



A place to rest forever

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The interest for the past is, in reality, an escape from one's own time. Nietzsche's message of "eternal return" is always accompanied by the constant questioning about one's own existence. Time is a circle; past eternity and future eternity are not straight paths, but rather, end up meeting each other. The memory of the past acts in the present as an unconscious motivation.

The initial origin of this idea is in the poetics of the "sublime" and its recovery from the historical and religious component. The Romantics, in their flight from society, in their disillusionment and ennui, took refuge in inner space, aspiring to the infinite, the supernatural, the understanding of beauty as a symbol of what was concealed.

This disenchantment of the artist for the life of his times, finally pushes him to adopt a sole solution: withdrawal into inactivity and dream. The works of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, of Gautier – let us remember his *Roman de la Momie* (1858) or *Une nuit de Cléopâtre* (1839) – or of Baudelaire, passing through the Decadent movement, Poe or Huysmans, among many others, make references to cosmologies and mythologies that are remote, but deeply rooted in the collective subconscious.

Neither is this current alien to our times. Dieter Roelstraete, in "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art" accurately observes that one of the decisive ironies of our times is the fact that a great part of the most advanced artistic production concerns itself (in its choice of materials as well as techniques, in form and in content) with the ancient, the obsolete, the out-of-fashion, the past. Works of art are interpreted as the shavings, fragments of an unknown, irretrievable whole.

Fragmentation has always been a condition proper to seeing the past. Man has only had the chance to know this past through its archaeological remains, its fragments. Many artists of modern times have discussed the evocative power of these interesting "splinters".

It is precisely here where I want to place Lucía Vallejo's installation for Tabacalera's La Fragua exhibition hall. Here, the artist has managed to turn a market architecture of industrial cast into an archaic and anthropological setting, where the echoes and niches of death reverberate.

Lucia manages to accentuate the dramatic, ambiguous and mysterious character of the space, falsifying reality, intensifying its similarity to a diorama and evoking an impression of artificiality. It could be said that we have suddenly come upon a funerary chamber in ancient Egypt where several mummies who somehow seem to have kept themselves preserved in a sort of funerary urn in which to remain unchanging and immobile are resting, like sleepers encapsulated out of a science fiction film.

We could say that the artist has built a “reliquary” located, moreover, in the exhibition hall of a possible museum – the new sanctuary, a place where all funerary furniture is religiously collected in a reserved area, like the treasures the pharaohs buried.

E. Jünger compared the tombs of ancient Egypt to our contemporary museums, underscoring their relative equivalence: both are concerned with keeping death and disappearance at bay.

As though they had survived a catastrophe, the pieces of this installation are isolated amongst themselves and in permanent dialogue with this chosen space: a strange and magical place outside time, where they seem to breathe slowly and listen peacefully to each other.

Nevertheless, life in its real sense is totally absent. These figures are the “others”, images of the dead; sober, depersonalized and schematic, which attempt to represent the “idea” of men and, in this specific case, women as fossil records.

This is also the representation of the organic and the inorganic, of the living and the dead, and because of this has much to do with the fetish. Fetishes make things out of persons, dividing their bodies into parts that become material elements or objects that are easily touched. An image of the unity between life and death, like a vibrant spiritual cord managing to bind both worlds.

Although these sensations may seem proper to something very distant in time, the reality is that many contemporary artists have exploited the repugnance and discomfort they produce in viewers. Just by way of example, we can cite the secular reliquaries of Damien Hirst, who shows the same taste for dusty, spent materials, or his methacrylate boxes containing “embalmed” animals, which recall those test tubes of human remains or malformed fetuses collected by old science museums.

Lucia nonetheless always employs delicate symbolism, consciously avoiding anything that may suggest corporal, visceral, putrid or abject proximity.

Unreal and allusive in character, her installation is a scenario born of artistic, literary and even cinematographic images slumbering in our subconscious and ready to explode at the slightest noise.

As was to happen with the *Wunderkammern* – chambers of wonder or cabinets of curios that sought to systematically collect everything existing in the world into a dream of total scientific knowledge that would include everything extraordinary or unheard-of; stones, shells, skeletons of peculiar animals, human bodies, fetuses, fossils, mummies, ruins, etc. – this exhibit contains within itself something enigmatic, something that must be deciphered, like an emblem.

This also has many connections with Dutch still life painting – *vanitas vanitatem*, the “vanity of vanities”, and *memento mori*, “remember you must die” – underscoring that so many of the things occupying our time are really ephemeral, in a world where nothing is permanent, nothing is important.

Life is ephemeral, but its imprint might persist indefinitely. Lucia is interested in traces almost wiped out, ruins understood as footprints and evidence (or announcements) of the existence of something prior, to which it is possible to return only obliquely, through evocation.

Interested in the emotional qualities of materials, in the gap between painting and the sculpted form, in the object as embodied metaphor, she manages to create an image that oscillates between the allegorical and the decorative, an ambiguous relationship between sculptural form and painting “incarnated” in a place, which creates space; a “body”.

Ground-breaking artists had already begun to take pictorial practice across uncharted ground that could be categorized as an *expanded field*. It was a rupture with the bounds of easel painting, abolishing the window



and mirror dialectics on which the foundations of the space for pictorial representation had rested since the Renaissance.

The painted form expands, released from the surface of the canvas to acquire independent existence in three-dimensional space. The transition from painting to object also marked a turning point in the work of Lucia, who, since her beginnings, experimented with the limits of frontal and static vision, with the restrictions imposed by the stretcher, the physical delimitation of paint, and the visual and plastic ambivalence of objects.

The comparisons that the artist makes between container and content, material and colour, object and surface, form and space, also require an intuitive response from the visitor, who may wander inside the exhibition space and between the pieces, which

stimulates senses other than sight, affecting the body of the viewer itself.

The mummies are not portraits. They have no differentiated features, but they do serve as plastic symbols, with sexual identity (gender) and a textile wrapping that, like skin, seems to cover a body. It could be said that the textile material – the canvas – softens the profile of the solid figure it is assumed lies beneath.

They have taken on the value of an archaeological discovery, moving in the terrain of excavations; they have something visionary, chimerical, since they make it possible to hear voices that had been inaudible for a long time, buried, attempting to make sense of things beyond grasp: the passage of time and the narration of our transit through the world.