

Interview with Mayte Vieta

Elena Vozmediano

Looking back at your work, one sees a unity of meanings, with constant themes and recurrent technical or formal processes, although they are expressed in a great variety of ways. I feel that although each work is very carefully thought out and -as an object- has a powerful physical presence, the formal aspects are subordinate to the expression of a message, which is almost always emotional rather than rational. How do you conceive the works?

Everything comes from drawings. For years I have drawn incessantly. In fact, I became an artist because I had a facility for drawing, and all my work (and in a way also my life) is contained in the notebooks and diaries that I've carried around since I was twelve. These diaries are a store of ideas, written and drawn, and I develop sketches in them that I will later make into works, not just sculptural works but also photographic ones. I theorise a lot about a piece before I make it. For quite a long time I didn't give these sketches much importance as works of art, but recently I realised that everything is there, and that they are very important to me. So much so, that up until now I haven't dared show my drawings, because I thought they were too intimate.

When the idea for a piece is clear I choose or look for the materials to make it. And this is the moment in the process where to a certain extent I let myself get carried along.

In this search for the right media to express your ideas physically, you have experimented with different forms of relationship between photography and sculpture. Why did you find this combination necessary?

I started off painting. But already while I was at the Massana School, precisely to learn to paint, I began to be interested in sculpture. Actually I started painting because it was what I could do at home. As soon as I could I started to get involved in sculptural work. I felt powerless standing in front of a blank canvas, and because of the limitations of the medium I ended up fighting with the space. Then little by little, sculpture began combining with photography. For years I experimented with photographic material. I was fascinated by old-fashioned techniques, like magic lanterns, scale models for cinema projects, small sets that framed a scene, or early photographic cameras. I spent all my time locked in the darkroom trying to understand photographic techniques better. These works helped me to understand photographic processes, to investigate how to achieve the sensation of movement and volume in small "models". This was my first involvement with space. I don't see myself as a photographer and I'm not an expert in photography. If I've managed to master the medium it's been by teaching myself. I don't spend money on good cameras, because for me the quality of the copy is not important. Sometimes I force the film so you can see the grain, or I use disposable cameras. With photography I have always looked

for three-dimensionality. I don't think about it is something flat, and in my initial sketches you can already see the complexity in the different dimensions. Always with the idea of introducing the viewer into it. At the moment I am in a more reflective period. I think that both my photographs and my sculptures are engaged in dialogue with the exhibition space; they interact and work off one another to create an atmosphere. This is what I am most interested in, the dialogue between materials and with the viewer.

In the area of what is strictly photographic, perhaps what catches one's attention most is your tendency to "fuse" images, which then lose their clearness and mix together (you have also done photo-collages). What are you aiming for with this process?

It is something related to memory, which develops itself infinitely, travelling across time and space. In any case, these combinations interested me more a few years ago. When I was making the *Miradores* (Viewpoints), I mixed archive images with my own pictures. They told a story and aimed at optical effects, by means of which one, two and even three images could be seen successively. They were reflections on claustrophobia. Nowadays I work more directly and simply. I am trying to do a project which consists of large photographic enlargements of a sea of ice, which I am going to use to cover real spaces, opening up kinds of windows in them. They will be deserted houses or places that show that someone has lived there, and as well as these fictional windows there will be other real windows that show the surroundings, what there is outside. And then I'll photograph all this. The ideas I'm interested in with this project are the infinite, of the house as a refuge, of one space within another space... A discreet look at the evolution of our environment by confronting it with a landscape with an infinite, desolate horizon. Nothingness as a counterpoint to the architectural disorder of our surroundings. On the other hand, waste, erosion, the ageing of the body appear in my most recent sketches. These are pieces in the form of a branch of a tree sculpted by the wind. They take root, fill themselves with the weight of what they were before, grow and decay in the space. Going back to my first question, I think that because your work conveys emotional messages, you make it necessary for the viewer to take an active part in it. In any cases, the visual layout that you create obliges the viewer to look through peep-holes, to be reflected in mirrors and become part of your work and, on a mental level, to try and reconstruct a story, to imagine situations and implications. For me the viewer has always been important. I consider it a pleasure to be able to convey emotions, to provoke. My first pieces in iron were completely hermetic. I wanted the viewer to have to make an effort to enter my world. I spent a lot of time working on this, on a type of voyeurism mixed with objects that had strong fetishist connotations. But I think that, as I myself began to feel more free, the pieces began to open up to the viewer and be able to project themselves in space, even within the same work.

Looking is very important in your work. There are often lenses, "viewpoints", mirrors and reflective surfaces. What role do appearances play in them, and, thus, optical illusion?

Working with lenses was a way of getting close to the viewer. Of creating the sensation of movement, produced by the optical effect of the lens, because of the light, and because the viewer moves physically closer. The same thing happens with mirrors, which create movement, deform and alter the space, and intoxicate the person looking with their own reflection.

Vision is possible because of light. In many of your works you have included artificial lights, you have used windows as if they were light boxes (Tarde de encuentros -Afternoon of meeting) or you have aimed small spotlights at them very carefully, so that the space remains in shadow. There are also a certain number of your works in which the image is made by means of a projector, in other words, a light. The image live through the light?

Light is what sparks off my works. It delineates everything that surrounds us. It creates "life" and so most of my photographs are back-lit, with either artificial or natural light. With photography, time passes, in a way that is inherent in the chemical process that makes the actual photograph possible. Time evolves with the projection of light through the photographs, in an attempt to capture time. I pursue this precise moment when light is on the point of going out, just before complete darkness. Last year I changed workshop: from an internal part of a building to a space completely surrounded by windows. This has had an unquestionable affect on my work, in the sense that natural light plays an increasingly important role.

The sculptures, on the other hand, have evolved towards transparency, they are fragile and have no life without light. On the other hand, linked to the protocols of vision, we find "constructions" that traditionally favour the concentration of the gaze, like the display cabinets (Cicatrices (Sears)), associated with museums, or the small stages of the Miradores, which are reminiscent of small theatres. These are also ways of creating spaces. Framing something inside a glass display case marks out a space, keeps it apart, orders its inside, helps the pause, the desire to isolate and preserve moment, a feeling. Memory protects itself from what is outside it, from forgetting.

In one of your texts you talk about light sleep, and about states in which the subconscious emerges. Is this a level on which you relate to the things around you?

The state you find yourself in when you dream is reflected in some of my earlier work. They dramatically reflect fears and doubts. I went through a pretty bad time between 1995 and 1998. I spent two years in hospitals with a very close member of my family who was on the brink of dying. I did not want to live reality and I escaped from it by sleeping, in dreams, and creating alternative realities.

Now I'm over this period. At the moment I am in a period of happiness, of reconciliation, you could say, with the things around me, so I pay less attention to the dream aspect of things. Now it's really a pleasure to work. I have very clear ideas about what I'm working on.

There seems to be a strong autobiographical element in your work. On the most obvious level, you make self-portraits, sometimes naked and in contact with natural elements. Or metamorphosed into an insect. Is this how you want to represent your relationship with the world?

I have always had a strong interest in the human body. The naked body has been despoiled, it is fragile, ambiguous, the forces of nature deform it. It speaks of desolation, of solitude. The naked body transmits the fear of pain itself, the fear of loving or being loved. The self-portrait is involved in the development of my work. I use my body as just another tool, I'm not trying to be identified. In fact the opposite: a body out of time.

Silencio (Silence) is the title of the photographs in which you appear submerged in water. Silence and perhaps isolation and lack of communication. In fact, you often show isolated figures. But in various works, you establish difficult dialogues between two elements. This is the case with Cicatrices (Sears), Arpía (Harpy) or in the recent mouths with teeth. Are you trying to say that dialogue is not possible without violence, without wounds?

Silencio is an installation I made specifically for the Sala Metrónom. I studied and observed the space for a long time. I fitted the photographs to the structure of the space, constantly thinking about the path the viewer would take, using natural light, searching for a fictional disorder distorted towards the infinite. The body faces the void alone. It fights against the flow of water, it is deformed, it lets itself go. In the chaos of feelings, pleasure is contrasted with falling, and at the same time it suggests a need for isolation from the outside world, as if it were in a bubble. The isolation of the figures underlines the feeling of emptiness. In pieces like *Cicatrices* or *Arpía*, I talk directly about the absence of love. They are painful pieces, which stem from lack of communication, from lies, not in a violent way but more with indifference to rejection. In *Diálogo* (Dialogue) a wound that will never completely heal also acts to increase further the tension created by lack of understanding,

Wounds are a recurrent theme. In Vivida (Lived, 1996) you appeared with an open incision, and in your sculptures there are lots of sharp objects, like spikes or teeth and so on.

At one stage in my life, I lived between memory and absence. I was not capable of thinking about the future, Everything that is infused with memories of the precise instant captured in time. *Vivida* froze that instant of lack of communication with the world, with death.

Sharp materials make it easier for me to create tension. To join and contrast one

material with another. The materials are embedded in one another. Wearing them down stops the gesture like a fingerprint.

Memory, or memories, are one of the focal points of your poetics. Something that is linked with your concern for the passing of time. Is it holding up time that interests you? How do you use photographs in this sense?

My interest is based on the relationship between space and time. Time and space. For this I need to work in series, which are exhibited almost like a single piece and which give strength to the feeling of movement. The viewer has to walk around them, which is both spatial and temporal. In my most recent exhibitions I have placed a bench in the space (from my house, something I've lived with) to encourage a prolonged contemplation. I even used light timers, which create a gradual change in lighting conditions and which oblige the viewer to spend a period of time looking at the works.

I use memory as the starting point for the photographs. Starting with reality, with the appearance of something that lies between what is real and what is fictional, it is a way of holding up time, or rather of imbuing it with feelings, like on a journey. And your own reflection in the glass. The sequence of the landscape blends with the movement.

*Ghosts are inscribed on the personal memory. On several occasions you have evoked them, using traditional iconography, covered in white shrouds (in *Te busco a veces con desesperación* (Sometimes I search for you with desperation)) or as shadows (in *A la duración*, 1993 (For the duration)). Is the presence of these figures symbolic or are you referring literally to the world of the dead?*

It's a way of facing up to fear. Opening a dialogue with someone absent, sometimes even in dreams. The absence of someone who no longer exists is present in everything that surrounds us.

Sometimes the ghosts in your photographs and sculptures are associated with water. It is clear that the sea is very present in your imagination. Water is almost always mysterious, dark and contains bodies that are real and tangible, or ethereal (in your projections on water). What values do you attribute to this element? Is it associated with death? With memory?

I was born by the sea. My memories and my experiences come from it, and are developed and express themselves through my daily landscape. If you have experienced absence beside the sea, the landscape mixes with your feelings. It is impossible to separate them.

Water leads us to the predominance of nature in your personal iconography. It is a nature that is to some extent equally "phantasmal", in which phenomena outside normality are sometimes insinuated in it, such as halos, lights,

monstrous beings etc. And this is mixed with an aesthetic that has a debt to Romanticism, both because of its association with landscape and feeling and because of the overwhelming sense of the grandeur of nature.

I can't explain my relationship with nature. For a long time I wasn't ever aware that there was a relationship, because I was clinging on to childhood, I wasn't ready for the world of adults. And I spent my childhood in the country, by the sea, all day out in the open, surrounded by insects, wrapped up in my butterfly collection. It is not an aesthetic problem. When I look at nature I learn to understand the small things about everyday life. Before, I wanted to turn reality around, but I increasingly get closer to the simplicity of nature. I find myself in a more serene period, without so many personal fears. I observe what is happening in the world with a more open spirit.

Landscape, animals and plants are similar to people. In Arpeggio and in Miradores, for example, women (you yourself) and animals (an owl, insects) form strange hybrids which take the modernist decorative arts as their model. They can be interpreted as metamorphoses. This, together with some of your titles, seems to indicate that you are interested in classical mythology. Is that the case?

I was fascinated by dissection, joining together and recycling materials with strong space/time connotations, which allow me even to pervert the order of things linked with death. The object is recovered from its old life, its state of abandonment. Its past continues to exist and it is reborn, transmitting this aura. In classical mythology there is this mix between something that is real, human and a part of dreams that always ends in tragedy, although I was more influenced by reading Kafka. In Metamorphosis, I discovered a world, a way of dealing with space/time, in which objects have powerful connotations, and are used as if we could give them life.

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