

ON MARIAN APPARITIONS

BEATRIZ HERRÁEZ

“And as to being in a fright.

Allow me to remark

That Ghosts have just as good a right,

In every way, to fear the light,

As Men to fear the dark.”

Phantasmagoria and Other Poems

Lewis Carroll

Julia Montilla’s work may be defined as an archive of images and objects –videos, installations, photographs, drawings, publications or websites– marked by absence. A universe –like a stage– travelled by strongly signified devices and peopled by a motley collection of beings: anonymous, outlandish, altered, intangible, dissolved, if not definitively erased. Celestial beings, frightened women –scream queens–, Bollywood dancers, illusionists, acrobats, spectres of all kinds and even child seers, who wander through different settings from which she reactivates an analysis of the processes and tools that intervene in the construction of mass consumption images and show business. Reconstructions of platforms, daises, stages –even of sacred places– in a space and time that turn out to be inappropriate. A continuous ‘staging’ of commonplaces, which pushes to the limit the resistance of a spectator confronted with the tension generated by the use of excessive trickery and unproductive effects –the kind that hides nothing–. A catalogue of images, in a precarious balance, which reveals the mechanisms that are used in the planning of those spaces of recognition –of clichés and stereotypes– which include us all. Agreed spaces of representation in which the artist intervenes, with a considerable amount of irony, showing up their always exclusive nature.

From genres of discourse such as melodrama, terror, musicales, radio novels or B movies to belief systems and ideological issues, such as nationalism and faith, Julia Montilla travels different places of the representation of subjectivity in the symbolic order, nonetheless stripped of a subject that might inhabit them. A displaced subject, whom she gradually distances from the framework that contains him, bringing back to life enclosed political territories where “some signify and others see”. A succession of breaks with conventions, breaks that systematically question the neutrality of the eye in the transmission of knowledge - and its centrality. A permanent ‘suspicion of the visual’, of that cold, modern eye, which she questions constantly in a series of projects marked by ‘loss’. A transit between voids and absences which was already present in her first works, in series such as *Acrobacias* (1996) –blurred, anonymous bodies, suspended in the air, which activate simultaneous connections with other ‘freefall jumps’ reproduced in the history of art, like those of Yves Klein or Bas Jan Ader–; installations like *Vanishing point* (2002) (2002) –an artefact/record of the paranormal where the traces of an invisible presence humming a repetitive melody are inscribed mechanically and ‘innocently’–; the series of ‘unoccupied’ plinths, *Atributos* (1996); or the videos and photographs *The Invisible Woman* (2002), where the effect to be revealed is ‘disconcealed’ from the very title of the pieces.

An invisibility to which she submits the spectator confronted with his disappearance from those symbolic spaces designed –by others– for all of us. An invisibility that becomes extreme, when it is also accompanied by the excessive ornamentation gradually added to the consecutive stagings conceived by her.

In this questioning of the exclusive forms of representation –and in making them suspicious– her latest project is set. An analysis

that takes the parodic gesture to extremes through a recreation of the Marian visions described by a person known as Patxi, in 1931. Visions that are part of the series of apparitions that took place in Ezkioga, and drew over a million of the faithful on the slopes of a mountain near a town in Guipúzcoa. “The Ezkioga business”, something that soon became a mass phenomenon –with precedents in other contexts such as Lourdes and Fatima–, emerged as a reaction to the threat posed by the period of modernisation promoted by the new government after the proclamation of the Second Republic in Spain. A period of political transformation that included major reforms such as votes for women or the separation between state and church, difficult to accept in a society with a strong religious tradition, especially in the countryside.

However, just a few months after the first apparitions, the faithful of Ezkioga ran into the –unexpected– frontal opposition of the church through an official prohibition issued from the bishopric of Vitoria. In Patxi’s visions, the Virgin appeared with the colours of the Basque flag conceived by Sabino Arana –founder of the Basque Nationalist Party–, in a series of actions programmed almost like a choreographed sequence. Actions with a precise timetable which had to be modified –from the initial one of the night angelus to early evening– owing to the first reservations about the events in Ezkioga expressed by the ecclesiastical institution, which used the imprudence of the time as an ‘excuse’. The bishopric ended by completely disavowing the protagonists of those visions –classified as demonical, collective and nocturnal– for their close relation with the theories of Basque nationalism, whose slogan was “Jaungoikoa eta Lege Zarra”, God and the old law.

In her latest project Julia Montilla rewrites what happened in Ezkioga through a reconstruction of the platform erected in the valley to observe the visionaries, who were placed opposite the faithful and the oaks of the sacred landscape; a dais she reproduces to scale, and where an agreed apparition takes place at a specific time during the days of the exhibition. An –approximate– recreation of the ‘documented’ ecstatic experience, for which an aseptic structure has been conceived in which we can only see the trick revealed. A desacralised space for the programmed representation of a Marian presence where, once again, there will be ‘nothing’ to show, except for suitably lit uninhabited structure.