

CAROLINA OTERO: L'INFRAMINCE

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The present exhibition of Carolina Otero's work, takes its title "L'inframince" from a term coined by Marcel Duchamp to note ephemeral nuance in the world. Sometimes translated as infra-thin, *inframince* connotes barely perceptible thinness. Facing its ineffable subtlety, Duchamp declared that because *inframince* was impossible to define "One doesn't dare but give examples like the warmth of a seat just left is *inframince*, as is the whistling sound made by walking in velvet trousers, two objects cast from the same mold, or reflections from mirror or glass." *L'inframince* also implies transdisciplinary forms of contemporary art, as presented in a publication by TransArts, a Department at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna. Apart from the serendipity of sharing the same name, The Transart Foundation in Houston shares Vienna's TransArts's vision where "Authors and artists capture in text and image fleeting moments in which artistic, theoretical, scientific or everyday cultural elements meet, change or merge with one another." (Davila, *De L'inframince*). Nothing is more fitting than our own example of "L'inframince" in Carolina Otero's recent work.

Carolina Otero's viscerally resonant artistic creations flow out of the mystic aura of landscapes that sunk into her imaginary during pivotal moments in her life: the tropical forest of San Antonio de Los Altos in Caracas became a paradisiacal playground during her early childhood, with its exuberant vegetation and misty drizzle melting multicolored clay in her hands. Later on, as an adult, the sonorous silence of Norway's peaceful winters, the tenuous veils of its snowy fields, the sharply carved fjords and gleaming glaciers took another subliminal seat in her inner being... More recently, in Marfa, Texas the artist recounted being magically transported to the amphitheatres of ancient Greece and the enigmatic ruins of Egypt, while experiencing Donald Judd's impeccable metal and concrete minimalist boxes in dialogue with their inner and outer luminous surroundings. Thus, far from modernist tenets that stress the autonomy of the work of art, Carolina's recent work embraces a relational, contemporary vision of the world:

In such a world, language is a constitutive element. As ecologist David Abrams puts it, "Language is as much a property of the landscape as of the humans who dwell in it." In this sense, as deconstructive philosopher Jacques Derrida famously declares, "There is nothing outside the text." (Pp.125-26 Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*)

So captivated was Carolina by the blanched, winded Texan desert, that she turned her latest visual notations into almost imperceptible marks, something like faint mutterings... marks as gesture, marks as trace, marks as shapes in passing.... they all evidence Derrida's thoughtful reflection, "If shapes make texts, then the world, which not only contains many shapes, but in fact, consists of nothing but shapes, will have a lot to say." (pp.126, *The Shape of the Signifier*) Thus, in Carolina's own perception of nature as text, a primordial trace or mark on the ground can be read either closely or at a great distance, resembling something as essential as a petroglyph or an urban site plan. Thus, in her photographs we see tree trunks and branches doubling as the course of rivers with its many tributaries seen from the sky.

For Roland Barthes as for Carolina, writing is furthermore a sensual act. Evoking early years when she learned to turn sound into scripted and cursive shapes, writing to her was an exhilarating experience. In fact, we can say that while for Barthes writing had all to do with making marks on paper, for Carolina, writing was mostly akin to making her own musical notation, translating voice on paper. Indeed, beyond representation, isn't all art fundamentally an act of translating the sensation of one realm of experience into another?

Carolina's resonant forms aligned horizontally on the wall also seem to invite the outside world to partake in an imaginary collective chant. Mercedes Otero, Carolina's sister, is the composer of the accompanying electronic musical piece from 1983, titled "*Danza de una Flor para el Desierto*" or "*Dance of a Flower for the Desert*." As a musician, Mercedes accurately compares Carolina's visual notations to medieval "neumes" - signs for one or a group of successive musical pitches. A predecessor of musical notes, neumes are the earliest known notation prior to the invention of the five line staff. Created in the 9th century during the reign of Charlemagne, neumes (derived from the Greek word for breath or "pneuma") were shorthand, squarish mnemonic aids placed over sacred texts to indicate inflections in the melodic recitation of Gregorian chants.

This spare inflection is what we appreciate in Carolina's marks and in each one of her hand-hewn pieces, made out of thin slabs of white plaster, laid out in clusters on a horizontal axis along the gallery wall. The space between these forms determines what could begin to evoke a faint sound or a prolonged silence. Furthermore, because of their inframince closeness to the supporting wall, these coded shapes seem to sprout like an efflorescence from the wall itself, emphasizing the subtlety of whispers, murmurs, or a strange rhythmic babble that a wall affixes, but only perhaps for a moment.

It is somehow in keeping with this primordial relation that Carolina's clusters of neumes were carved by her out of cast plaster slices. Refining the art of unglazed porcelain later on, Carolina chose a spatialized format to arrange her newer compositions of sensual shapes, which only by dramatic illumination are understood as something belonging to material culture. Depending on the distance from which it is viewed or imagined, these compositions can remit to a musical tablature, a Mayan mural, or an architectural layout.

In conclusion, as we follow the various stages of Carolina's unique creative process, we perceive a world translated into different archaic visual notations, some resembling eastern calligraphy, others recalling pictograms, primordial musical notations, or urban configurations. Eco theorist David Abrams, who dedicated a lifetime to study an array of magical phenomena in many cultures, insists that it is our responsibility to renounce the claim that language is an exclusively human property. As Carolina has shown us throughout this exhibition, "we must begin to listen to what the world that speaks wants to say". (Pp.55 *The Shape of the Signifier*)

References

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