

SPIRITS OF MASS PRODUCTION: Graciela Iturbide's "The Goat's Dance" and the Ecstasy of Meatpacking

formed bricks out of slaughtered pork bellies for several years during my late teens. During that time, in the mid-1980s at an Armour Meatpacking Plant in Louisville, Kentucky, when I drove in for the second shift and as I approached "Butchertown" — it was replete with several stockyards — I would be drenched with the stench of incessantly spilt fresh blood.

Presently situated on LA's Acropolis, The Getty Center, I think back to that instant while standing in a gallery that features photographer Graciela Iturbide's series "*La Danza de la Cabrita*" (The Goat's Dance), just one component of her retrospective.

The pigs squealed 24/7 as Armour's production lines were ceaseless. Eventually, the pigs would be sent down a tunnel from their concrete pens, sprayed with water, funneled into a shoot, and electrified; the water meant to carry the current better. Their unconscious bodies would fall onto a conveyor belt, and a man would attach chains to their hind right legs that yanked them upwards — like a literal minded *deus ex machina*. They dangled in the air on the way to the Kill Floor; fleshy chandeliers emitting crimson beams of blood draining from their arteries after their throats were slit.

Since the arrival of Spaniards, in the hills of La Mixteca, located in the northern part of the state of Oaxaca, goats have been herded. A ritual that involves their slaughter has continued from that time — a mass production of sustenance for food, profit, and Catholic spiritualism. Iturbide witnessed this annual ceremony at the hacienda of Santa Maria in El Rosario — sharp knives, puddles of blood in the dirt, severed goat heads, skins drying in the sun. Iturbide says of her experience: "It was an erotic world for me, filled with the blood of sacrifice. The Indians make the sign of the cross and ask forgiveness before killing the goats. It's practically biblical, but erotic at the same time because everyone is very excited by the blood ..."

Like Iturbide, I was excited about the blood at Armour. There was the horror of experiencing the revelation of a kid who finds out that the meat on his dinner plate comes from the friendly, loving, and talking animals in his storybooks. But being a butcher also felt like a tie to ancient sacrificial rites.

I would retrieve racks of bellies from a house-sized freezer, and then shove each one into a metal press that shaped them into rectangles



SELF-PORTRAIT OF AN ARTIST: Tyler Stallings as "Priest of Pork"



Graciela Iturbide, from the series "*La Danza de la Cabrita* (The Goat's Dance)," 1992

so that they could be sliced into uniform strips of bacon. Their new, flush, four-sided shape reminded me of marble blocks for a cathedral of meat. The factory's unofficial motto was "we use everything but the oink" — the oink being a pig's ethereal, uncontrollable spirit, therefore, unmarketable for whetting appetites.

The position of these Indians in Mexico as seemingly sacred butchers is descended from colonial rule. In the past, they were indentured servants. In the present, they are free, but the results of their servitude have formed a cultural tradition now, though the goat meat and hides provide a source of income. It is only since the early-twentieth century that Mexico embraced its indigenous past as that which makes it special. Iturbide's photographic gaze captures these contradictions—the history and present reality of the ritualized goat slaughter and a seductive Romanticism of the indigenous.

If I were to return to Louisville, after having now perused Iturbide's photographs, I would be inspired to create a performance akin to a cross between Vienna Actionist Hermann Nitsch's "Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries," and the drawings of Dutch artist Wim Delvoye, who once tattooed pigs marked for slaughter and then framed their decorated pelts.

I and my former friends from the Kill Floor would march out of the factory, oinking in unison to evoke the spirit of swine, and wearing headdresses formed from bacon strips, as if representing the transubstantiation of the living pigs into processed food — priests of pork. Against the backdrop of heaving music that would suggest a heart beat's ebb and flow, the drums of smoke-flavoring chemicals turned into percussive instruments, we would each grab a pig from behind, hold its gaze toward the crowd so that they could see for just a second that it was a mortal comrade, that he or she has an awareness of what is coming, and then we would slash their throats, tilting up each swine's head so that the blood spurt onto white sheets, placed in advance between the geometry of parking lot lines, forming patches of an unstitched quilt of forfeited blood, visible only from the heavens.

This is how I would bring to the fore, vividly, the United States' most native quality — the Spirit within its Mass Production. ■

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