

ARTS

La Ribot has shrugged off tradition – and her clothes – to make performance art that explores intimacy and observation. She talks to Laura Cappelle in Paris

Would you spend three hours following a single naked performer around a gallery? The Spanish dancer and choreographer La Ribot manages to make it easy. Throughout her 2003 work *Panoramix*, a series of vignettes performed at the Centre Pompidou in Paris this month as part of the Festival d'Automne's retrospective of her work, she looked at the audience as intently as we looked at her, a twinkle in her eye. The situation may be absurd, she seemed to say, but we're in this together.

Her stance was so refreshingly direct that when someone pulled out their smartphone to take a discreet photo, I felt a pang of anger on La Ribot's behalf. A museum employee intervened, but when I mention it to the 57-year-old performer days later, she sighs and tells me that minutes into another show, two other women tried to take pictures of her in the buff. "I yelled: 'No photos!' I was upset for 10 minutes. I told myself that if it happened again, I would get up and leave."

The perils of the job have certainly changed over La Ribot's three decades of performances, but the tall redhead has lost none of her fearlessness. If anything, she was long ahead of the game in contemporary dance. She explored nudity and the intimacy it creates with strangers before it became a cliché of the genre, brought dance into gallery spaces and museums in the 1990s, and even sold a number of works to collectors before the market for performance art had become established.

Yet while some of her contemporaries, such as Jérôme Bel or Xavier Le Roy, have achieved a high profile and secured major commissions, La Ribot hasn't received the same level of international recognition. In the UK, where she lived between 1997 and 2003, her work has all but dropped off the radar. "That made me very sad," she tells me at her hotel in Paris.

In 2003, La Ribot moved to Geneva at the suggestion of her then husband, the



La Ribot in the Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum in 2016
Credit: © Tommaso Azzopardo

of miniature, self-contained work, and many at the Pompidou came with a witty feminist twist. In one, she took Polaroids of her breasts and proceeded to pin them on to her torso; elsewhere, she tied herself up with rope and stood motionless, desexualising a quasi-voyeuristic image.

As an experiment in the 1990s, and in order to fund her independent work, she sold 27 of her pieces to "distinguished owners". Many are friends and fellow artists, from Lois Keldan, founding director of London's Live Art Development Agency, to Bel. Years before the advent of performance art fairs such as Brussels' A Performance Affair, La Ribot wrestled with what the sale entailed. She made a commitment to listing buyers' names next to their works and to informing them whenever they were performed, but stopped short of offering on-demand performances.

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Stark, naked performance

choreographer Gilles Jobin, who was frustrated with the British reception of his own work. Switzerland embraced her, and this year she was awarded the Swiss Grand Prix for Dance, now, for the first time in her career, she is enjoying benefits from steady funding. Her latest work, *Please Please Please*, a collaboration with the director Tago Rodrigues and the French performer Mathilde Monnier, recently premiered in Lausanne.

Next month it will travel to the Festival d'Automne, along with 2006's *Laughing Hole*, a punchy six-hour installation made in reaction to the

Guantánamo Bay detention camp, and 2018's *Happy Island*, created for a company of disabled dancers, *Dancando con a Diferença*. At the Pompidou pages from her notebooks, covered with colourful sketches and crossed-out drafts, let the viewer in on what looks like a busy stream of consciousness.

In person too there is something warm and unfiltered about La Ribot. She keeps suggesting that she may be an unreliable narrator, even as she discusses the experience that inspired her love of dance. "The story is that my mother took me to see a very long film

that was a cross between *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*, with both cartoon elements and real people," she says. "but I think I mixed up what I needed to create this core memory."

She also readily acknowledges her privileged Spanish upbringing, as the daughter of a businessman who brought British pop records back from his trips and counted painters among his friends. Franco died when she was 13. She remembers the uncertain years that followed as "very complicated": "One of my classmates murdered someone for political reasons when he was 15 or 16. There was this sense of democratic change, and at the same time, terrible violence."

La Ribot left Spain at the age of 18 to study ballet in Cannes, but struggled with the form's strict gender roles. When she took classes with Merce Cunningham and Alwin Nikolais in New York, she found their modern styles equally restrictive. Her refusal to be moulded by established masters was a stark departure from the traditional model for dancers, especially women. "I think I wasn't looking for a guru," she says. Amazingly, she has never danced professionally for anyone other than herself.

When she returned to Madrid in 1984, it was "a different city – a different country". She landed in the middle of La Movida, the Spanish new wave that pushed artists including Pedro Almodóvar to the fore. La Ribot is quick to add

that she was only a fringe participant. "I was 15 years younger than many of the people at the heart of it. Anyway, I tend to only half-realise what's happening around me. I feel like I'm less aware than most people," she says, before concluding with a laugh: "Or perhaps it's just the way they talk about things later on, in interviews."

She can't remember how she first came to strip naked onstage, in 1991's humorous *Socorro! Gloria!*, but it became the blueprint for *Distinguished Pieces*, the ongoing series that has defined her career. *Panoramix* features 34 of the existing 53 works; she has long planned to make 100 in total. Each acts as a kind

rights." But what right do you want to have?" she muses. She hasn't sold a new piece in more than 15 years – "I was a little bothered by the commercial nature of the exchanges" – but since existing owners can resell or donate theirs, one of her pieces is now in the collections of Madrid's Reina Sofia Museum, which received the rights to 2000's *Sliquid* this year.

And there is something heartening about seeing her revive works such as *Panoramix* at a stage in her life where some now call her "brave" for taking off her clothes onstage. "I've never heard anyone talk about the bravery of mature men onstage," she deadpans, acknowledging the pressure her work entails as a woman. Onstage, however, her presence belies it. She may bare it all – her lean, graceful figure and muscles as well as her C-section scars – but La Ribot won't be objectified.

To November 16, laribot.com

La Ribot performing 'Panoramix'
Alfred Meuse

