

Transparencies

Yuneikys Villalonga 2004

For all those who live on an island, the sea acquires an unparalleled prominence. Havana knows this very well. Its most recent stories of life and death, danger and salvation, encounters and partings, isolation and connections, remind us of this. It may seem as if we knew everything, as if the sea's potential for making and telling the stories of our lives had been exhausted once and for all. Having turned round through 360 degrees, Gulliver has looked in every direction. He has no alternative but to re-embark on the journey, time and time again, to infinity. And sooner or later Gulliver will come to believe that there is nothing new to learn. But what does the islander know about the experience of the sea on other islands.

From the white cliffs of Peacehaven, on the south coast of England, where the obelisk that marks the Greenwich Meridian stands, the sea is looked down on from above, from a height of many metres. There, on the cliff-tops, people live together in a different way: on another island. 'During the winter months the cliffs would start to crumble and disappear. This made our home ever closer to the sea. Some of the people around us lost their battle with the elements. We could not help but be connected with [it]...'.¹

Nicola Atkinson.Davidson, from Glasgow, has come to our shores to tell us of her own experiences of the sea. On the top floor of the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales in Old Havana (or from the cliff, perhaps) 'beaten by the wind', we find a unique seascape. The title of the show is Sea Painting.

And, in effect, there is a sea painting at the entrance. But this is only a sketch, a study. The sinuous figures in whites and blues interweave organically on a canvas that becomes a place as abstract as only the waves or the clouds of a panoramic landscape can be.

However, as the viewer goes inside the space, the two-dimensional, contemplative experience is left behind, and one is submerged in an all-enveloping environment. As on an island, the viewer feels surrounded by 'water' and this is exacerbated by the full engagement of all of one's senses.

An elliptical spiral is situated in the centre of the gallery space; lengths of satin and chiffon fall from above in three parallel levels that superimpose on each other towards the centre and create shadows of a certain transparency in different tones of green and blue. A series of fans suspended from the ceiling, which is also covered with satin, produce 'swells' in the delicate fabrics, and in the clothes and hair of the observers, their shadows creating an incessant movement.

And above the rustle of the fabrics, the hum of the fans and the footsteps of the visitors, the roar of a football stadium can be discerned. These are the voices of victory and disappointment mixed together, rising and falling in the manner of the tides.... sounds of the earth and the water that merge in unison. For the islander, they are the same thing.

The work of this Scottish artist, sophisticated though it is, is by no means inaccessible or over complex for the spectator. It is easy to appreciate the resources that have been used to create each sensorial effect within the installation. Not only do the fans and the light engage in a dialogue with the piece, but if we decide to 'escape' from the proposed route and go round the ellipse from the outside, between the installation and the gallery (a trajectory which has not been discarded by the artist), the wooden structure that holds the cloth in the air is immediately apparent.

And although this could constitute another sculpture in its own right, within the installation, it feels here as if we were backstage, behind the scenes in a theatre. The fact is that its apparent frontality adds a certain sense of drama to Atkinson.Davidson's piece.

Another similarity with theatre is the fact that the artist's work would not exist without the presence of the spectator. Only when someone enters the space are the sound recordings and the fans throughout the room activated by a system of sensors. The

'performance' thus becomes ephemeral: like a mirage, or like a mise-en-scène whose start and finish are determined by the visitor.

In Sea Painting the spectator is the protagonist. Having reached the centre of the space, the spectator becomes one of the essential components of the piece: an island, surrounded by the sea/cliffs of Peacehaven; submerged in its surges and sound memories, a portion of floating land... Zero Meridian.

A key element in Atkinson.Davidson's work is her exploration of the role of the individual in society, by expanding the notion of participation. At the same time she sets out to create a piece of universal art, an art that is capable of travelling not only geographically but also culturally, and still be understood. Having worked as an artist for the last 22 years, she has shown in many different parts of the world. In all of her work, the interaction and interchange of experiences with the community in which the works are created plays a very important role.

In a previous piece such as Lost and Found (1993), for instance, the artist engaged people from two different neighbourhoods in Glasgow, Scotland, in the realization of two sculptures. She travelled some 11 km across the city, borrowing 420 button collections and 1314 teaspoons from the local people, finally creating a 'water tower' of glass jars with the button collections and a chandelier of teaspoons. Within ten months she would, as promised, return all of the borrowed items to their owners. The honouring of trust is an integral component of her work.

In 1996 she commenced a piece that she will continue until her death, Secrets of the World, consisting in the compiling and preservation of individual and collective secrets, which are sealed in envelopes she will never open. She continues this by recruiting different persons from all the countries in which she works to participate, such as Pakistan, the USA and Germany.

The artist sees the context in which her works are installed and the way they are received as sources of content, as well as providing them with aesthetic and conceptual complements. Atkinson.Davidson makes use of information from her surroundings in

order to create significance, noting, emphasizing, comparing... and allowing individuals and the community to speak for themselves. This often results in innumerable readings of and comments on everyday life.

In *Sea Painting* there is an evident intention to set up a dialogue: a desire to flirt, to provoke reactions to diverse forms of insularity. On the one hand, the Cuban Gulliver is tempted to 'keep on playing the game', to experience a different way of relating to the sea, but at the same time knows it is impossible to cast off his or her existing memory and experience. The resulting tension is something that the artist relishes as possibility, something she has no wish to avoid or conceal.

It is also possible to find in the piece formal coincidences, within the context in which it has been installed, that quite intentionally endow it with other interpretations and significance. The clothes and sheets hanging in the breeze; the wooden scaffolding that shores up Old Havana and the Malecón;² the familiar fans, or the sound of crowds: fragments of a mirror that oblige us to re-make the city in a different way, or rather, to re-invent it. In Atkinson.Davidson's piece, Havana becomes, once again, an island-city, but this time submerged in foreign seas. Or perhaps it is actually Peacehaven, the artist's childhood home, now eternally adrift in our city...?

At the close of the show, *Sea Painting* will be divided into 60 fragments, which will be given at random to 60 of its visitors...³ The mirage will be over, but vestiges of it will remain, all across Havana. On this occasion Atkinson.Davidson is not asking us for secrets; she does not want to collect our objects. Along with the memories of her part of the world she will leave us with her own belongings, which we, too, can keep until death.

1 Excerpt from the notes sent by Nicola Atkinson.Davidson to Yuneikys Villalonga by email.

2 The artist has been working with Cuban architect Ernesto García on the realization of this piece.

3 This is why visitors are asked to leave their name and address for the artist.

