

Oblivions are just things to overcome, after all

Gran Sur: Contemporary Art from Chile in the Engel Collection

Sala Alcalá 31, Madrid. 25 February – 26 July 2020

In a small but very famous advertising insert in the London *Times* newspaper, the British explorer Ernest Shackleton announced in 1911 the search for a crew for what would be his ambitious and ultimately tragic Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition, destined to sail to what at that time was the last of the continents unknown to human beings, to travel and cross it. "Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in case of success," the ad read. Despite the threatening tone, the invitation had a great response, and in 1914 those brave men sailed from the port of Plymouth, probably seduced in their imagination by the mixture of mystery and promise arising from what in those years was known as "the Great South".

Echoing this challenge to imagination, the exhibition *Gran Sur: Contemporary Art from Chile in the Engel Collection* was open in February 2020, in what could be described as the most important and ambitious foreign expedition of the art from that remote southern country. Mounted in the Sala Alcalá 31, in Madrid, the exhibition brought together works by more than thirty Chilean artists from different generations working on a wide range of techniques and formats. All the artworks belong to the private collection of

businessman Claudio Engel, offering a well-finished cartography of the geographical, historical, cultural and even legal territories that these works have been going through during the last forty years in order to continue the difficult task of turning visible the vast and unknown territory that South America still is. Part of this task has also corresponded to the space of Alcalá 31 itself, which hosted the eighty-nine pieces of the exhibition as part of their project that since 2002 seeks to encourage the displacement of private collecting from Latin America into the public sphere, serving as a bridge between different government entities related to culture, art fairs, etc.

However, what is surprising in the entire symbolic and institutional framework that this project entailed is how the geographical and even epic imprint that the exhibition wanted to give itself by invoking Shackleton's journey, ended up marked by the same danger that also sealed the fate of the English explorer. Because far beyond the curatorial parameters proposed to review that complex, rich and painful relationship between Europe and America, the Covid-19 pandemic imposed an unexpected record layer on this exhibition, which wanted to challenge cultural limits and borders in a world that suddenly locked that geography by closing borders, paralyzing industries and confining entire metropolises indefinitely. That world had become again, as in Shackleton's time, an unknown and threatening place. Thus, by virtue of this unforeseeable crisis, it is now possible to see how *Gran Sur*, one of the main international exhibitions of the year, is acquiring now a very particular significance, having suffered the risks posed by his own will to enter the unknown to question the geography of our history. When examining in more detail some of the works that were part of *Gran Sur*, it is possible to notice that the intuition of danger as a vector of history and its mutations has been latent in the reflections of many artists, whose creations, in the new context in which we see them now, have acquired an unusual relevance.

The Laughing Alligator (1979) is one of the works in this exhibition that most frontally raises this reflection on cultural limits and borders. A video that records as a

travel diary the experience that its author, Juan Downey, had when entering the Amazon jungle to live with a community of Yanomami Indians, in Venezuelan territory. Despite its strong ethnographic content, the almost twenty-seven minute duration of the piece does not seek to unravel the mystery that this encounter entails, but rather to live within it, immersing us into the unknown and letting the audio-visual texture of the work to pick up the marks of the interactions, fears, joys and difficulties of the journey. Downey gives his own cameras to the Yanomami for them to observe and manipulate its technical and magical properties, and with this gesture he allows the intellectual and historical myths of Europe to unfold over the limits of the communicable, anticipating the many questions we ask ourselves today about how technology put pressure on the borders of our cultural diversity.

In a more subtle but no less eloquent gesture of resistance, the artist Lotty Rosenfeld presents *A Mile of Crosses on the Pavement* (1980), a series of interventions on the layout of streets and avenues in different cities in the world that the artist carried out between 1980 and 2009. The records of her intervention on Manquehue Avenue, in Santiago, are presented in *Gran Sur*, where the simple arrangement of white adhesive bands on the asphalt transforms the traffic sign into funeral emblems that poetically point to the humanitarian catastrophe that Chile was living at that time, ruled by a military dictatorship. The photos and videos that document this performance once again acquire a new meaning in our pandemic times, where traffic and circulation have become dangerous and deserving all kinds of surveillance. By means of this raw intervention, the work prompts the projection of the ancestral character of the symbol of the crosses on the current ways that we have for understanding our ideas of freedom, circulation and control of the territory.

Similarly, the artist Pilar Quinteros also investigates the tensions and disruptions displayed on the territory through ephemeral actions and site-specific installations, though observing the unstable and often precarious quality with which architecture

weaves the fabric of historical processes. Her work *Lago Bulo* (2016) registers the construction and subsequent burning of two house-like boats made of cardboard and paper that move through Llanquihue lake, in southern Chile. The natural environment of the space allows the artist to stage, in an allegorical way and with a good dose of irony, the ancient conflicts between the Huilliche inhabitants, originally from those lands, and the strong German colonization that settled in the region towards the end of the 19th century. The permanent desire of cultures to impose themselves on each other is contrasted in this work with the evidence of the fragile and vulnerable condition of all human construction.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the work *Gran Sur* (2011) by the artist Fernando Prats, which refers directly to Shackleton's journey, from where, as we already know, the title of the exhibition comes. It consists of a metallic structure almost twenty meters long that reproduces in red neon letters the same notice that Shackleton published in the London *Times* before his expedition to Antarctica. But its poetic strength lies rather in the fact that this enormous arrangement was located in Antarctica itself, on Elephant Island, through an operation whose logistical complexity is only comparable to that which Shackleton himself had to face to enter the frozen nothingness of that territories. It is this sort of revival or tribute, the arduous but epic journey that this work undertakes to reach the end of the world, which makes it paradoxically visible, and for which it was chosen to occupy the Chilean pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 2013 .

In one of his famous Theses on History, Walter Benjamin says that to articulate the past historically does not consist in reconstructing things as they effectively happened but rather in seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger¹. If today it is clear to us how the Covid pandemic has put the word “danger” back into our vocabulary, it is also necessary to learn how to recognize what tools do we have to carry out the task

¹ WALTER BENJAMIN, *Theses on the philosophy of history*. London: Pimlico, 1999. P. 247

of redefining the past —and rewriting history— by virtue of this present urgency. For this reason, the *Gran Sur* exhibition, located right on the edge of this change of era, can be seen as a call to abandon our desire to predict the future and instead enter the risky but irresistible adventure of inventing it. Without having proposed it, this exhibition allows us to think of the current health crisis as a proper time to awaken that spirit of adventure and courage that we shall need from now on. That is why we can trust that this exhibition still has a lot more to reveal about how artworks can continue to flash up in our footsteps, even while we move over the most radically unknown horizon of events.