

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

Books

Groundbreaking anthology of Mexican poets released

By Sheila Farr

Seattle Times staff critic

Just when North American poetry wanted an infusion of excitement, Copper Canyon Press has released **"Reversible Monuments: Contemporary Mexican Poetry"** (\$20) a generous anthology of contemporary Mexican poets. It's a big, multilingual edition that includes substantial selections by 31 writers, most born during the second half of the 20th century.

I say "multilingual" instead of bilingual because several of the poets write in indigenous languages (Mazatec, Tzeltal, Zapotec), and for them the work is translated into English, with a Spanish version at the end of the book.

It's pure coincidence that "Reversible Monuments" came out just in time to ride the swell of enthusiasm surrounding the new movie "Frida" and Seattle Art Museum's show "Frida Kahlo, Diego Rivera, and Mexican Modernism." Among the many events and exhibits planned around the show is a Seattle Arts and Lectures program spotlighting three poets from the anthology. Coral Bracho, Tedi López Mills and Pedro Serrano will read their work (in English and Spanish) Tuesday evening at SAM.

In their selection for the book, editors Mónica de la Torre and Michael Wieggers have revealed a host of fine writers, some of them world-class talent. The first to bowl me over as I scanned the pages was Carmen Boullosa, a poet and novelist in her late 40s who now lives in New York City. Several of her novels have been translated into English, but this anthology should ensure that we see more of her poetry: That's where she excels.

Boullosa is represented in "Reversible Monuments" by one long poem, "Elysian Garden." It's a stunner, rushing along in plain-spoken, at times colloquial, language, in a prolonged conceit that establishes the speaker as a kind of zookeeper for the gods. Prime movers Zeus, Ares, Apollo, Venus, Vishnu, Hanuman, Cronos, Isis, Demeter, Nut and others huddle or pace or shriek in their cages, a bunch of moody petulant creatures. Some are vicious, others slaver like dogs. The whole place stinks.

The story she tells and Boullosa's gripping, incantatory pace and imagery don't let go. She writes:

*As night falls,
a hubbub breaks out,
for the world keeps on turning, even though its gods are in captivity.
It is the voices of the gods themselves, scaring off their fear of the dark.*

Book Review

Seattle Arts & Lectures presents "A New Generation of Mexican Poets," a reading by Coral Bracho, Tedi López Mills and Pedro Serrano, followed by a conversation led by Mónica de la Torre, co-editor of "Reversible Monuments." 7:30 p.m. Tuesday at Seattle Art Museum, 100 University St., Seattle; \$10, 206-621-2230 or www.lectures.org.

She also throws in terse, funny asides, such as:

(Note to myself: punish Artemis. She's having fun hunting the bear / and the fallow deer. Penalty: two days without food rations.)

For me, Boullosa alone made the book worthwhile, but "Reversible Monuments" bristles with so many other thrilling discoveries it's impossible to cover them all. Among them are the three readers coming to SAM on Tuesday. Tedi López Mills, for example, was the first recipient of the Octavio Paz Foundation poetry award in 1998. In her work, she pays tribute to the accomplishments of other world poets. I admire her for her intelligent explorations into the timelessness of art — and also for choosing poets particularly dear to me, beginning with the late Joseph Brodsky. In "And Never Did ... " Mills responds to Brodsky's great poem "A Part of Speech," beginning, "I was born and grew up in the Baltic marshland / by zinc-gray breakers that always marched on / in twos."

Mills starts out:

*I don't know the Baltic marshes,
metal shattered by northern cold,
dementia of hoarfrost on nocturnal windowpanes.*

She also responds to poems by Apollinaire, Pound and Virgil.

In discussing a book of translations, a brief mention of the translator's art is essential. Many writers worked on the English versions that appear in "Reversible Monuments" and the successes — and failures — of their undertaking warrant more than the few words we have space for here. Let me just say that translation is the art of making choices and, also, finally, of disappearing.

One person who did that brilliantly is Geoff Hargreaves, who translates Boullosa and Fabio Morábito, among others. He gave us an imaginative, yet natural-sounding English version that always serves the original.

One person who stood out for the wrong reasons was Roberto Tejada. At one point, in translating Eduardo Milán's work, he even took the liberty of translating "me amas?" (do you love me?) into the German "liebst du mich?" Certainly Tejada has a good rationale for all his decisions, yet his versions of Milán's poems are rocky. By drawing so much attention to his own work, Tejada didn't well serve the original author.

Sheila Farr: sfarr@seattletimes.com.