

Written on Water

Essay by John Yau

LYDIA RUBIO

Exhibition 1996 Gutierrez Fine Arts Miami & Joyce Goldstein Gallery, New York
Catalog by Bianca Lanza

THE JOURNEY ITSELF IS THE HOME: THE ART OF LYDIA RUBIO

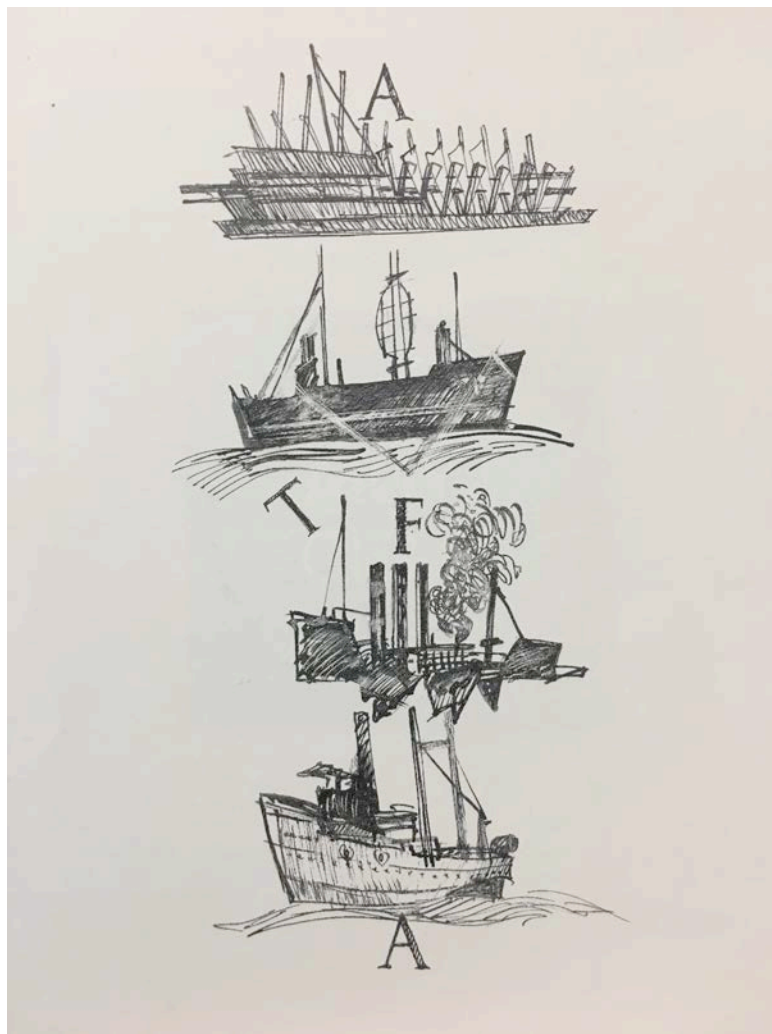
I.

Lydia Rubio was born in Havana, Cuba, and grew up there during the 1950's. She has strong memories of her grandmother, who was an artist, and has honored their relationship in the painting, *She Painted Landscapes*, a dazzling trompe l'oeil work which undercuts its myriad of illusionistic details with both dramatic shifts in scale and open-ended juxtapositions. In *She Painted Landscapes*, Rubio combines fragments of ordinary reality with the mysterious, often multiple narratives underlying one's dreams, with the pull of both memory and imagination. Everything jostles together. The viewer cannot say whether the painting is of a dreamscape inhabited by fragments of memory and reality or a realist depiction haunted by memory and fragments recalled from different dreams. Such is the primal power of Rubio's art; it calls the ordinary into question, as well as compels us to examine our belief that our everyday life is stable enough to withstand change, and that the earth we walk on is solid and dependable.

After living in Cambridge (Mass.) and New York City, among other places, Rubio resides in both Miami and the diaspora. The world she knew into her adolescence, and which has had a strong and lasting influence on her, no longer exists, shattered forever by larger events over which she had no control. Instead of believing reality is a slowly unfolding, recurring pattern, she knows the world, her's or anyone's, can be utterly changed at any moment. The person who lives in the diaspora knows the earth is as solid as the water covering most of its surface, and that one can easily disappear without a trace, and without being remembered by anyone or anything. Even those thousands of nameless slaves who built the pyramids in both Egypt and Meso-America left something tangible behind.

For Rubio, the question is: How do you reconcile your deep knowledge of the diaspora, your sense of endless displacement, with the world you presently inhabit? It is a question with no single, deeply satisfying answer. In 1994, the question was given a different slant when flimsy flotillas of homemade boats left Cuba, their passengers and navigators desperate to reach America, some ninety miles away. The Cuban *balseros* (boat people) drifted across the Caribbean, hoping to reach Florida's shores. Many of them died, and those who didn't often ended up in internment camps on the American navy base at Guantánamo, Cuba. They had left one kind of imprisonment for another.

The irony of their fate sears one's sense of proportion, and more than likely makes Rubio and others, who were born in Cuba and are now living elsewhere, remember their own flight from their island homeland. In part, this suggests why one of the artist's recurring motifs is a ship, whose inhabitants are nowhere to be seen. But, to locate Rubio's ships solely within the matrix of her personal life, is to ignore both the larger implications of her work and the open-ended, imaginative contexts she establishes through pictorial, material and verbal means.

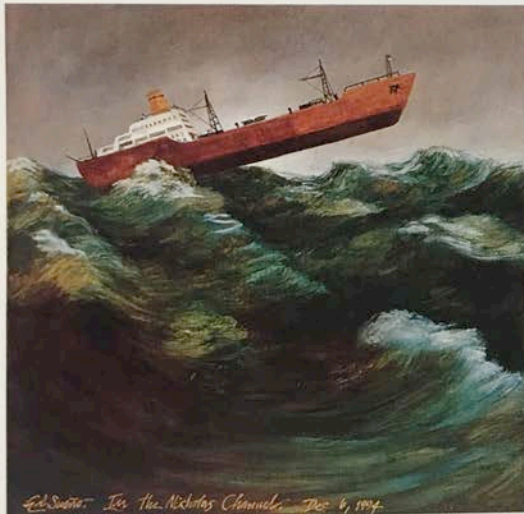




Aug. 1994. *La Lancha de Regla, leaving the Bay of Havana.*



9/20/95, *Leaving the Siquinde de Bacunayagua. December 5, 1994.*



El Sueño: In the Nicholas Channel, Dec 6, 1994.



Mira por Vos Passage, 2 degrees north of Pointe, Martin, August 16, 1995.

Upper Left: *La Lancha de Regla*
 Lower Left: *El Sueño, Nicholas Channel*
 Each 16" x 16" oil on wood, 1995

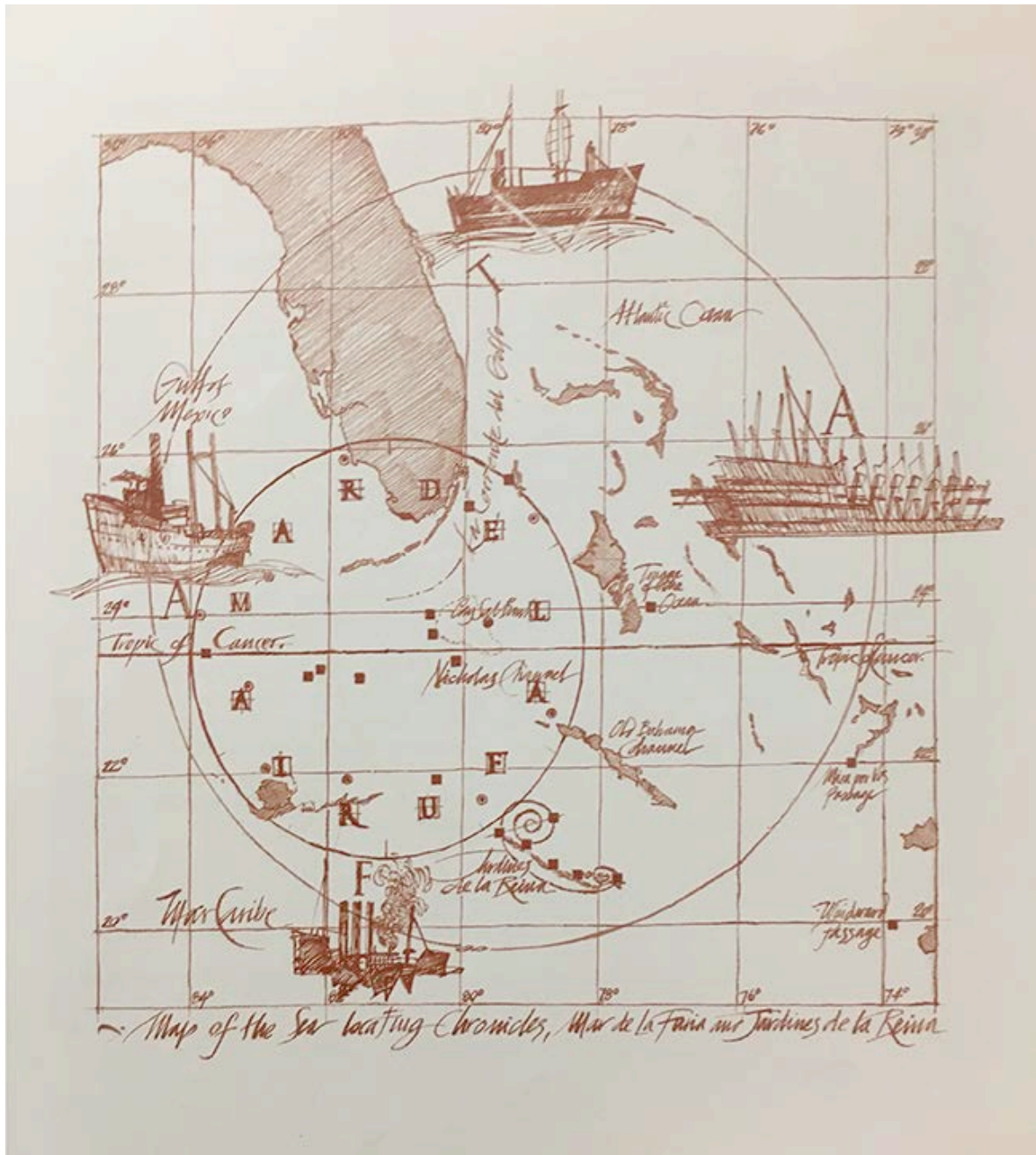
Upper Right: *El Sueño, Bacunayagua*
 Lower Right: *Mira por Vos Passage*
 Each 16" x 16" oil on wood, 1995

II.

Written On Water1; Rubio's collective title for the exhibition, evokes the poet John Keats' self-accusatory epitaph: "Here Lies One Whose Name Is Writ On Water." The artist has gathered together four distinct, though related series: *Chronicles*, *The Ships of the Elements*, *Mar de la Furia* (Sea of Fury), and *Jardines de la Reina*

(Gardens of the Queen). The ship is a central motif of Homer's *Odyssey*. The difference is that for Ulysses, home is both a goal and a horizon. It waits for its master to return and claim what is rightfully his. For Rubio, however, there is no home to which she can return, there is only the journey itself. And, as Rubio knows, there is no single journey, and certainly no single story which can lead her home. Thus, in contrast to many who live in the diaspora, Rubio has not succumbed to the pull of nostalgia and the myth that she can indeed go home again. The stories she tells in her paintings are fragments which hint at a

larger narrative, and which can never be fully known.



Because the function of a ship is to transport both its occupants and cargo from one place to another, it is particularly conducive to narrative, which begins in one moment in time and ends in another. In essence, both a ship and a narrative echo each other, since each exists in time as well as measures its passing. Like a ship, a narrative both contains and excludes aspects of the world. Rubio investigates that aspect of painting which stills time, thus locating the narrative moment of her painting between the *after* and the *before*, between that which has happened and that which is about to happen. Thus, in all of Rubio's paintings, the viewer senses that something has happened and something is about to

happen.

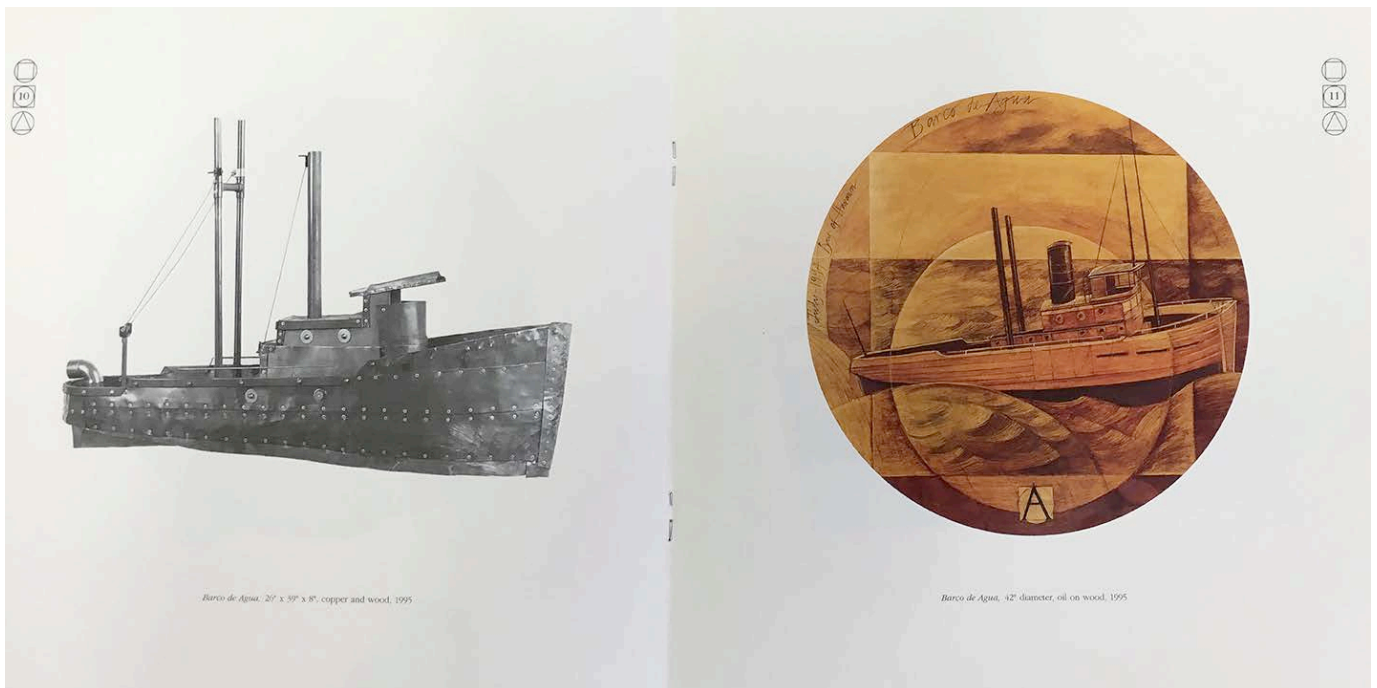
In the first or leftmost panel of the triptych, *El Sueño* (The Dream), a ship floats above the water, airborne. In the second panel, its prow rises above the rolling green waves, as if it is either about to take off, like a rocket, or it has just dropped into the sea, bow first. The viewer doesn't know why the freighter in *El Sueño* is floating above the calm green sea, only that it calmly defies gravity and all the laws of nature. The mystery of both its defiance of gravity and its eventual sinking is never revealed.

III.

The *Chronicles* are marine ex-votos. Along the bottom of these intimately scaled panels, Rubio writes the location, date, and story of the ship she has depicted. Often, she depicts fictional disasters, which resonate against a perilous moment or phase in postwar history, particularly in relationship to modern Cuba. Thus, one recognizes in the artist's seemingly matter-of-fact description of a Russian ice-breaker, an allusion to the Cold War and the part Cuba played in the confrontation between America and Russia. According to the date on the painting, the event took place over three decades ago. And yet, as we know, the Cold War is over for some but not for all. Cuba remains locked in a history defined by the Cold War, and its current state of affairs reminds us that history is still unresolved.

In *Chronicles*, Rubio uses the motif of the ship to recast history, to show its effect on those who are nameless. Both the passengers and crew occupying the ship are at the mercy of larger, more potent forces which are not necessarily visible in the composition. At the same time, the paintings are haunted by an overall sense of isolation and vulnerability. There is a sense that no resolution to the narrative is possible, that each story that ends will also spawn another narrative of conflict.

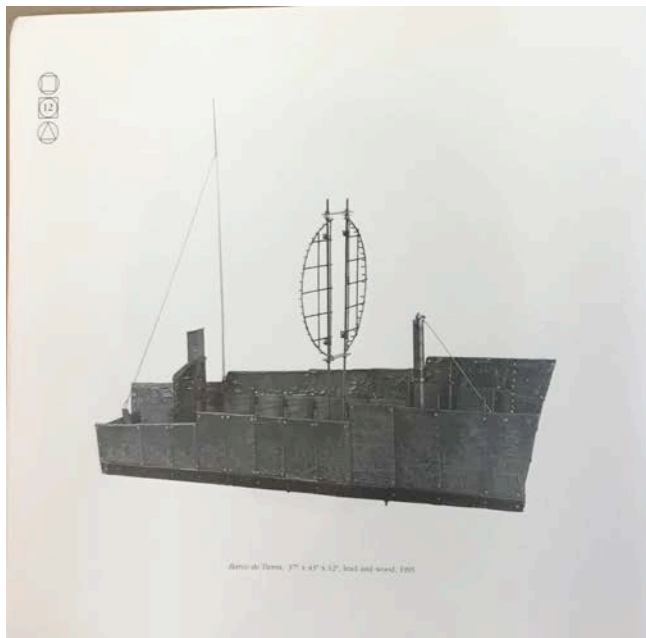
IV.





In *The Ships of the Elements*, *Mar de la Furia* (Sea of Fury), and *Jardines de la Reina* (Gardens of the Queen), Rubio investigates the metaphorical implications of a narrative which is based in part on symbolic materials. . In *The Ships of the Four Elements*, Rubio constructed four ships, each made from a different metal: aluminum (air), copper (water), steel and iron (fire), and lead (earth). The sculptures serve as models for the paintings and vice versa. The four paintings are in oil on round wood panels or tondos. The tondos evoke both portholes and a circularity of an endless journey. If the viewer thinks of the circle as a porthole or window, then one is looking at the ship from another ship.

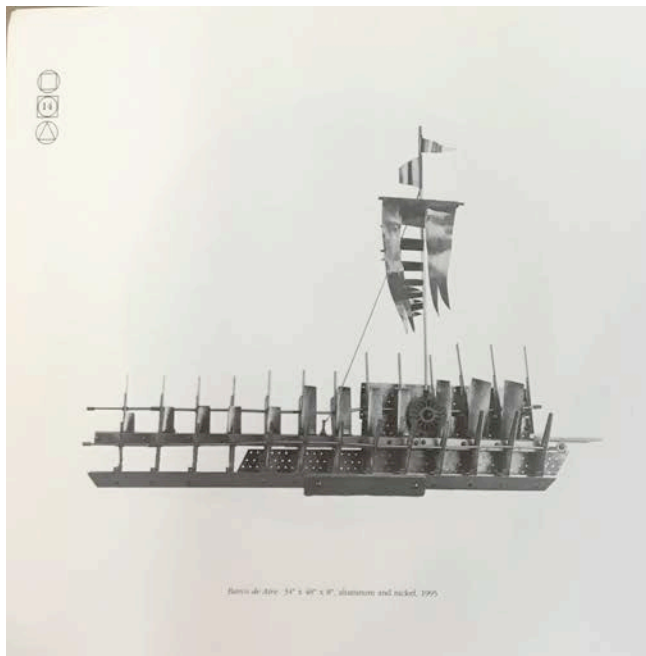
For the paintings, Rubio largely limits her colors to the tonalities which fall between brown and red. She applies the paint in thin washes, which gives the composition a sepia-like glow. In the painting of the lead boat, Rubio depicts a ship cutting through a landscape, its mooring lines extending beyond the frame of the composition. Is the ship being dragged across the earth? And if so, who or what is dragging it? Common to all of the paintings in this series are unanswerable questions the viewer will feel compelled to ask. It is these questions which help fix our attention and make us look carefully at the paintings, which combine aspects of realism and abstraction. '



Barco de Torres, 37" x 43" x 12", lead and wood, 1995



Barco de Torres, 42" diameter, oil on wood, 1995



Barco de Aire, 34" x 40" x 8", aluminum and nickel, 1995



Barco de Aire, 42" diameter, oil on wood, 1995

In each of the paintings, Rubio defines a large square which frames the ship. On one level, the square isolates the ship from the round format and locates it in an abstract realm. On another level, the combination of geometry and realism reminds us that there is an underlying order to the world, and all of us are caught in a larger cycle of time than the immediate moment. Thus, the paintings remind us that we exist in time, which is both linear and cyclical. Recognizing that resolutions are only temporary, that there is a larger story which includes us all, Rubio has evoked narratives whose beginnings and endings can never be known.

Mar de la Furia consists of twelve paintings. In each' painting, the viewer notices a single large capital letter at the bottom of the composition. All together, the letters spell out

the title of the series. Thus, each painting (narrative) is part of a larger narrative. At the same time, the single paintings are self-contained compositions whose narratives remain open ended.

Jardines de la Reina consists of six paintings. Rubio has juxtaposed images of ships with dates which correspond to both feast days of Catholic female saints and Afro-Cuban goddesses (orishas). Culture is a hybrid made up of many sources. The paintings depict episodes from an imaginative journey which suggests that one never finally escapes his culture, even when that culture has been radically reconfigured. The individual is caught in time in a number of ways, including historical time and time's relentless passing. Mortality, Rubio subtly underscores, takes many forms.

For Rubio, the series isn't a formal means, but an integral part of the way she understands reality. She keeps finding ways to construct a narrative, as well as undo it. The world, she reminds us, never stands still. We keep moving between one place and another, without ever reaching our destination. We are all on journeys we did not ask to undertake. Rubio remains open to the world, to this threat of chaos and dissolution. Sanctuary is, at best, temporary; the ship cannot survive all that it will encounter. The world has a way of catching up with us, reminding us that time is relentless and unsparing. Rubio opens our eyes to this disquieting, inescapable fact.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The 42 works in this series have been conceived as a unit composed of progressions or groups of 4, 6, 12, 15 pieces. *The Ships of the Elements* and *Jardines de la Reina* will be shown in New York City, *Chronicles* and *Mar de la Furia* will be shown in Miami. .

The sense of separation or incompleteness I have sometimes lived is conceptually explored in these works, as in my previous works over the past years. Each piece is a story, a location, a letter tied to a maritime maze or puzzle eventually and inevitably destined to drift away from the other. The impossibility of seeing all the works simultaneously instills in the viewer a sense of loss or need to fill in the missing pieces.

I hope these fragments of boats and words will eventually find dry land and lasting meanings.



Son de los Mares

El reto:
te voy a formar un nudo
a ver si lo zafas solo.

Este es el son de los barcos
Cuatro de los elementos,
que se ha escrito sobre olas
para que lo lleve el viento.

Por jardines, laberintos
de más leguas insulares,
he viajado en espirales
probando la sal del mar.

Déjame Señor que vuelva
a pisar el continente
y que el aire de agua ausente
apacigne el temporal.

Oración:
No me des mi sepultura
entre las olas del mar.

Mi son es son de los mares
y barcos de la Reina Luna,
que entre estas diosas nació
la unacien millas de Cuba.

They come from the sea

The task:
I will tie for you a knot
to see if you can undo it.

This is the song of the gardens
of the ships of the four elements,
carried away by the wind
and written over the waves.

Crossing labyrinths and gardens
islands of more than twelve leagues
I have travelled in spirals
tasting the salt of the seas.

Let me return, oh my Lord!
to land again on the continent
and let the most forceful air
appease the threatening storm

Prayer:
Please don't allow them to bury me
among the waves of the sea.

My song is the song of seas
of the ships of the Queen Moon
that was written among goddesses
many miles away from truth.