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# Images of the *mujer moderna* in the Works of Maruja Mallo and Norah Borges

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The concept of the modern woman is transnational, although it is most strongly associated with the US and democracies in Europe, and emerged at a time when the involvement of women in public life was being contested.<sup>1</sup> As a term of reference it encompasses women who were activists, writers, painters, suffragettes and social campaigners. Whilst the breadth of this definition does, of course, mean that the individual becomes somewhat lost within it, Sally Ledger points to one way in which it might be possible to seek some kind of unifying feature within this diverse category when she states that: ‘The “newness” of the New Woman marked her as an unmistakable “modern” figure, a figure committed to change and to the values of a projected future’.<sup>2</sup> This broad definition can go some way toward harmonizing the disparate and contested ways of thinking about the experiences of some mostly upper- and middle-class women in the late

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1 I refer broadly to the late nineteenth and early to mid twentieth centuries. Public life is understood in the widest possible sense and includes, but is not limited to, university education, universal suffrage and cultural activities, such as writing and painting. Although I draw upon wider images of the new woman throughout this article, I do so whilst recognizing and accepting the significant body of work that has problematized the concept of modernity in Spain, an overview of which is provided in Elizabeth Smith Rousselle, *Gender and Modernity in Spanish Literature 1789–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1–8. This broader focus on the wider influences of European cultures in Spain is in keeping with the arguments presented in Beatriz Celaya Carrillo, *La mujer deseante: sexualidad femenina en la cultura y novela españolas (1900–1936)* (Newark: Juan de la Cuesta, 2006), 56–57, and in Gayle Rogers, *Modernism and the New Spain: Britain, Cosmopolitan Europe, and Literary History* (New York: Oxford U. P., 2012).

2 Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester/New York: Manchester U. P., 1997), 5. Throughout this article I use the term ‘modern woman’ as it has emerged in more publications in relation to Spanish women than the term ‘new woman’. See Shirley Mangini, *Las modernas de Madrid: las grandes intelectuales españolas de la vanguardia* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 2001), and Nerea Aresti Esteban, ‘La mujer moderna, el tercer sexo y la bohemia en los años veinte’, *Dossiers Feministes*, 10 (2007), 173–85.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; however it cannot really capture the difficult social position in which they found themselves.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly some women were able to embrace the idea of freedom without paying attention to the social codes that operated around them, whilst others may have been committed to change but did not openly challenge the societal norms they observed or to which they felt bound. Such opposing ways of negotiating social positions might well be applied to Maruja Mallo and Norah Borges. However, the aim of this article is not to focus on the differences between them but to draw their works together and to explore the ways in which both artists allude to the complexities of living as a woman in Spain and Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s. This article will show that they both drew upon transnational imagery relating to the modern woman and that Spanish and Argentine women were engaging with the difficulties around the opening up of new social roles for women in a similar fashion to other women across the world.

Although Mallo and Norah are not the most obvious pairing, they were two of the most prominent women artists working in Spain in the 1920s.<sup>4</sup> Norah's numerous contributions to leading magazines such as *Grecia* and *Ultra* in the early 1920s and the exhibition of Mallo's works in the offices of the *Revista de Occidente* in 1928 attest to the esteem in which their works were held by their contemporaries. Moreover, the work of both artists has been neglected and their pioneering roles in the development of an *avant-garde* visual aesthetic in Spain have been overlooked. Whilst their stories might now be told in quite different ways, it is important to bring their works together in order to compare the distinctive ways in which images of modern women were portrayed by women artists considered leading exponents of *avant-garde* styles. I will show that both artists capture the tensions surrounding the modern woman and that whilst they celebrate the potential for renewal that the figure encompasses, they also reflect the ties to tradition and the past that come from living as a woman in a specific social and cultural context.

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3 Nuria Cruz-Cámara provides a succinct yet broad overview of these tensions, in *La mujer moderna en los escritos de Federica Montseny* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2015), 14–19.

4 Throughout this article I will refer to Norah Borges by her first name as the surname Borges is inextricably linked with her brother and is impossible to use in an unmarked way. Norah began her career in Spain, where she lived until 1921 when she returned to her native Argentina. She returned to Spain in 1923–1924 and again in 1932–1936 ('Cronología de Norah Borges 1914–1940', in *Norah Borges*, Special Issue of *Romance Studies*, ed. Roberta Quance and Fiona Mackintosh, 27:1 [2009], 1–6). I consider her works reflective of both Spanish and Argentine contexts, yet recognize that the Argentine environment was more conservative than the Spanish. Beatriz Sarlo makes this argument in *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 1988). Mallo's career is equally transnational but in this article I explore early works completed in Spain in the late 1920s.

It is no surprise that this figure captured the attention of the two young artists, as they themselves must have identified with aspects of that identity to some degree. Shirley Mangini explains that the concept of the modern woman emerged across Europe and in the US and was particularly pronounced following the First World War. She, like Ledger, explains that

[...] la moderna no lo era sólo por su formación cultural, su vocación profesional y su conciencia política liberal (a veces feminista), sino también porque aplaudía los avances tecnológicos y reflejaba la modernidad en su aspecto físico y su modo de vestir.<sup>5</sup>

Mangini shows that the modern woman cannot be defined through a simple check-list fashion but that a number of outwardly visible factors such as dress might identify a woman as modern. Susan Kirkpatrick builds upon Lily Litvak's work on the erotic novel in the inter-war years to emphasize the pluralistic and often opposing identities which the image of the modern woman may be said to incorporate; for example, she may be asexual or hypersexualized, seen as part of the social order or subversive of it.<sup>6</sup> I want to explore the ways in which the plurality of that identity emerges in works by Mallo and Norah. Both artists began their careers in Spain and it is important to point out that the *mujer moderna* stands in opposition to the *ángel del hogar*, which was the dominant model of womanhood in Spain that emerged in the nineteenth century and persisted well into the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> According to the ideals of the *ángel del hogar*, women were honourable, dutiful and self-sacrificingly tied to the domestic sphere. In other words their role had not changed much since Fray Luis published *La perfecta casada* in the sixteenth century and Mangini is careful to underscore the difficulties women faced in terms of acceptance of their new role, especially because of the misogyny directed towards them out of fear.<sup>8</sup> Some relatively progressive studies for the time, such as Gregorio Marañón's *Biología y feminismo*, which was based on Freud's more scientific approach to gender and sexuality, recognized that women could

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5 Mangini, *Las modernas de Madrid*, 75.

6 Susan Kirkpatrick, *Mujer, modernismo y vanguardia en España: 1898–1931* (Madrid: Cátedra, 2003), 221.

7 Bridget Aldaraca, *'El ángel del hogar': Galdós and the Ideology of Domesticity in Spain* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1991). Chapters 1 and 2 are particularly relevant as they deal with the figure of the *perfecta casada* and how that model of behaviour was incorporated into and differs from the *ángel del hogar*.

8 'No ayudaba tampoco que la mujer hubiera cambiado su aspecto en la posguerra. La moda, el deporte, el cine norteamericano y la propaganda consumista ponían en peligro la "feminidad" de la mujer. La ropa moderna desenfataba las curvas naturales que revelaban la única misión de la mujer en la vida: la maternidad. Se temía que si estos seres andróginos—sólo una de las muchas etiquetas que les ponían a las modernas—podía competir con los hombres y reemplazarlos en el trabajo, ¿no sería posible que también les quitarán el poder supremo algún día?' (Mangini, *Las modernas de Madrid*, 98).

work and participate in public life under certain circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Although the approach would now be categorized as biological determinism because of its emphasis on the importance of women's role as mothers, it is important to acknowledge it as part of a tentative step forward for women's participation in public life. The desire for an increased visibility for women also encompassed the cultural sphere and Hélène Cixous argues through a series of hierarchal oppositions that culture is identified with men and the lesser category of nature with women.<sup>10</sup> Building on Cixous' work on the unequal relationship between culture and nature, Sherry Ortner shows that culture is an attempt to make sense of the world in which we live and seeks to dominate nature.<sup>11</sup> Debate around such dualistic thinking did occur at the same time that Mallo and Norah were working and Elena Laurenzi notes that both María Zambrano and Rosa Chacel 'consideran que la cuestión de la mujer pertenece al orden de lo simbólico y trasciende la conquista de la igualdad de los derechos'.<sup>12</sup> In 1929, the academic and art critic Antonio Méndez Casal describes the modern woman in the works of the Russian painter Maroussia Valero as 'esbelta de silueta, alta y flexible de movimientos, y va constituyendo algo así como una nueva raza seleccionada', which shows wider critical engagement with this figure within Spain, albeit in very narrow terms.<sup>13</sup> Indeed Méndez Casal goes on to praise Valero as she 'no cayó en la tentación tan del gusto vanguardista, de realizar pintura moderna buscando modelos femeninos, de formas del tipo de campesina rolliza, o de cocinera fofa y pringosa [...] La vida de hoy nos muestra a todas horas y en todas partes, bellos tipos de mujer,

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9 Mangini analyses the text in some depth and notes that it was published in 1920 (Mangini, *Las modernas de Madrid*, 103–05).

10 Hélène Cixous & Catherine Clément, 'Sorties. Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', in Hélène Cixous & Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 63–132 (first published in French as *La Jeune née* [1975]).

11 'Woman is being identified with—or if you will, seems to be a symbol of—something that every culture devalues, something that every culture defines as being of a lower order of existence than itself. Now it seems that there is only one thing that would fit that description, and that is "nature" in the most generalised sense. Every culture, or, generically, "culture", is engaged in the process of generating and sustaining systems of meaningful forms (symbols, artefacts, etc.) by means of which humanity transcends the givens of natural existence, bends them to its purposes, controls them in its interest. We may thus broadly equate culture with the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e. systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature' (Sherry Ortner, 'Is Female to Male As Nature Is to Culture?', in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo & Louise Lamphere [Stanford: Stanford U. P., 1974], 68–87 [p. 72]).

12 Elena Laurenzi, 'Desenmascarar la complementariedad de los sexos: María Zambrano y Rosa Chacel frente al debate en la *Revista de Occidente*', *Aurora*, 13 (2012), 18–29 (p. 23).

13 Antonio Méndez Casal, 'Exposiciones recientes', *Blanco y Negro*, 10 de marzo de 1929, pp. 6–9 (p. 8). My thanks to Roberta Quance for passing on this reference.

verdaderamente representativos del actual momento'.<sup>14</sup> It would seem that he is criticizing Mallo's works here and focusing instead on a very narrow definition of the *mujer moderna* derived almost exclusively from the stereotypical images of the flapper. These are precisely the fundamental questions about the position of women within the symbolic order that emerge in Mallo's and Norah's works, which engage with the realm of culture and offer a way of thinking about what it means to be modern in Spain and Argentina. Yet theirs is not a uniformly straightforward task as they both participate in a system of culture that normally devalues the subject position of women. Furthermore, they were working within a discipline, that is visual art, which depicted (and to a large degree still presents) women as muses—the object, rather than creator of works of art.<sup>15</sup> The marginalization of women's experiences within culture generally and within modernism specifically meant that the two artists had to develop their own strategies both for entering the cultural arena and for representing the modern woman.

As artists working within a cultural environment Mallo and Norah negotiated their relationships with their contemporaries in very distinct ways and these differing approaches have had an impact upon the ways in which their works have been received. Mallo is renowned for her daring and the anecdote most often associated with her surrounds her practice of *sinsombrerismo*, quite literally going out without a hat, the sign of a lady. Both biographies dedicated to the artist recount the scandal this provoked in Madrid, where tradition mandated the wearing of hats in public for all but working-class women.<sup>16</sup> Kirkpatrick notes that Mallo and her friend, the poet Concha Méndez, 'salieron a las calles y los espacios públicos, autoconstruyéndose, conscientemente como *flâneuses*, como parte de su programa para convertirse en artistas'.<sup>17</sup> This taboo-breaking practice mirrored the experience of male artists, who, especially in light of Baudelaire's works, invoked the city and the experience of life in the city as a key image of modernity. The two women's behaviour marked them as modern and they used this to construct an identity for themselves within the cultural sphere whilst seemingly disregarding the social norms operating in Madrid at the time.

In contrast to Mallo, the most cited of Norah's remarks comes from an interview with the critic Juan Manuel Bonet, in which she stated: 'en

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14 Méndez Casal, 'Exposiciones recientes', 8–9.

15 Carol Duncan, 'Virility and Domination in Early Twentieth-Century Vanguard Painting', in *Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany*, ed. Norma Broude & Mary Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 292–313 (p. 294).

16 José Luis Ferris, *Maruja Mallo: la gran transgresora del 27* (Madrid: Temas de Hoy, 2004), 89–90.

17 Kirkpatrick, *Mujer, modernismo y vanguardia en España*, 227.

aquella época, las chicas no íbamos a los cafés'.<sup>18</sup> These words neatly sum up her absence from *tertulias*, in which new ideas were discussed and debated. This segregation would seem to be dictated by social and, certainly in Norah's case, familial reticence to embrace a more public role for women and stands in diametric opposition to Mallo, who did attend *tertulias*.<sup>19</sup>

The images of the two women that these anecdotes conjure up are not neutral and they have an impact on the way their works are framed in critical discussion. A 2004 biography of Mallo carries the subtitle 'La gran transgresora del 27' and on the other hand, a 2009 monograph dedicated to Norah is titled *La vanguardia enmascarada*.<sup>20</sup> In the photographs chosen for the exhibition catalogue, *Fuera de orden: mujeres de la vanguardia española*, a demure Norah is seen, eyes cast downwards while in contrast Mallo looks directly at the camera or is the exuberant surrealist draped in seaweed.<sup>21</sup> It is evident from these visual images and the words used in studies of the artists that these often repeated aspects of their lives have influenced the ways their works are viewed: Mallo presents an image of the bold, modern woman, while the women in Norah's paintings are perceived as passive, demure and are associated with the home and domestic spaces. Of course there is a grain of truth here as the artists used their own personal experiences in the construction of both themselves and their works, yet what unifies them is a sense of exclusion: both the transgression of boundaries and the adoption of an unobtrusive persona are practices that underscore the need to negotiate a different type of subject position.

Although Mallo and Norah, both considered modern artists by their peers, were perceived to offer different presentations of what being a modern woman meant, there are ways to compare the women they depict and my analysis will draw out the ways in which the difficulties of being a woman in Spain and Argentina in the early decades of the twentieth century can be glimpsed in their works. This focus is informed by Linda Nochlin's essay in which she sees rebellion as the unifying strand in images of the modern woman:

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18 Juan Manuel Bonet, 'Hora y media con Norah Borges', *Renacimiento*, 8 (1992), 5–6 (p. 6).

19 Shirley Mangini notes that Mallo attended the Pombo *tertulia* in Madrid (Shirley Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde* [Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2010], 40). It should be noted that Norah's remarks refer to 1919–1921 and Mallo attended *tertulias* in the later 1920s. Roberta Quance argues that questions of respectability are paramount in a consideration of Norah's lack of attendance at these gatherings (Roberta Quance, 'Espacios masculinos/femeninos: Norah Borges en la vanguardia', *Dossiers Feministes*, 10 [2007], 233–48 [pp. 234–37]).

20 See Ferris, *Maruja Mallo: la gran transgresora del 27*; and May Lorenzo Alcalá, *Norah Borges: la vanguardia enmascarada* (Buenos Aires: EUDEBA, 2009).

21 Fernando Huici & Estrella de Diego, *Fuera de orden: mujeres de la vanguardia española—María Blanchard, Norah Borges, Maruja Mallo, Olga Sacharoff, Angeles Santos, Remedios Varo* [exhibition catalogue] (Madrid: Fundación Cultural MAPFRE VIDA, 1999), 73 & 93.

Yet what all New Images of the New Woman do have in common, flapper or vamp, political revolutionary or suffragette, is a heartfelt rejection of woman's traditional role as it was defined by every society in the world: rebellion against oppressive notions of the "womanly" understood to be a life devoted to subordinating one's own needs and desires to those of men, family, and children.<sup>22</sup>

It is important to note that despite all the difficulties associated with a unifying label for the modern woman, the figure is still capable of capturing a more generalized sense of women's individual lived experiences of modernity and the use of the figure in Mallo's and Norah's works questions the traditional roles women played in Spanish and Argentine societies.

Mallo's *Mujer de la cabra* (1927) depicts a woman striding through the countryside in the Canary Islands; her determined forward gaze and resolute gait suggest purpose and determination.<sup>23</sup> Her flushed cheeks, strong limbs and short skirt indicate she is a modern woman, probably engaged in rural work and she is very much a visual 'celebration of the female body'.<sup>24</sup> The way she is positioned in the centre of the canvas with her legs mirroring those of the goat, whose inclined head suggests subjugation to her will, is a sign of her power and control over the animals with which she works and the image itself. In contrast to the modern woman at the centre of the canvas, another woman gazes out of the window of her home, her pale face perhaps suggestive of a domestic (indoor) existence. Her raised hand, obviously in a practical sense holding open the shutter, is a greeting to the woman working outside the home. María Soledad Fernández Utrera highlights the disturbance of the typical binary understanding of private space as the realm of women and public space as a male sphere through Mallo's depiction of these two women. However, her interpretation that 'la joven campesina abandona el mundo familiar y rural para dirigirse a la ciudad y consecuentemente caer, de acuerdo a la simbología decimonónica en el pecado, la corrupción y la pérdida de la inocencia rural', might well be reframed if we consider this painting alongside Mallo's later Religion of Work series and some of Norah's drawings of *campesinas*.<sup>25</sup> Within this wider context, *Mujer de la cabra*

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22 Linda Nochlin, 'Foreword: Representing the New Woman—Complexity and Contradiction', in *The New Woman International: Representations in Photography and Film from the 1870s through the 1960s*, ed. Elizabeth Otto & Vanessa Rocco (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2011), vii–xi (p. vii).

23 For a reproduction of this image see Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, plate 1.

24 Shirley Mangini, 'The Gendered Body Politic of Maruja Mallo', in *Modernism and the Avant-Garde Body in Spain and Italy*, ed. Nicolás Fernández-Medina & María Truglio (New York/London: Routledge, 2016), 151–73 (p. 156).

25 María Soledad Fernández Utrera, *Visiones de estereoscopio: paradigma de hibridación en el arte y la narrativa de la vanguardia española* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001), 145.

represents women's contributions to the rural economy. The robust frames of both women support the idea that they are hardy, working women and Mallo's painting makes visible the fact that women were already working inside and outside the home at a time when discussions were taking place about their move into the workplace. In this way, she calls attention to women's actual, but unrecognized, roles in the labour market. Moreover, the use of the rural setting underscores the traditional links between women and nature and aligns the images of these working women with that idea of tradition, thus calling into question the notion that women do not already participate in work.

Mallo's best-known works are the series of *Verbenas* completed in 1927–1928. The four images depict scenes from fairs and Mallo herself says of them: 'In this universe, in those street paradises, among the luminous crowds, the controversy represented in the successive changes of expression appear'.<sup>26</sup> Her remarks suggest that she is aware of the subversive potential of the carnival identified by Mikhail Bakhtin and she draws particular attention to the expressions of her figures who revel in the temporary dismantling of hierarchies.<sup>27</sup> María Alejandra Zanetta supports this line of argument and proposes that the *Verbenas* 'representan no sólo una burla al sistema de valores establecidos sino la propuesta de un modo de vida alternativo liberado de las convenciones sociales que especialmente restringían a la mujer'.<sup>28</sup> Mangini also detects 'un objetivo más profundo: proveer un retrato sociológico y antropológico de la división en clases sociales y de la reacción del pueblo ante el poder'.<sup>29</sup> These scenes are the perfect place to set images of the *mujer moderna* and study her role within society as they highlight the constructed nature of traditions, which in turn shows they can be modified, dismantled or destroyed entirely. The careful placement of a range of women of different classes involved in different activities across these four canvases calls attention to the varying and multivalent experiences encapsulated by the idea of the modern woman.

*La verbena de Pascua* contains a mixture of pagan and Christian symbols, such as the Christmas tree between the three wise kings and the priests, who are observing a painting of the Annunciation, a nice nod towards the birth of Christ.<sup>30</sup> Then, in contrast to this, the two women linking arms at the centre-right of the canvas hold a dead lamb, which

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26 Cited in Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 65.

27 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 65.

28 María Alejandra Zanetta, *La otra cara de la vanguardia: estudio comparado de la obra artística de Maruja Mallo, Ángeles Santos y Remedios Varo* (Lewiston/New York/Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2006), 54.

29 Shirley Mangini, 'Españolas en París: el caso de Remedios Varo, Maruja Mallo y Delhy Tejero', in *Remedios Varo: caminos del conocimiento, la creación y el exilio*, ed. María José González Madrid & Rosa Rius Gatell (Madrid: Eutelequia, 2013), 161–79 (p. 171).

30 For a reproduction, see Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, plate 2. Mangini translates the title as *Christmas Verbena*.

Mangini suggests is 'probably meant to satirise the Church's teaching about the sacrificial lamb'.<sup>31</sup> It is also a subtle reference to the foretelling of Jesus' death from the moment of conception and a neat summary of the links between birth and death in the figure of Jesus and thus acts as reference back to the image of the Annunciation (Matthew 1:18–21) contained within the painting. Moreover, the image of the angel announcing the conception of Jesus also calls attention to the importance of women in the Bible; Mary is, after all, the mother of God, the woman who accepted great suffering to save humanity, and this forms a link to Norah's work, in which the Annunciation is an important repeated subject matter. Both artists use the theme as a way to underscore the overlooked protagonism of women through the use of a set of symbols that do not readily threaten male hegemony.

Mangini points out that the two women carrying the lamb are dressed as maids. Note also that they are not wearing hats, which was seen as customary in public and the depiction of these women without them links them to the figure of the modern woman more generally as well as to Mallo's own practice of *sinsombrerismo* in particular. Moreover, the fact they seem to be wearing summer dresses and are not wearing coats even though it is winter—not surprising as this is not a realist image—allows the viewer to see their bodies. These are robust women, with strong frames, a feature enhanced by their proximity to the rakish troubadour in his cape. Their presumed physical strength, especially in comparison to the man alongside them, or indeed to the thin man in the scarf and hat behind them, suggests that they are physically stronger than these men, which contradicts dominant ideas in Marañón's work, for example, which set careful limits around the types of work in which women might engage.

The other notable woman in the image is the skater on the centre left. The participation of women in sports was a relatively new development, with the first women competitors taking part in the Olympic Games of 1900 at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. Mallo's skating figure, whose scarf and right leg indicate motion and the speed at which she travels, keeps up with her male companion and is seen as his equal, which is further underlined by the way in which his extended leg exactly mirrors hers. The women in this image meet or exceed the strengths and capabilities of the men beside them. The fair has provided Mallo with a safe setting in which she can challenge traditional notions of women as the weaker counterparts of men.

The second *verbena* also represents the movement and energy of the fair, with the Ferris wheel, merry-go-round and pinwheels all lending a

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31 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 66.

sense of dynamism to the work.<sup>32</sup> The upper-class couple at the front represent tradition as staid, tedious and contained in comparison with the vigour and colour of the fair. Mangini captures the mood of this canvas perfectly when she states that

[...] the dominant narrative is, of course, the irony of the contrasting couples who share space at the fair: on the one hand the overweight, lethargic, wealthy couple who do not participate but who physically dominate because of their size and the deep colours of their clothing and the sofa; and the young, clown-like masqueraded working-class couple who seem to exude the devil-may-care attitude of those who have little to lose.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to the two contrasting couples, there are various women dotted around the image, but the one who draws the viewer's attention is right in the centre. She is sitting in a car on the merry-go-round, but she is driving while a man sits behind her holding a baby, and although this is only a merry-go-round in fair, that particular image at the centre of the painting dramatically reverses stereotypical gender roles. The presence of the car insists upon new technologies and the woman's reclining position suggests the speed and progress of the vehicle of which she is in control. Across from this couple another woman on the merry-go-round looks upwards towards the women on the Ferris wheel. No matter where the viewer looks in this lively representation of the fair, the eye will quickly be drawn to a woman, whether she adds to the dynamism of the fair or represents a more conventional form of womanhood, she is crucial to an understanding of the image.

The third of the four *verbenas* is perhaps the best known of the series and attention is immediately drawn to the two exuberant women at the centre of the canvas.<sup>34</sup> Both Mangini and Kirkpatrick agree that these figures are likely to be representations of Mallo and her friend, the poet Concha Méndez, and they also point out the provocatively short dresses the pair are wearing. Kirkpatrick notes that 'su trayectoria, en diagonal hacia la esquina frontal derecha del lienzo, y las líneas y los ángulos sincronizados de sus piernas en movimiento son la fuente de dinamismo en una obra que se compone en su mayor parte de planos que se soplan, enmarcando o conteniendo el movimiento de imágenes más pequeñas' and, thus, despite their size, makes them the focus of the piece.<sup>35</sup> Mangini points

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32 For a reproduction see María Alejandra Zanetta, *La subversión enmascarada: análisis de la obra de Maruja Mallo* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2014), figura 9. This image is known simply by the title *Verbena*.

33 For a reproduction see Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 66.

34 See Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, plate 3. This is known as *La verbena* and is held in the Reina Sofia Museum.

35 Kirkpatrick, *Mujer, modernismo y vanguardia en España*, 250.

out that these two figures ‘appear to challenge the (patriarchal) viewer with their bold and “unladylike” gesticulations’ and in addition to this, the viewer might detect in their facial expressions a jubilantly unfettered attitude as modern women walking freely through the fair.<sup>36</sup> These two figures are bold representations of the modern woman, free to do as she pleases, having cast aside any traditional notions of femininity and embraced wholeheartedly their new-found freedoms. They stride in diametric opposition to the two large statues representing traditional Spain immediately behind them, which, like the two figures at the front of the second *verbena*, appear out of place because of the dark clothes they wear and the stern expressions on their faces. The halo and angel wings worn by the two women in this image appear again in the fourth *verbena* and Kirkpatrick explores the effect they create in detail, noting that these figures are ‘inversiones irónicas de imaginería religiosa y símbolos de una forma distinta de transcendencia’ as well as ‘proyecciones de la mujer artista que identifica en su propia creatividad con la calle, lo carnavalesco, lo popular, lo espontáneo y lo moderno’.<sup>37</sup> The strategic alignment of herself with the figure of the angel, with the multiple meanings that Kirkpatrick attributes to it, is another example of Mallo reinvigorating very traditional biblical images of women in her work and insisting that the figure of the modern woman can be aligned with more traditional images of women.

Mangini draws a fascinating parallel between this same image and Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*. She points out the presence of a painter, in a short dress, bending over a painting in the centre left and suggests this may be Mallo herself, who ‘in Velázquez-like fashion, “immortalises” herself into the canvas as a painter’.<sup>38</sup> This small detail is not the only reference to the Baroque painter; the mirror on the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, which reflects the side of the fair the viewer does not see, functions much like the mirror in *Las Meninas* that reflects the figures of the king and queen. In addition to these references to Velázquez, the subject matter of the fair recalls Goya’s images of leisure scenes. Mallo took formal art classes in Madrid and visited the Prado museum, where *Las Meninas* is exhibited alongside Goya’s works, so these references are not simply accidental. They may be ludic and in keeping with the spirit of the fair, they could also be a knowing intertextual game for the informed viewer. However, in addition to these two possibilities, they are a way for the artist to insert her work into a canon of Spanish visual art. Perhaps one of the freedoms the two figures in the foreground are celebrating is the possibility for a woman artist to see her work hang alongside paintings by traditional old Spanish masters in the Prado (in theory at least).

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36 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 67.

37 Kirkpatrick, *Mujer, modernismo y vanguardia en España*, 250–51. Mangini also notes this tension, see ‘The Gendered Body Politic of Maruja Mallo’, 159.

38 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 67.

The title of the last of the four *verbenas*, known as *Kermesse*, is taken from the name given to celebrations originating in Belgium, Netherlands and Northern France that initially honoured patron Saints and marked the founding of churches, but which evolved to cover funfairs as well.<sup>39</sup> Again the bright colours and juxtaposition of images add to the carnivalesque air of the work. The canvas is replete with depictions of women; the woman in the puppet show in the background is dressed as a Spanish *maja*, a working-class figure in eighteenth-century Madrid who dressed in an elaborate fashion to signal her repudiation of the French Bourbon monarchy. Mangini notes that this style of dress became popular among upper-class woman who wore it ‘so that they could attend the working class fairs without being recognised’.<sup>40</sup> Thus, Mallo’s use of the puppet dressed as a *maja* here emphasizes the subversive potential of both women’s clothing and the carnival, and this figure offers a critique of the ways in which particular styles of dress can lead to women being read or coded in different ways. The two figures on the centre right of the canvas are reminiscent of the two angels in the previous *verbena* and wear similarly short dresses, which, although very different to the traditional costume of the *maja*, are a reminder of the seemingly subversive nature of the modern woman’s clothing. In an echo of the figure of the woman in the car on the merry-go-round in the second *verbena*, this image depicts a woman on a pig. Her raised arm and pose suggest exuberance and freedom and again she is represented with the angel wings characteristic of many of the women in the *verbenas*. The sense of freedom and enjoyment she exudes might well be the unifying characteristic of the modern women Mallo portrays throughout her series of *verbenas*.

Along the top of this final *verbena*, above the puppet show, three women on bicycles mirror Mallo’s representations of sport in her series of *Estampas*, also from 1927. In the image of the woman on the bicycle in the series—who, as Mangini notes, resembles Mallo’s friend, Concha Méndez—the focus is on the strong athleticism of the woman’s body.<sup>41</sup> In this *verbena*, albeit in a much reduced fashion, Mallo also depicts an athletic woman who is simply free to practise sport, and the raised legs of the three cyclists, creating a strong line, underscores the women’s physical dexterity and grace. Across the four *verbenas*, Mallo presents images of the *mujer moderna* emerging boldly into society. There is little sense of negotiation or a careful attitude towards social position; instead her figures reflect the potential for women to engage with public life. Because this new subjectivity is mostly set within the context of the fair, where the rules of the everyday are inverted, the choice of setting is perhaps an indication of

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39 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 68. For a reproduction, see *La verbena* in Zanetta, *La subversión enmascarada*, figura 11.

40 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 78, n. 21.

41 Mangini, *Maruja Mallo and the Spanish Avant-Garde*, 69.

the need to set these modern women outside the accepted norm as a means of highlighting their abilities within the carnivalesque setting.

In contrast to Mallo, Norah does not depict modern women who openly transgress the boundaries set around women's behaviour; instead the figures she portrays suggest the struggle between tradition and modernity. This emphasis on the position of women shows that it is not simply a question of opening up public spaces to them or securing rights in law but that change must be effected within social attitudes in order for modern women to be able to live as such. Norah's works show that such change is slow and must be negotiated carefully, yet she does not shy away from presenting this struggle.

In an atypical image (Figure 1), Norah portrays women engaged in sport, yet whilst the subject is out of character, the style of the drawing is in keeping with her work. The drawing from 1929 depicts a beach scene and a woman is seen swimming in the sea while another woman plays ping-pong. They are engaged in physical activity and have the same type of strong athletic bodies as the women in Mallo's series of *Estampas*, some of which deal with images of sport. The main difference between Mallo's and Norah's works is the way in which Norah introduces the child playing with a woman who is presumably their mother in the centre of the image. This has the effect of moving away from an exclusive focus on sporting women and Norah represents a range of women so that the viewer does not fixate upon the modern woman who is breaking all taboos and forging a path for herself. Instead she presents women engaged in a range of activities within a context that gently questions their social roles. This is an astute technique as it portrays the woman at the centre, with her bobbed hair and modern style bathing-suit, as both a modern woman and a mother. The composition, which draws attention to the central figure, means that the women on the periphery who are engaged in sport are seen as less transgressive because of their presence alongside the image of the woman and child. In general, Norah is not drawn to sporting imagery in the way that Mallo is but, as is the case here, her focus lies in subtle depictions of the difficulties that women encounter in finding a position for themselves within a new and changing social order.

In her study of *Sala* (1922) (Figure 2), Roberta Quance suggests that Joan Rivière's theories from the essay 'Womanliness as a masquerade' might profitably be applied to the image in order to examine the ways in which Norah accentuates a particular type of femininity in order to offset any behaviour she may understand is coded as masculine. Quance argues that

[...] the print was not intended as an illusionistic representation, as a copy of an objective reality, for it is immediately obvious that two different types of women and two different styles of dress are represented in the same frame, making it difficult to imagine the two

figures as being literally in the same room. What we have instead is a subjective impression of two different styles of womanhood, signalled by the radical change in fashion for evening dress.<sup>42</sup>

Quance takes the differences between the women as emblematic of the changing roles of women in society at the time and she points to the use of portrait and mirror in the background to support her argument. She notes that the more traditionally dressed woman, who is holding the fan used on formal occasions, is linked to an older generation through the portrait, while the young modern woman—wearing a shorter dress and sporting 1920s bobbed hairstyle—finds no precursors in the empty mirror on her side of the print. Quance suggests that: ‘it would seem possible to read a narrative here of the modern woman and her fears about breaking with tradition, or of not finding her place in the line of generations’.<sup>43</sup> This careful line of argument touches precisely upon the issue at the heart of this comparison: not every woman reacted in the same way to new-found freedoms, it was not a simple question of casting off the physical, social and familial corset of the past because many women still needed to reconcile their position as a woman in both her own family and social circles with her desire to embrace some or all of the roles opening up to women.

There is some critical disagreement around exactly what is depicted in *Sala* and May Lorenzo Alcalá argues that the print, which she refers to as *Salón (Federal)*, is linked ‘temática e ideológicamente’ to Jorge Luis Borges’ poem ‘Rosas’ published in *Fervor de Buenos Aires* (1923).<sup>44</sup> Her argument is that the Borges siblings re-engaged with their national identity upon their return to Buenos Aires and that in this print Norah depicts a woman seeking clemency from Rosas’ daughter Manuelita, which she explains was a common occurrence.<sup>45</sup> She draws a direct parallel between the figure in the painting on the left and the figure below her and argues that the painting is a portrait of Manuelita. However, debate has largely centred around the figure on the right. In response to Quance’s earlier argument that the figure was wearing a short skirt and so created a temporal inconsistency across the image, Lorenzo Alcalá states that ‘queda la duda de si se trata de un juego de tiempos o del efecto de la posición de la mujer o el recogido de la tela’.<sup>46</sup> Whilst it may be possible to argue that the figure has hitched up her skirt, the lack of bunched fabric and the clear depiction of the hemline right below the knee makes it much more likely that the

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42 Roberta Quance, ‘The Theatricalised Self: Women Artists in Masquerade from 1920 to the Present’, in *A Companion to Spanish Women’s Studies*, ed. Xon de Ros & Geraldine Hazbun (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2011), 257–72 (p. 265).

43 Quance, ‘The Theatricalised Self’, 266.

44 Lorenzo Alcalá, *Norah Borges*, 76.

45 Lorenzo Alcalá, *Norah Borges*, 77.

46 Lorenzo Alcalá, *Norah Borges*, 77. See Roberta Quance, ‘Un espejo vacío: sobre una ilustración de Norah Borges para el ultraísmo’, *Revista de Occidente*, 239 (2001), 134–47.

figure is wearing a short dress and that the image does indeed cross time periods as indicated by the dresses worn by the two figures.

Francisca Lladó Pol extends Alcalá's argument and suggests that the figure on the right in the short dress is wearing a Mallorcan *rebosillo* and is a decontextualized image of the *pagesa*.<sup>47</sup> She also states that the figure on the left, which she agrees is Rosas' daughter, is another version of a *pagesa*. The composition of both figures undoubtedly draws on the types of shapes created by the *rebosillo* and they do show that Norah was attracted to the *pagesa*. Yet, the incongruous short dress suggests that either the *rebosillo* is an archaic addition to the image or that Norah is attracted to the shapes created by figures wearing the *rebosillo* and repeats these shapes in her works without necessarily making them exclusive representations of the *pagesa*.<sup>48</sup> These debates underscore the complexities around Norah's depictions of women in her work and this particular print shows the ways in which Norah was drawing on a number of sources for her works.

The main piece of evidence for the link to Rosas is her brother's poem; however, it is crucial to bear in mind that the works of the Borges siblings cannot be seen as two directly complementary halves of a family corpus.<sup>49</sup> In the case of *Sala*, Norah's work may draw in part upon her brother's poem, or may derive from a similar set of stories shared within the family, but even if we agree that that the figure on the left does represent Manuelita, her print diverges from the poem—which does not reference Manuelita in any case—through the incongruous figure on the right, whose short dress and bobbed hairstyle overlap with other visual representations of the modern woman.<sup>50</sup> The research group dedicated to the figure of the modern girl found in their work that:

Visual representations of the Modern Girl allowed us to track her across the globe. Numerous iconic visual elements including bobbed hair, painted lips, provocative clothing, elongated body, and open, easy smile

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47 See the article by Francisca Lladó Pol in this present volume: 'Una isla a su medida: Norah Borges y la práctica de la vanguardia desde Mallorca'.

48 Other examples of prints with figures adopting a similar pose include *Las tres hermanas*, *Horizonte*, I, 1 de octubre de 1922, front cover; *Arlequín*, *Baleares*, 131, 15 de febrero de 1921; *Untitled*, *Ultra*, I:2, 10 de febrero de 1921, front cover. This same pose is also seen in Norah's earliest works such as *La Verónica* (1918) and the paintings *Bodegón con figura* (1919) and *La anunciación* (1919-20).

49 Eamon McCarthy, '“El jardín de los Borges que se bifurcan”': The Image of the Garden in the Early Work of Jorge Luis and Norah Borges', in *Norah Borges*, Special Issue of *Romance Studies*, ed. Roberta Quance and Fiona Mackintosh, 27:1 (2009), 30–44 (p. 42).

50 Humberto Núñez-Faraco argues that time is the central preoccupation of this poem, which may help explain the incongruity of the two figures in this print. See his *Borges and Dante: Echoes of a Literary Friendship* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2006), 76.

enabled us to locate the Modern Girl around the world in approximately the same years between World War I and World War II.<sup>51</sup>

The figure in *Sala* and figures in Norah's other contemporaneous prints can be readily identified as representations of modern women, which does not nullify the links with her brother's poem or suggest that Mallorcan peasants are not present in some way, but rather shows that Norah uses references to women across time periods to place modern women alongside her ancestors. The empty mirror in which Quance stated 'it would seem possible to read a narrative here of the modern woman and her fears about breaking with tradition, or of not finding her place in the line of generations' reflects the difficulties faced by the modern woman searching for her place in society and locates the figure on the right of this print alongside many other similar figures in Norah's contemporaneous works, which capture the tensions faced by women living in Spain and Argentina in the early 1920s.<sup>52</sup>

The same awkward pose of the young girl in *Sala* is seen in an untitled image of two young girls, possibly in a garden or courtyard, published in the Spanish avant-garde magazine *Ultra* (Figure 3). The exterior setting is suggested by the depiction of the balustrades on the lower right and the tessellated entrance hall floor in the upper right-hand corner, which are characteristically indicative of a garden or balcony in Norah's works. Her figures never stray far from the domestic setting and any exteriors—typically a garden or balcony—tend to form liminal spaces, between private (or home) life and public (or city) space.<sup>53</sup> Norah takes a more tentative step towards her representation of the modern woman in this particular figure, who is dutifully wearing her hat and does not appear particularly exuberant; none the less she is outside the home and her bobbed hair is just visible. She is carefully crafting her appearance for her emergence into public life, ensuring she is neither too daring nor too old-fashioned and her

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51 Alys Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong & Tani E. Barlow, 'The Modern Girl as Heuristic Device. Collaboration, Collective Comparison, Multidirectional citation', in *Modern Girl around the World: Consumption, Modernity, and Globalization*, ed. Alys Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G. Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong & Tani E. Barlow (Durham, NC/London: Duke U. P., 2008), 1-24 (p. 2). In the introduction, this research group carefully explain their use of the word 'girl', which overlaps nicely with Norah's images of adolescents.

52 Quance, 'The Theatricalised Self', 266.

53 See for example the similarities between this print and the untitled print that was published in the mural magazine *Prisma*, 2 (1922). Also see many of her later paintings, such as *La anunciación* (1941), *La Galería* (1949), *Las quintas* (1965). For reproductions of these works see Ana Martínez Quijano, *Norah Borges, casi un siglo de pintura* (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural Borges, 1996), 42, 49, 55. Marta Sierra underscores the importance of viewing the spaces in Norah's work as dynamic and performative. See her 'Espacios diferentes: las cartografías imaginarias de Norah Borges', in *Geografías imaginarias: espacios de resistencia y crisis en América Latina*, ed. Marta J. Sierra (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Cuarto Propio, 2014), 74–105 (pp. 89–90).

confidence in taking these steps might be glimpsed in her poised, forward gaze. The other figure, playing what looks like a lute, is more hesitant, with her head bowed. She is a typical figure in Norah's works: a demure, contemplative woman with a musical instrument who lends an air of tranquillity to the setting. The insertion of this figure means that Norah can use her or other figures in her images to reflect critically upon women's experiences; for example, in this print a modern woman between the balustrade of the house (literally fencing her in, keeping her away from public spaces) and the angelic figure representing tradition and religion are present, which provide carefully delineated roles for her to fulfil. Yet, in the middle of the print, among these competing expectations, the viewer sees a modern woman, which makes the print a subtle allusion to the complex liminal position of women in 1920s Spain and Argentina.<sup>54</sup>

The technique of depicting seemingly innocent figures, particularly adolescent girls, is a means by which Norah can safely represent the *mujer moderna* without drawing undue attention to the figure. Moreover, works such as this print capture the experience of women who are caught between tradition and modernity, those who want to step outside the home but who do not wish to call into question their social position. This particular problem is readily glimpsed in the issue of *Ultra* in which this print was published as it also contains a poem by Guillermo de Torre, who met Norah in Spain in 1920 and then married her in 1928. Torre's poem, 'Amiga', was published without a dedication in the magazine but was later dedicated to Norah when it appeared in his anthology *Hélices* (1923).<sup>55</sup> The love poem is addressed to a woman artist, described as a 'musa de la xylografía [sic]' (l. 16), and cast in a very traditional role as a source of inspiration for the male lyric subject despite her own engagement with the cultural sphere.<sup>56</sup> This is a clear instance of the type of masculine bias of the modernist movement that Rita Felski described and shows that the men like Torre paid little or no attention to the ways in which Norah's works were aesthetically innovative.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to her aesthetic innovation, two of Norah's paintings include a focus on sexuality and sexual desire that relate to her own long engagement to Guillermo de Torre. She uses techniques (such as pastel colours and very young figures) to ensure attention is deflected away from a

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54 The Borges family returned to Argentina in March 1921 so this print was either completed in Argentina and sent back to Spain or was left in Spain by Norah before she set off on the trip.

55 Guillermo de Torre, *Eliche: Poesie 1918–1922*, ed. Daniele Corsi (Arezzo: Bibliotheca Aretina, 2005), 148.

56 In his article, Sergio Baur catalogues many other instances of Norah being cast in the role of muse. See 'Norah Borges, musa de las vanguardias', *Cuadernos Hispanoamericanos*, 610 (2001), 87–96.

57 Rita Felski argues that the whole modernist movement operates with a masculine bias. See her *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard U. P., 1995).

subject which might be considered taboo or at least difficult for a woman artist but which, in the light of Freud's work, was an important component in the discussion around women in the early twentieth century. The first of the two paintings in question, *El herbario* (1928) (Figure 4), has been interpreted as a comment upon the frustrations of Norah's long engagement, whilst *El marinero y la sirena* (1931) (Figure 5) is a celebration of sexual desire.<sup>58</sup> The paintings do not immediately seem to allude to the couple themselves or indeed to any sense of a sexual relationship, largely due to Norah's depiction of adolescents as a means of avoiding direct engagement with sexuality. However, the parallels between her own life and the dates of the paintings strengthen the possibilities that they contain an element of a critical reflection of her own experience. Moreover, the depictions of the male figure holding the *herbario* in the first painting and with an open book by his side in *El marinero y la sirena* link him directly to her other images of Guillermo, who is always depicted with books, and thereby strengthens the link back to the artist herself.<sup>59</sup>

In *El herbario* the emphasis on the preservation and dryness of natural objects might be read as a comment upon growing and frustrated sexual desires through a long engagement because of the air of melancholy that exudes from the pair, who seemed trapped in this controlled world.<sup>60</sup> The dried butterflies on the wall, the stuffed bird, the butterfly net and the herbarium in the foreground all suggest an exertion of control over nature or the suppression of natural forces, which links to the regulation of sexual desire throughout the engagement. The couple's hands almost touch as they hold the herbarium, but the distance between them is precisely what is alluded to in the rest of the painting. This gesture is in direct contrast to the depiction of the hands in the image stuck to the herbarium itself, which are intertwined and holding two roses, a symbol of nature blooming from the union of hands, reiterating the idea of desire. The female figure is not readily identifiable as a modern woman; the hemline of her dress is not visible, making it impossible to see if it is short or not and the neckline and

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58 Roberta Quance notes that in *El marinero y la sirena*, Norah moves from the Romantic *leitmotif* of love between siblings or soul mates to a more carnal expression of desire. See Roberta Quance, 'Las sirenas de Norah Borges: el sexo inocente', *Boletín de la Fundación Federico García Lorca*, 35–36 (2005), 96–114 (p. 108).

59 See for example *Retrato de Guillermo* (1924), in Patricia Artundo, *Norah Borges: obra gráfica 1920–1930* (Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1994), 57. There are also strong physical similarities between the figures in these paintings and the image of Guillermo in his study. See *Guillermo de Torre* (1929), reproduced in May Lorenzo Alcalá & Sergio Baur, *Norah Borges: mito y vanguardia (julio–agosto en el Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Neuquén; septiembre–octubre en el Fondo Nacional de las Artes, Buenos Aires, 2006)* [exhibition catalogue] (Neuquén: Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes/Buenos Aires: Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 2006), 26.

60 I base my reading of this painting on Roberta Quance, 'Norah Borges y Ramón Gómez de la Serna: revisiones de lo cursi', *Revista Canadiense de Estudios Hispánicos*, 28:1 (2003), 71–85 (pp. 78–80).

long sleeves are not particularly daring. The same difficulties of identification apply to her hair, which might be either tied back or styled in a short *garçonne* fashion. The lack of any features that would allow the figure to be identified as a modern woman suggests that Norah is taking care to ensure that a painting that touches upon taboo questions of female desire is not immediately dismissed for being too provocative. *El herbario* alludes to the carefully arranged social setting in which the modern woman, in Norah's case at least, conducted her romantic life, showing that women's sexualities and desires were still highly regulated by family and society more widely. Whilst Mallo's exuberant women walking through the fair seem more daring than the demure woman in this image, what unites them is, as Ledger suggests, their 'newness', which is juxtaposed with the older traditions they are challenging.<sup>61</sup>

*El marinero y la sirena* reveals a series of subtle allusions to sexuality in general and to Norah's relationship with Guillermo de Torre in particular. The painting was completed after the couple's marriage in 1928 and signed with Norah's full married name, which was just one of the ways in which she mitigated the theme of sexuality.<sup>62</sup> As was the case in *El herbario*, the open book beside the sailor links him directly to other images of de Torre. Moreover, the strong similarities between the facial features of the sailor and the mermaid, particularly the almond shaped eyes, prominent nose and small mouth, place them alongside Norah's other paintings of *almas gemelas*, including her depictions of Urbano and Simona or Paul and Virginie, yet the overt sexuality of this piece is distinctive.<sup>63</sup> The couple depicted on the beach with their intertwined bodies represent sexual union, even despite the ambiguous sexuality inherent in the figure of the mermaid, whose tail functions as a means of frustrating a physical relationship with the sailor.<sup>64</sup> The strong compositional lines, typical of Norah's later style, serve to emphasize the harmony between the pair and the cross formed out of these figures meets at the point where the couple's waists are touching.<sup>65</sup> As was the case in *El herbario*, the couple's hands are

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61 Ledger, *The New Woman*, 5.

62 See Quance, 'Las sirenas de Norah Borges', 110–12.

63 Quance gives these paintings as examples of Norah's use of a *cursi* aesthetic and she shows that they are examples of what might be termed *cursi bueno* by Norah's contemporaries (Quance, 'Norah Borges y Ramón Gómez de la Serna', 76–78).

64 Quance notes that: 'las sirenas evocaban tanto la esquividad como el poderoso atractivo físico de la mujer, pues la desnudez de la sirena prometía el placer, mientras que la cola de pez advertía del fracaso; la ambigüedad era tan poderosa que acaso hiciera que la sirena se convirtiese en el más cabal de los emblemas del deseo imposible' (Quance, 'Las sirenas de Norah Borges', 103).

65 Artundo analyses the composition of this painting in detail and shows how 'la disposición de las figuras y el predominio de las líneas oblicuas sobre las horizontales y verticales, incrementaba la dinámica de la superficie que se ocultaba tras un aparente estatismo' is characteristic of Norah's later style (Artundo, *Norah Borges: obra gráfica 1920–1930*, 98–100 [p. 100]).

not quite linked here, but the mermaid's bare breasts and the languid, intimate, almost post-coital pose fill the image with a strong suggestion of sexuality and the central point of contact at the waist is a much stronger allusion to sexuality than touching hands.<sup>66</sup> Quance notes the ambiguities inherent in Norah's use of the mermaid, and also sees an allusion to the modern woman in her use of the figure:

Si, finalmente, como la mayoría de los hombres y mujeres de vanguardia, acabamos reconociendo en la imagen de la sirena una alegoría de la imagen de la mujer moderna y la sexualidad femenina, hemos de reconocer que a veces las mujeres de este período se encontraban todavía atenazadas, como acaso lo estuvo en algún momento Norah Borges, entre el deseo de afirmarse como sujeto deseante y el deseo de seguir sintiéndose femeninas, es decir, amables a los ojos del amado y deseadas por él.<sup>67</sup>

The mermaid successfully captures the experiences of the modern woman who finds herself negotiating the ambiguities of a theoretically more open society and her lived experiences. In *El marinero y la sirena* Norah goes further than she ever has in addressing questions of female sexuality, yet the careful use of pastel colours, signing with her married name and the depiction of the figure of the mermaid ensure that she is not seen to do so in a direct or overtly challenging manner. Her desire to address such issues mirrors both her own lived experience and the discussions taking place in the cultural magazines she was reading, yet her reluctance to be overt underscores the pressures not to be seen to transgress social boundaries.

In their works both Mallo and Norah capture some of the experiences of modern women in Spain and Argentina in the 1920s and early 1930s. Mallo's boisterous works celebrate the new-found freedoms of women yet use the carnivalesque atmosphere of the fair to place these outside an everyday setting, while Norah's works explore the ways women might adapt to these freedoms as they negotiate a place for themselves in society. Ultimately what emerge are images of the different ways in which women might engage with modern society and find spaces for their own subjectivity within an evolving social order. However, their works show that the modern woman cannot simply be reduced to the image of a rebellious figure boldly overturning social structures and both artists reflect the complex position, somewhere between tradition and modernity, in which women found themselves during the 1920s and '30s. The fact that

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66 The sexuality of the figure of the mermaid stands out within Norah's body of work. Apart from depictions of the mermaid, the only other nude figures that I am aware of are a small unpublished drawing and the painting *Desnudo en un paisaje* (1954), which was published in Ernesto B. Rodríguez, 'Para el Orión del recuerdo', *Lyra*, XVI:171-173 (1958), n.p., and also in Félix M. Pelayo, 'Norah Borges', *Nuestra Arquitectura*, 345 (1958), 41-42.

67 Quance, 'Las sirenas de Norah Borges', 114.

both artists employ imagery, such as clothing and shorter hairstyles, to represent versions of the *mujer moderna* indicates that the potential for a new subjectivity offered by this transnational figure had captured the attention of women living in both Madrid and Buenos Aires. The women in Mallo's and Norah's works act as reminders that although the term 'modern woman' is used in the singular, it is a concept which encapsulates a range of experiences, identities and women in the plural.\*

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