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“Patricia Esquivias: ‘111-119 Generalísimo/Castellana’”

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By Roberta Smith



An installation view of “111-119 Generalísimo/Castellana,” by Patricia Esquivias, at Murray Guy. Credit Murray Guy, New York

As seen in her third solo at Murray Guy, the work of the Venezuelan artist Patricia Esquivias is as much art history or urban archaeology as it is art, and consequently very dependent upon having a visually interesting, historically resonant subject. That is the case here, in a meandering installation that focuses on five apartment buildings in Madrid erected in the late 1950s at 111-119 Avenida del Generalísimo (named for Franco and later renamed Paseo de la Castellana), and Ms. Esquivias’s gradual excavation of their history.

Attracted by the pictorial ceramic murals visible from many of the terraces, Ms. Esquivias manages, through sleuthing and personal connections, to discover that the buildings were designed by an architect named Miguel Artiñano, who commissioned the murals from two largely forgotten artists, Amadeo Gabino and Manuel S. Molezún. She also tracks down the artists’ widows. Then, after befriending the buildings’ superintendent, she takes photographs (seen here) of 20 of the murals and even gains possession of two that were tossed out to make way for remodeling.

This would be mostly a conceptual exercise if the murals weren’t so beautiful: stylized renderings of European capitals that have the underlying geometry of folk art. They form a little piece of art history that you’re happy to have. The largely documentary nature of the proceedings is further subverted by a short, episodic, musing video in which Ms. Esquivias, pausing twice to sing a cappella, recounts parts of her process of discovery.

Almost in passing, she weaves her own story into the history of the buildings while conjuring the utopian pretenses of life under Franco and the ways the present inevitably erases the past. The power of her effort sneaks up on you.