



291 GRAND ST | NOV 9 – DEC 22, 2023

# Tecla Tofano

## *This Body of Mine*

Installation view, Tecla Tofano, *This Body of Mine*. Photo by Phoebe d'Heurle.

James Cohan is pleased to present *Tecla Tofano: This Body of Mine*, an exhibition spotlighting the radical Latin American feminist Tecla Tofano (b. March 5, 1927, in Naples, Italy, d. October 20, 1995, in Caracas, Venezuela), on view at the gallery's 291 Grand Street location from November 9 through December 22, 2023. This is Tofano's first solo presentation in the United States and is accompanied by a comprehensive artist monograph. The gallery will host an opening reception on Saturday, November 11, 2023 from 4-6 PM.

*Tecla Tofano: This Body of Mine* foregrounds Tofano as a critical figure in the history of feminist art and the broader canon of postwar global modernism. Curated by Gabriela Rangel and Audrée Anid, this exhibition features over thirty ceramics from the 1960s and 70s as well as a selection of drawings from *Evas al desnudo* (Naked Eves), her series from 1972. Tofano channeled her ideas most notably through ceramics, though she was also an adept draftsman, a metalsmith, and a voracious writer.

In Rangel's words, "...the feminist impulse empowered her to examine, in both her art and writing, the female body as a tactical space of confrontation."

Tofano's meditations in clay were often infused with her biting sense of humor, though they also maintained a poignant and personal undertone. The artist's initial foray into pottery in the 1950s began with throwing utilitarian objects on the wheel under the tutelage of Miguel Arroyo, a figurehead of Venezuela's nascent craft movement. By the 1960s and into the '70s, she shifted to hand-modeling body parts as well as domestic items ranging from food and books to totemic figures, flora, and fauna. Unabashed in her choice of subject matter,

Tofano embraced ugliness, hand-modeling ceramics that celebrated the grotesque. Her visual language stood in direct opposition to a refined geometric abstraction and kineticism that was popular among her peers. Tofano embraced rough, hand-built surfaces, as evidenced in this exhibition's uncompromising works, which range from carved and extruding phalluses to disembodied tongues.

The artist's work revealed the cracks in an extremist sociopolitical system in Venezuela, Tofano's home of over forty years. Her left-leaning activist views were a direct response to the volatile dictatorial climate that engulfed the country in the 1950s and to the oil boom of the 1960s and '70s. She embedded her work with social commentary to explore issues of class, gender construction and sexism. The female body is specifically addressed in Tofano's visual art and writing as an affront to pervasive machismo and a reflection of her personal traumas. Her suite of forty-four pencil drawings, *Evas al desnudo* (Naked Eves), 1972, for example, directly referenced social stigmas and expectations imposed on women, particularly those involving reproductive and domestic labor. In Tofano's narrative, Eve, the archetypal woman, is pictured in a multitude of scenarios, from the quotidian to the fantastical.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Tofano felt that she had exhausted the possibilities of visual art and refocused her energy and activist rhetoric on writing. The titular phrase, "This Body of Mine" is borrowed from *Epílogos* (Epilogues), her 1987 book of poetry. Tecla Tofano's corporeal ruminations across ceramics, drawings and writing underscore the artist's deeply-rooted commitment to vocalizing the unspoken paradoxes of womanhood and to rendering visible what was once considered taboo.

To accompany this exhibition, James Cohan has published the first-ever monograph dedicated to the artist, co-edited by Gabriela Rangel and Luis Felipe Farías. It features an essay by Rangel, a detailed chronology by Farías, and translations of Tofano's poetry and writing by Lucía Hinojosa Gaxiola.

Tecla Tofano was born in Naples, Italy, on March 5, 1927. In 1952, she moved to Caracas, Venezuela, where she studied ceramics at the School of Plastic and Applied Arts. Tofano was an outspoken public intellectual and influential activist who taught at the Central University of Venezuela in Caracas from 1959 to 1980. Beginning in the 1960s, she wrote for the newspaper *El Nacional* and authored several books of fiction and poetry including *Quién inventó la silla* (Who Invented The Chair?), 1968 and *Yo misma me presento* (I Introduce Myself), 1974. Tofano presented her work in exhibitions at numerous galleries and institutions in Caracas including the Museo de Bellas Artes and the Galería de Arte Nacional. She was awarded the Premio Oficial de Artes Aplicadas at the 19th Salón Oficial, Museo de Bellas Artes (Caracas, 1958); gold medal at the International Exhibition of Contemporary Ceramics (Prague, 1961); and silver medal at the Exposición Internacional de Cerámica (Buenos Aires, 1962).

In recent years, Tofano's work has been featured in group exhibitions including the 2015-2016 exhibition, *MODERNO, Design for living in Brazil, Mexico and Venezuela, 1940-1978* at the Americas Society, New York and the Blanton Museum of Art, Austin, Texas and the pivotal 2017 exhibition, *Radical Women: Latin American Art, 1960-1985*, which traveled from Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, to the Brooklyn Museum, New York and Pinacoteca de São Paulo, Brazil. Her ceramics were included in Cecilia Alemani's exhibition, *The Milk of Dreams* at the 2022 Venice Biennale. She is represented in the collections of Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas, Venezuela and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. Tecla Tofano died in Caracas on October 20, 1995.

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