



EYE
BEFORE
E
EXCEPT
AFTER
SEE

VANESSA DONOSO LÓPEZ

Limerick City Gallery of Art / 16th July - 28 August 2015

the ache of the uprooted plant (1)(2)

In New Zealand writer Keri Hulme's 1984 award winning book, *The Bone People*, the plot involves an idea of cultural sickness that expresses itself in the deep rooted, inexplicable sadness and constant foreboding of something that prevents the characters from developing healthy relationships and living full lives. Until the root is found and explored, which is essentially around a culturally based disconnection and trauma, lives are blocked and unhealthy. Central themes concern isolation and repressed cultural identities. The grief or melancholy around the confusions connected to an unacknowledged cultural imprint are passed from generation to generation, often unexplained and creating intergenerational characteristics, including depression and anti-social behaviour, compounding difficulty and blockages. Irish author Evelyn Conlon's book *Not the Same Sky* (2013), explores the passage of orphan Irish girls transported by the British Government to Australia during 1840s Famine times in Ireland. They were to be engaged in domestic service and to populate the New World, and Conlon suggests that the girls were encouraged to forget their cultural identity as a policy of settlement: they had to, and they were young enough to, and there were no physical props in their environment to remind them of their origins, they were never going to see Ireland again, and it was hoped that their children and grand children would not have an understanding of their grandmothers' cultural reference points. This was the methodology of the colonial project. Conlon sets the story in a contemporary setting which traces the grandchildren, who in turn trace their ancestry. This was the launching imperative of the story that goes on to underline the need to know origins and to understand cultural reference points – that elaborates the power of cultural DNA. In these two fictional stories in factual settings, drawing on existing cultural scenarios that entail suppression of cultural identities and memories, there are commonalities that Vanessa Donoso Lopez examines in her exhibition *Eye before E except after see*. Donoso Lopez, in her work, viscerally provokes a yearning and a sense of loss, a homesickness which, although not necessarily entailing social trauma, involves the same symptoms.

In the late 17th century, Johannes Hofer, a Swiss academic, observed that soldiers suffered from symptoms that restricted them from performing their duties, that was allied to a yearning for home and that this was manifest in physical symptoms. Naming this 'Nostalgia' at that time, this becomes 'Homesickness', where the word is first used in the mid 18th century. This was tolerated in society as a sickness up until the American Civil War in 1863 when homesickness became a real physical threat to the armies on both Union and Confederate sides, with longings for home both invaliding soldiers in large numbers and killing them in extreme cases - as well as causing desertion. Even citing 'homesickness' in wrenching slaves from their 'homes' on plantations was a Confederate argument to continue slavery practices – illogically the argument did not trace this cruelty back to when the slaves were originally brought from Africa. In the following centuries, it is also argued that the rise of racism was augmented by the idea of homesickness which came to be regarded as evidence of weak mental health and character, which then evolved to seeing Homesickness as a symptom of mental illness and grounds for committal to asylums, which of course ruptured the subject from their homes completely. In the 20th century, Nostalgia became de-militarized and de-medicalised as a term and was separated from Homesickness, with Nostalgia understood

in psycho-analytic terms, as a returning to the womb, to a place of safety and clarity. Homesickness itself changed in how it was understood to being a sense of desiring to return to a particular place, with a particular set of senses associated with that very specific place.

As consumerism grew in the 20th century, Nostalgia became a tool for manipulating a person's behaviour and influencing social values and their manifestations in society. Homesickness has diminished in being thought of as a dangerous illness, coming to be seen as not serious and temporary, even as a rite of passage for teenagers particularly. The fluidity of these definitions of words over time and the unstable character of society in general, underlines the complexity of trying to articulate meaning. It is this difficulty in articulation of the meaning of Nostalgia and Homesickness, the cornerstones of culture and the value of home that Vanessa Donoso Lopez examines. In the process, she also delves into the yearning and sense of loss of home that is felt when distanced from home, that is profoundly connected to and may even create the trauma of repressed cultural identity.

There is no one word for homesick in Spanish. When living in another culture, the difficulties of language are clear, and cultural differences are manifest through these difficulties. In the process of production, the Artist has dug out from the earth the clay she uses from a combination of sources: from her motherland Spain and adopted land Ireland. In this action, the very different earth is involved in the artifacts she makes. The material is washed and impurities reduced to ready the material for the kiln. The Artist chooses white as the final colour of the created work, which is related to the idea of origins. Using very high temperatures, tonalities of colour are introduced: at lower temperatures the white colour is whiter. The different clays from different places produce different colour. In using muslin and other materials in the display, the Artist uses a diaphanous layering to imply the complexity of the content, to confuse transparency with obscurity. In this layering, the origin and its purity become difficult to find and may even become compromised. Other characteristics have emerged with the layering: a musicality, sound is added. Textures are different. The objects created are beads and chains among other adornments, hanging along the walls, almost conforming to a classification, along some sense of order, something that seems museum-like in an authenticating process. The shapes are basic, the Artist has involved other people in the making, while travelling, while socialising. Society breathes from within the objects - the beads are those of procrastination, of holy prayer, of rosary, of adornment. There is alchemy at work, with traditions and places being magic-ed up, there is a sensory function at work. Articulating what the Artist is doing lies in the experience of seeing and being present. In seeing these objects, displayed on surfaces and in orders, with their whitened colours, the first bones of origins are present. Provoking the feelings may also precipitate disquiet and nausea alongside the acknowledgement of the processes – what the Artist might uncover and disturb is that yearning for home, that homesickness which, however rationalised in the society of the 21st century, is still a strong human response.

Helen Carey, July 2015

DUBLIN, IRELAND

(1) Stephen King, *The Breathing Method*

(2) In response to the CARNEGIE GALLERY

the infantile art of Vanessa Donoso López ⁽³⁾

I

In their bewitching play, art works know more about our being-in-the-world than we do. That is why art works arrest, appeal, appall, beguile and bemuse, stir, stun and silence. Art can be demanding or domestic, democratic or defy description. Individual works may appear intricate and intellectual, intoxicating and insane, sacred and inscrutable. But these ineffable veils are only so many disguises adopted to mask art's true identity: a doll's house for devilish children to play in or destroy. Art is an impossible child born of the infinite, the demonic and the divine. An irrepressible imp, eternally at play. Only in this sense can we truly say, art is infantile.

II

White paper discs form an arrangement of sorts across a studio wall: an experimental archipelago. From the centre of each radiates a watercolour stigmata: marine blue, organ pink, blood orange. Floating wild flowers. Each possess a central stamen or filament. Are they samples, specimens, or scars? Are they breeding? A co-evolution of colour? Some are cut and spliced in latticed rounds. Colour interweaved with its own origin. Is there a finite pattern emerging here? Or merely a fragment of infinite play? Multiplied they might resemble a frenzy of children's party plates, a game invented and performed for an infant's own amusement, remnants of a self-perpetuating pleasure principle. In their autonomous intertwining of theme and variation they present a chromatic echo of Hans-Georg Gadamer's description of chamber music 'which seeks to be more authentic music-making in being performed for the players themselves and not for an audience' (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 110). We cannot easily assume we are the intended audience of such a display. It is performed for its own sake. We have merely interrupted, momentarily, the proceedings, untimely intruders upon a predetermined ritual: a silent and mystic synaesthesia. But such bewitchment is also a form of beckoning, as can be witnessed in the room-sized installation and miniature assemblages consisting of perpetually overflowing porcelain, rotating cut-out dolls, dancing magnetic toys: a *mise en scène* of baroque automata. They attract us, draw us into their intimate world but ultimately ignore us as they and their universe dance to an indifferent tune. Yet, as Gadamer reminds us, art is ultimately made for the beholder just as all play is a form of presentation, even if no-one is there to receive the gesture of its gift. Herein lies the final predicament of art, its precarious existence in the face of its own 'infantile utopia of play' (Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History*, p. 53).

There is a small pencil drawing by Vanessa Donoso Lopez titled, *Join the dots. If you wish.* (2012). In its open-ended and incomplete structure it could be said to resemble Warhol's *Do It Yourself* series. A comparison furthered in its ambivalent tone – an invitation delivered with an off-handed disregard. But there is something more vulnerable in this precarious economy than the deflationary intent of Warhol's ironic transaction. In its direct address to the viewer as fellow player it foregrounds its contingency on the volition of another as yet unknown and unseen. Precarity is, therefore, the very ground of the field of play. As Winnicott concludes, 'Playing is inherently exciting and precarious.' (D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, p. 52). 'If we fail to understand precarization,' writes Isobel Lorey, 'then we understand neither the politics nor the economy of the present.' (Isobel Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, p. 1). Lopez's drawing understands the present - in both senses of the word - as a precarious field of play, which creates a space of potential where art accedes again to its infancy.

Ross Birrell, May 2015
GLASGOW, UK

(3) In response to HERBERT 1 and 2 rooms.



unforeseen hindrance (4)

We walk into a room and in the centre of it a mass of objects smear our steps. A big structure formed by old furniture, piled as if it was an assemblage, creates an enclosed space within the room.

Old movables and unused objects, are stacked as if they were in an old attic.

Gradually we observe that this structure is animated: little objects made out of a variety of delicate materials, paper, feathers, dolls, pins, metallic pieces, reside on the surfaces and move in autonomous ways.

They look animated by a strange energy that confers on them their own life. The atmosphere becomes more and more strained, our hearing captures new sounds, creaks, cracklings and the tic-tic of clock mechanisms.

Senses aggravate; now we can even get the soft smell of old wood, the mites, the fabric, the dust. We become aware of the lights and shadows that move around us. It feels like we are not alone...

We walk our gaze through all the nooks and gaps looking for an explanation of what we are seeing. Our mind travels backwards, to the past; to a fantasy world in which reality and imagination intermingle, when any corner of the house could become a new world, magic as well as terrifying.

We transfer ourselves into that instant lost in our memory; We recover the curiosity unique to childhood and we let ourselves go with the feeling between the shivers and the enchantment. Just there, a bizarre but familiar sensation puts us on the alert.

In *Eye before see except after see*, Vanessa Donoso López, exploits the voyeuristic potential of the viewer, introducing them into a personal world, intimate and fantastic. At the same time, the installation erects and supports itself on multiple elements becoming part of an atavistic and sinister fiction; this distressing feeling, that Sigmund Freud classified in one of his texts, became the closest esthetic analysis that he ever created. Freud's research encourages the itemization, in a rational way, of what confers to certain objects and experiences the sensation of the *unheimlich*. He did it through the dissection of horror stories like *Der Sandmann* by E.T.A Hoffmann and other traditional fantastic narratives. In this way, the sinister ties in with situations that unleash fears and dreads, like the doubts raised when an inanimate object seems animated, or the other way around a living being becomes no longer so; Or the encounter with the double, among other anguishing trances. He even describes situations that can raise momentary horror feelings, although they could appear comical, like finding oneself in a dark and unfamiliar room, frantically looking for the switch and stumbling into a piece of furniture.

We find all those elements in the Dark Room; objects strangely animated, a dismal room, the piled furniture waiting to be bumped into,...as if the artist wanted to condense a set of situations that could cause uneasiness; a little room of infantile terrors. The viewers, nevertheless, feel safe: aware as if a fantastic story was told, as if they were under the control of the fiction. In the same way as a theatre play, its about getting a cathartic effect that will make us confront our personal fears and memories without major damage.

Vanesa Donoso López's work runs away from the classic conception of art being just a set of objects to be contemplated in a white, aseptic, clinical and almost spiritual cube, like the one that Brian O'Doherty explored in his work *Inside the white cube*. Quite the opposite, she looks to create an atmosphere similar to the Surrealist or closer to installations by Canadian artists Janet Cardiff & Georges Bures Miller. Within the last few decades, there has been an expansion of installations that use sound and moving elements, currently becoming an artistic genre itself. These are works that act on different senses like hearing or touch. They fight against the preeminence that the sense of sight has had in the history of art. Generally, they operate in a broader sensorial sphere, where they exert themselves to investigate emotions, even the ones that are remotely hiding in our subconscious.

Vanessa's creative process resembles the one of a scenographer that devise an unreal space, where a complex choreography with dramatic effects happen, with the object to create the appropriate environment to welcome the observer. The core of her project gets revealed this way, that what constitutes the axis of her work, the spectators, which she forced to resign their role of mere viewers and become active subjects. The piece is a scenario prepared to receive a spectator-actor. And at the same time, their ambulation in a temporary space is the essential element to set the piece into operation. The potential of this type of artwork exists within the dialogue that is established with the recipients and consequently, in its opening to the possibility of exploration and multiple interpretation, as diverse as each of the visitors contemplating the installation. This is a work that isn't dispatched at a glance, it needs specific attention and time to relish its elements and to allow sensations to rise.

With this said, we just need to leave our watches aside, enter the room fearlessly, and let ourselves go.

Beatriz Escudero García, July 2015

BARCELONA, SPAIN

(4) In response to the DARK ROOM



more info:
www.gallery.limerick.ie
www.kevinkavanaghgallery.ie
www.vanessadonosolopez.com


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