's abstract creations take shape from the chaos of colours that stem from the essentialist tradition (explained further in the next section) and face us straight on. Their bodies may be on an angle, but their gaze follows us all the same. And yet, are we not all skeletons at base; is it not time we rid ourselves of the layers and layers of artifice that distance us from our natural state? Their artist and creator, now 42-year-old Antonella Trovarelli – who identifies with the essence of her own politicized figures that lead a way forward to a bigger truth– is concerned with the human condition, who we have become, what we do that detracts us from who we ought to be and are at base, and what defines us as that which we are not.

Antonella Trovarelli – Working in the Spirit of “Esencialismo”

Self-made plastic artist Trovarelli's professional trajectory began in earnest in 2007. That's when her career was kickstarted as she gained a place in the “Taller del Esencialismo” (Essentialist studios or workshops) in Buenos Aires. With that she found her essence, she adopted her art form, and she gained a new family of equals similarly querying what lies beneath and exists beyond.

² In her original Spanish Trovarelli appears to reveal more about herself: “Este enfoque en realidad tiene que ver con lo anterior. Son los mismos personajes que antes pasaron por ese proceso de transformación. De irse quitando capas, capas de lo adquirido, de lo heredado entorno a las instituciones, tales como la familia, la educación, la iglesia, el estado. Hasta llegar a lo esencial que es todo lo que tenemos en común, como en la primera series, hacen este proceso, ¿no? Hasta quedarse en los huesos, en esta metáfora de huesos que es lo que todos los seres humanos tenemos en común. Habiendo pasado por este proceso, esta transformación, esta descarnación de conceptos, se paran en la sociedad y llevan ropa, llevan piel, llevan cicatrices, pero ya pueden materializarse. Desde allí, desde haber pasado por ese proceso individual están creando un proceso colectivo al poder habitar físicamente (con ropa, con piel) un espacio – que en ese sentido sería lo urbano (porque yo he vivido casi toda mi vida en las ciudades).”

Nationally and internationally acknowledged, she has since gone from strength to strength. In her bold and impressive art that loosely resembles that of Jean-Michel Basquiat (1960–1988) Trovarelli ventures away from traditional notions of aesthetic beauty. While she is informed by artistic conventions, constantly engaged in research (books and poetry, artworks and encounters with other artists) and always open to new discoveries, she says her inspiration comes from the creative process itself (“*inspiración, para mi es trabajo*”). She has found her own style and way forward in a field where her contributions are important and much needed. In this paper we showcase some aspects of her art and share her responses to rather existential questions. Trovarelli’s art is a manifestation of fluid identities that undergo a sense of Deleuzian becoming something else and are likened to “lines of flight” and a kind of *reterritorialization*: “[a]ll organizations, all the systems [he] calls biopower, in effect reterritorialize the body” (Deleuze, 2006, p. 131). Through her naked essentialist art, Trovarelli reaches through to the essence and puts things in perspective – and alignment. She takes a stance and dares reterritorialize the body through a type of art that reflects her efforts to strip the body of its superficiality and move beyond surface and vanity. In that clear message she urges us to delve deeper, to scrutinise who we are, and to resist external labels, societal norms and un-freeing expectations.

In the upcoming transcribed interview translated into English, which constitutes the final part of this brief paper, Antonella Trovarelli does her own talking. Her responses reflect an approach to art, life and the world which corresponds, in part, with both Bauman (who talks of the time of “modernity” in the following fashion: “These are reasons to consider ‘fluidity’ or ‘liquidity’ as fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways novel, phase in the history of modernity”; a statement applicable to society also today) (Bauman, 2000, p. 2) and Deleuze. The latter left behind

a philosophical legacy that went on to influence numerous academic disciplines: continental philosophy, cinema studies, literary theory, cultural criticism, social and political theory, LGBTQ studies, art and architecture theory, as well as the growing field of animal studies and environmental theory. (Parr, 2015)

We argue that Trovarelli ventures beyond the human and the readily identifiable by focusing on our original primitive state – which connects us all. She ultimately demonstrates that we have much in common and reminds us of the importance to look beyond gender, heteronormative narrowmindedness and racial differences and for us to engage and connect on a more all-encompassing universal, human to human level. Her artworks, large-scaled and powerful, delve into the abstract but her images and the titles conferred to these works urge us to engage in current issue and debates.

Figure 1

Photo of Antonella Trovarelli at Museo La Neomudéjar (Jytte Holmqvist). 20 October 2024



Interview With Antonella Trovarelli: Madrid 20 October 2024 (With References to Zapadores, Which Is Now Permanently Closed)

How would you define art and what is its purpose or aim? Does art exist to please us, provoke us, or both at once?

For me Art is Art (“Arte es Arte”) and represents what I believe in. On the other hand, the intrinsic meaning of this word changes according to historical changes and eras affecting humans through the ages; it is a discipline totally linked to its context. I think art needs to question the reality we live in. It is important to seek beauty, the aesthetic, beyond what this may mean for each artist, and to challenge the spectator.

Do your artworks fit into the broad, brutalist setting of Zapadores/ Ciudad Del Arte Museo Siglo XXI, where several exhibitions and exhibits provoke a sense of existential angst and refer to Spain's Francoist past? Do you, too, communicate a brutalist message?

I think my work fits in Zapadores because it is raw and direct and talks about identity. Sometimes when people see it, they experience a sense of anguish or shock. Then they discover, little by little, new elements that allow them to embark on an inner journey.

Is your art inserted into a theoretical framework and how do you distinguish “essentialism” from “existentialism”; which also influences your work?

My work is inserted into the theoretical crossroads of gender studies, identity, science fiction, robots, animals, and anthropology. I’m passionate about reading and find the evolution of the ideas on which we build what we call society very interesting. When I started painting, I spent two years learning “Esencialismo pictórico”, a movement formed by Heriberto Zorrilla and Helena Distefano in Buenos Aires; both my teachers and mentors. Here the development and execution of the artwork is based on desire, not on planning. While *existentialism* proposes a more dynamic and subjective vision of life and identity, for *essentialism* there is already a meaning or an essence. In my work as a painter, I use the essentialist technique but then I turn to existentialism and my work gains deeper meaning or value.

Please tell us something about your professional trajectory: Where does your fascination with the anthropomorphic form come from and do your rather confronting skeletal figures carry human characteristics?

I am a self-taught painter, I started painting when I was 25, now I am 41. At first, I painted abstract art, then the figures came out of the stains, little by little, until I reached the anthropomorphic forms that have to do with the desert, my inner desert. I was born in Argentina in San Rafael, Mendoza. There you go to the countryside to walk and it's all dry, there are animal bones, cows, rodents, etc., in the mountains. With the passing of time and the creation of the series "Desheredar lo humano", these anthropomorphic forms took on more prominence; they refer to a group of people or beings who don't adapt to prevailing social norms – either because they don't want to, or because they can't, or because the system itself rejects them. In this context, these beings desire freedom and are peeling off layers until they reach the deepest part which are the bones and what all human beings have in common. These figures represent emotional states and thoughts. In this sense they have to do with my personal history since they are born from an inner desire to express myself and to live; they have to do with emotions I have felt, situations I have gone through, and people I have met. That is why I am interested in people, in our pains, miseries and glories, the way in which we elaborate our thoughts and live or inhabit Planet Earth through the centuries.

You have exhibited your work across the world – e.g. in Argentina (Buenos Aires and Mendoza), Spain (Valencia and Madrid), England, Croatia, Italy and Israel – and since 2015 you live and work in Spain. Does your art communicate a diasporic or migratory message to the audience?

My characters are identities that are always active, never standing still. These identities are affected by an unstable global context. As such, they reflect an internal and external diaspora; some mutate and adapt to the system, others escape; all in pursuit of survival or looking for their place. I believe that in today's world and as a painter you must be in constant movement. Art is similarly affected by these new structures of global interaction.

Chaos is your driving force – you find "a stimulus in chaos"; this is how you describe your creative process. Is this chaos external or internal and is there harmony and order in chaos and disruption? Is chaos necessary for humanity to move towards another state where we grow with new realisations and discoveries?

Art is germinated by Chaos, and the painter must then find structure in that chaos. If that created structure or image doesn't work or works only momentarily, it needs to return to Chaos to forge a new identity. As for humanity, I wish it were that easy, but it is not. You can't go in and out of chaos "en masse", there are too many borders, boundaries and divisions. But I suppose we can learn from every situation and draw strength to move forward.

"The bite of the queer mosquito": What prompted you to create this work?

The painting ("La picadura del mosquito queer") was born as a response to the phrases or statements that say that homosexuality is a disease. So, I decided to create the mosquito that transmits that plague, it's a way of responding to the verbal aggressions heard out there. I think humour is very important for survival.

Zygmunt Bauman was interested in fluid identities and liquid states, including liquid love. What is love for you? Are we living in an increasingly liquid or fluid universe?

I think love is a feeling, I like to think of a phrase by writer James Baldwin who says that “love has never been a very popular movement, and no one has ever really wanted to be free. The world is really sustained by the love and passion of a few” (specifically, “[l]ove has never been a popular movement.” Why? Because “no-one’s ever wanted, really, to be free”). (Ayoub, 2024).

Perhaps we live in a more fluid world, obviously things are changing, there are structures that are more affected than others because also their configuration never really worked, and some people have decided to stop sustaining them in the traditional way and instead look for new ways of relating to one another. On the other hand, I think that whatever flows, the system picks it up and rigidifies it again and makes it the norm. We have created a complex civilisation, especially in [terms of] social, class, identity, state issues. A constant trap traversed by control and power structures.

Figure 2

From Trovarelli's Private Collection (Instagram). ©Antonella Trovarelli



Does accepting or approaching a fluid or liquid identity enable us to cross boundaries and break down cultural, national and psychological barriers?

I believe so, accepting a fluid identity can be a tool to break down barriers and cross borders, especially in cultural, national and psychological terms. This tool opens the possibility to explore greater personal freedom and to break down some rigid socially established norms, within contexts suitable for its development and deepening.

According to Paul Ricœur, “non-linguistic symbolic systems such as gestures, sounds and pictures also have the power to make and remake the world” (1991, 2016). Does your art engage with memory and belonging?

Yes, in my work there is an internal memory of landscape, colours, states, cities, people. And of belonging and not belonging, on the other hand. The question of immigration brings these two themes together.

Does the abstract form allow your viewer to imagine and interpret your work in their own way?

I believe a work is finished when the viewer sees it as complete; not until then. The abstract form allows more freedom to imagine. I also consider myself a spectator of my own work, since one part of the creative process is the making and another is the looking, I am not the same person when I paint as when I look at a work of art, write about it and explain it.

You use a combination of strong colours that sometimes seem to clash with more serious themes or subject matters. This is the case with, for example, “Propagandists for the Working Class”, “How to dismantle the dictatorship of patriarchy”, and “Moral Monsters.” Why these contrasts: light colours, but your themes are dark?

Colours are the main element. All my works are born from colour and the material load, then the themes and characters appear. I don't consider the themes to be dark, perhaps I identify with crude themes and then approach them with a touch of sarcasm.

What are your views on the human vis-à-vis the non-human. Do you take an interest in Cultural Studies as a “subversive” academic field or discipline not confined to certain theories and that pays attention to marginalised subgroups? What separates the human from the non-human and does your humanised animal (or the animalistic form) reflect who we really are: human beings analysable from an anthropomorphic perspective?

I begin to take an interest in cultural studies when my characters don't quite fit into certain social structures. I consider the human, but not as the centre of the universe or the measure of all things. The human species lives in a global ecosystem surrounded by other species with which it shares and inhabits Planet Earth – although most of the time we forget this, and we think that “all of history” arises from the evolution of hominids. We are a meta-narrative within the universal narrative. As for my work, the anthropomorphic forms come from this interrelationship that is maintained and reinforced in our contact with other species and with whom we connect both immediately and spiritually.

Concluding Comments

Through her art that breaks conventions and comments also on the “monstrous feminine” or the “monstrous queer,” Antonella Trovarelli engages with issues that need addressing in an increasingly totalitarian world that seems to be going backward rather than forward and that needs enlightening now more than ever. Her voice and insights lead the way and onto a path of greater acceptance, light and understanding. She is a light bearer in a moral darkness and proves how similar we all are at base; when we scale it all down to our not so primitive selves.

Figure 3

Las Bolleras de Turno ©Antonella Trovarelli



Source: Antonella Trovarelli's Exhibition, "Desheredar Lo Humano"
<https://antonellatrovarelli.com/portfolio/desheredar-lo-humano>

Figure 4

Suicidas Del Poliamor ©Antonella Trovarelli



Source: Antonella Trovarelli's Exhibition, "Desheredar Lo Humano"
<https://antonellatrovarelli.com/portfolio/desheredar-lo-humano>

Figure 5

Orgia Transfeminista ©Antonella Trovarelli



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