

Portrait of a neighborhood, landscape of mystery

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Admiring Juan Castillo's most recent projects is an experience that invites the viewer to look back toward the compendium of symbolic operations that he has been producing in the form of installations and art actions since 1966. The common denominator of all his projects is their migrant nature: they are traveling projects that take on different physiognomies in each of the stops they make along their way. Even when a fair number of the central elements of these works are the same throughout their various iterations, the *mise en scene* is always different at each stop. In this way, by using one single title Castillo is able to articulate a number of versions, the broad scope of which is distinguished by a varied combination of media and supports. Each version is a part of the overall plot of his work, and at the same time each project is a piece of the not-quite-uniform mosaic that comprises the *oeuvre* of this artist.

The itinerant quality and inevitable variety of his work preclude the viewer from associating any of his visual organizations with any previously-conceived notions. What we are finally able to observe –or experience- is not the realization of a previously-defined conceptual plan. This is where Castillo's operations diverge from the basic premises of conceptualism (art as idea), though they do share conceptualism's preference for the dissolution of the object/work. In fact, it is hard to describe Castillo's projects as "works" at all, but this happens not because their physical/material dimension is an accessory in relation to a hypostasis of the concept but because this materiality, which is fundamental above and beyond all else, is always one that *floats*: its roving nature is its very essence, its transitory idiosyncrasy, its imperious tendency to fuse materials and images. This lack of closure allows the signifiers to change over and over again as they emerge upon the different stages chosen for their execution.

For this very reason, we are not talking about works, not even in the sense that an installation can be referred to as a work. These are not constituted objects, they do not work as organic wholes but they also don't work as solutions determined by a fixed relationship to a given shift in space¹. Their nature is nomadic, ever-changing, temporary. What Castillo has been proposing for a long time now is the idea of more-or-less articulated collections or clusters of objects, images and texts that do not comprise, in and of themselves, an object/work but which instead come together – poetically rather than conceptually— insofar as there is a gaze that organizes them somewhat.

But while variety is a constant in Castillo's work, there is also an invariability that tends to unify the whole: the insistence upon a mechanism of *transfusion*,² a concept that

¹ The artist himself prefers to use the term 'occupation' rather than 'installation.'

² "Transfusion" is the title that Juan Castillo invented for an operation carried out at the Museo de Arte Moderno (Modern Art Museum) in Chiloé in 1999. On that occasion, two borderline places, two landscapes at two edges of the earth, Chile and Sweden, were

alludes quite literally to one of the projects that Castillo undertook from 1996 onward but it is also, moreover, the thread that weaves its way through this artist's visual discourse: the (trans) fusion involves the vagabond existence of the images, texts, and materials in question as well as the intersecting genres that are borrowed from the pictorial tradition. These are experiences of interchange between one image and another, between stories and words, portrait and landscape.

Landscape

Landscape is the pictorial genre *par excellence* or, in other words, it is the most pictorial of all genres. In its origins as an autonomous genre it refers to the Romantic tradition: it was the Romantic impulse that liberated the landscape from its subsidiary role and gave it a dignity all its own, and it slowly moved away from its previous function as the mere background for an historic, mythological or religious narration, to become a field for experimentation from which pictorial language acquired its own colors, grew more independent and, above all, became aware of that possibility of constitution.

In Chile, landscape occupies a foundational place in the pictorial tradition, for in the search for an autochthonous referent the pictorial tradition finds a place of its own in the Chilean countryside. It was through language that Chilean artists began to progressively abandon academic models imported from Europe and to trust in their own testimonial gaze upon the vernacular geography, creating over time a more or less established tradition of "Chilean painting."

The evocative title *Tu rostro es el paisaje* (Your face is the landscape, MAC 2003), is the name of a project with which Castillo wished to pick up the thread that had been left hanging by a number of experiences he carried out in Chile in the 1980s, which were grouped under the title *Campos de luz* (Fields of light) and which posed questions relating specifically to the matter of landscape. On that occasion, Castillo and the artist Ximena Prieto undertook various actions that involved the use of transparent acrylic sheets positioned in front of a number of local landscapes. The procedure recalled the pictorial technique of glaze but also worked with the idea of surface (painting) as a filter placed in front of a given reality.

These sheets, which bore the inscription '*el montaje eterno*' (the eternal montage), were burned as if part of a ritual of unveiling, an unveiling of reality. In fact, these experiences were foreshadowed by a previous work which involved writing on walls located in abandoned lands, which Castillo created during his days as a member of the CADA collective (Colectivo de Acciones de Arte, Art Action Collective), during a time in which such operations were buoyed by a notably subversive spirit with regard to the existing institutions of art and politics. Today, however, that spirit is different. When

symbolically linked by the presence of a product that comes from the earth and that was brought from the new to the old world: the potato. This tuber became a metaphor for the process of transculturation between two places at the edges of the earth as well as the intersection between the work of two artists, given that Castillo's project is also a dialogue with the Argentine artist Víctor Grippo.

the institutions have changed and tradition is not an authority that needs to be fought, these same figures (institution and tradition) appear as the referents upon which the artist's inner work may be envisioned and formulated. For this reason, pictorial categories seem useful in helping to illuminate the meaning within the intertextual plot that Castillo's propositions constitute.

The experience in 2003 began with a montage in the Konsthall Gallery in Lund, Sweden as well as an incendiary act. This time, however, what the flames ate up was not a transparent curtain (filter) in front of a real landscape but rather a little hut that had been positioned upon a series of stilts. It was a scale model that was made especially for this purpose, much like the kind that are used to create special effects in the movie industry³. The fragile construction was situated in an environment that simulated aridity and desolation, evoking qualities of that other landscape so very familiar to the artist: the landscape of Sweden. Here, strategies of illusion were especially emphasized in order to reaffirm the illusory condition of the raw material; the artist manipulated fiction, not reality. The illusionism of the entire operation carried with it an awareness of the kind of art that is imbued in Castillo's work. Castillo himself states quite clearly: "the issue in art is the problem of illusion...art has never had anything to do with reality."

This awareness of the illusory places the work of this artist firmly within the pictorial tradition. Beyond the fact that the media and supports used are varied and somewhat removed from the 'mother' discipline, Castillo recognizes the persistence in his work of problems that can be traced back to the history of painting: it is in the pictorial fact that the illusory condition is most plainly revealed.⁴ The pictorial fact appears concretely in certain versions (oil on canvas), but it also reveals itself in the form of stains (tea, coffee, oil), impastos and glazes (tar, beeswax) and the constant citation and intersection of the disciplinary genres (landscape, portrait, still life). Landscape –as something simulated, constructed, artificial- emphasizes the idea that its condition cannot be anything but ambiguous, ineffable, indeterminate: it does not exist out there, the landscape is in the face, the face that sees, *the face is the landscape*.

In its second period at the MAC, *Tu rostro es el paisaje* was divested of the technological tools that were put to use at its inauguration at the Video Biennial⁵. A gallery painted entirely in white was worked over by Castillo with a few very precise elements: old photographs with their elaborate frames, used tea bags hanging from nails, a continuous straight line of red earth that traveled the entire perimeter of the room at mid-height. In the blank spaces various different sayings appeared, handwritten with a graphite pencil. From the right: "*sangre sudor y lágrimas*" (blood,

³ Curiously, the image of the house in flames recalls a memorable scene from a movie by David Lynch in which, contrary to what one might expect, a real house was used.

⁴ "The matter of art is illusion. All artists work with an imaginary world. In painting this has always been evident. All painters know that a portrait is a collection of stains. The artist manipulates an imaginary world that, in turn, activates the imaginary world of the person who is viewing the work" (interview with the artist)

⁵ I am talking about the projection of a video of the little hut burning on top of a support made of white tiles.

sweat and tears), a bit further on “*campos de luz, transfusión*” (fields of light, transfusion), “*te devuelvo tu imagen*” (I give you back your image), “*frankenstein*,” and finally “*geometría y misterio de barrio*” (neighborhood mystery and geometry), and “*historia y geografía*” (history and geography).

Portraits

The texts—always written by the artist himself— transcribe the titles of his latest works, ‘latest’ meaning those pieces that begin with the project *Frankenstein, lo extraño como utopía* (Frankenstein: the strange as utopia), in 1996, a project that was articulated around a pastiche image which fused the faces of people of various different races. The image was projected from moving vehicles in the periphery of Paris, on the Seine, and in the Lund cathedral. From this project several other installations were launched in Paris, Sweden, Seoul and Chile. The racial pastiche served as a kind of family portrait, the family of immigrants, and recalled the fusion of Castillo’s own racial and cultural identity and that shared experience of nostalgia, imbalance, inadequacy: the experience of existing as an Other in the domain of the Same. At the same time, the image can be interpreted as a kind of prophecy of the virtual racial amalgam that could well become a reality in a world that seems to be inching ever closer to becoming a universal ‘melting pot.’

In 1998, *Te devuelvo tu imagen* occupied the two spaces of the Gabriela Mistral Gallery in Santiago with a montage that included retouched photos, projections, painting, videos and calligraphic writing. The occupation made use of material gathered from the places where the artist spent his childhood and also from where he had previously executed a project involving the projection of images (family photographs) returned to the abandoned scenarios of the nitrate fields in the Chilean north. As in *Frankenstein*, Castillo once again worked with the objective of fused, erased or interchanged identities. Portraits without faces, deleted, erased or, as occurs with videos, the overlapping tales (sound exchange) of two women from opposite cultural realities. In this way, other signs of identity melt into one other: the proper names that were written on the ground to be trampled and erased as well.

Landscapes and Portraits

Toward the end of 2001, Juan Castillo once again crossed the Atlantic to spend just over three months in a house in a middle-class neighborhood in the periphery of greater Santiago. The choice to spend time in this place was determined by the almost eccentric presence of a gallery for contemporary art located in the aforementioned neighborhood.⁶ This gallery, the only one of its kind located in the physical and social margins of the city, was the base camp for this project that was carried out in collaboration with the local television station. During his time there, Castillo focused his energies on cataloguing the dreams that his neighbors described for him, as well as the cramped interiors of their homes and the strips of street out front. *Geometría y misterio de barrio* (Neighborhood mystery and geometry) was the name chosen to represent a very ambitious project, the different versions of which occupied the spaces

⁶ The Galería Metropolitana.

of the aforementioned gallery, those of an abandoned hospital located in the same city, two Swedish galleries, one Spanish gallery, the second Art Biennial in Buenos Aires and the most recent Havana Biennial.

The catalogue of dreamers' faces, of the houses they lived in and the streets they walked down, and the transcription of the stories that told of their dreams comprised the raw material of this macro-project. It was a collection of raw material that was extremely uneven in many ways, drawing together objects of all different kinds: on the one hand, the photographic and video recording of the physical spaces (living rooms, façades of homes, faces of the dreamers), and on the other hand, the less tangible universe of all that these people dreamed about, a world accessed through the most imprecise of tales. In this last category the daydreams that manifest people's desires and aspirations get mixed up with their more ineffable nighttime dreams, in which their daydreamed desires sometimes find a path toward fulfillment. Castillo legitimizes the floating statute of mystery (the dream world) by using mechanisms through which these elements overlap in such a way that dream and dreamer do not necessarily correspond, just as the geometries (scenarios) that they fictionally inhabit also fail to coincide.

Tu rostro es el paisaje brings together a number of significant elements from previous projects. The old photographs, some eaten away by mold, others manipulated in different ways, are essential elements that act both as an affirmation and a denial of the genre of portraiture. The erasures, the segments of the image that have been blacked out, defy the condition of perpetuity, the immortalizing capacity of the genre by removing the persistence of physiognomic traits. The tea bags—which are never absent from the Chilean table and as such are a metonymic tool of a social way of being—had turned up before in the Spanish version of *Geometría y misterio de barrio*. Nailed to the wall in series of two or three, perfectly equidistant from one another, they let the infusion fall, leaving a vertical stain that crosses the continuous horizontal line of red earth. The little tea bag releases its juice and its color thanks to the nail that has impaled it, in a gesture that recalls the act of crucifixion.

One element that is a constant presence is calligraphy. The manual nature of this practice recalls the tradition of annotation, of the most casual writing in a notebook. In a certain sense, Castillo occupies the public space of the museum or the gallery (just as before he used the wall in the untamed land or highway) as if it were an extension of the exercise of pointing. Like notebooks, these occupations travel and along the way add more notes, impressions of different geographies and mysteries. In their transfer to the support-wall, these notations open up in order to broaden the perspective from one that is private to one that is public.

The landscape—not that one out there, but the one that appears in the aforementioned white room—is comprised of elements, materials, and procedures that come together at an appointed hour, acting like the levitating pieces of a mosaic that almost but never quite manages to come together. The landscape is color, stain: it is painting. Nevertheless, here the landscape is not the expression of the specificity of the medium: rather, it asserts itself as a reunion with the age-old tradition of the

landscape, that which was inextricably linked to symbolic values, narratives. No longer is it a backdrop; it is now a participant in the central plot.

In this landscape, in the portraits that inhabit it, a fundamental lack of definition takes root. A lack of definition that is the echo that defines the complete fabric of Castillo's articulations. The imperfect weave, the mismatched mosaic serves as a metaphor for the strange experience of the nomad: rootlessness. Pastiche of identities, geographies, mysteries, idiosyncrasies. Along with this we find the intersection of genres, the combination of pictorial referents, as paradigms of the alchemy of illusion.