

## Soledad Salamé: Moving Through the Earth, Crossing Borders and Boundaries

Edward J. Sullivan

For many years, I have lived with a large-scale print by Soledad Salamé. It is a graphite and acrylic piece from 2006 and belongs to the series called *Antarctic Reflections* (**Fig. 1**). These works were first seen publicly in an exhibition called “Aguas Vivas” at the Museo de Bellas Artes in Santiago, capital of Salamé’s native Chile. The tones in the print are pale blues, greys and varying shades of white. “Aguas Vivas” means “Living Waters” and it is important to understand not only the meaning of this term but also, its connotations for the overall concept that the artist deals with in this, and subsequent projects. The waters of the Antarctic, indeed **all** waters, are alive! They contain the kernels of existence. Not only do they shelter incalculable numbers of organisms, they also provide the sustenance for the flow of life throughout the planet. Water in Soledad Salamé’s art is the essence of existence, but it is also a harbinger of potential disaster and chaos. Droughts, floods, or pollution through such human-created events as oil spills, and all manner of ecological catastrophes are poised to upset the delicate balance of every natural element, including the rhythms and the sustaining foundations of animal and human life on this fragile planet that we inhabit.

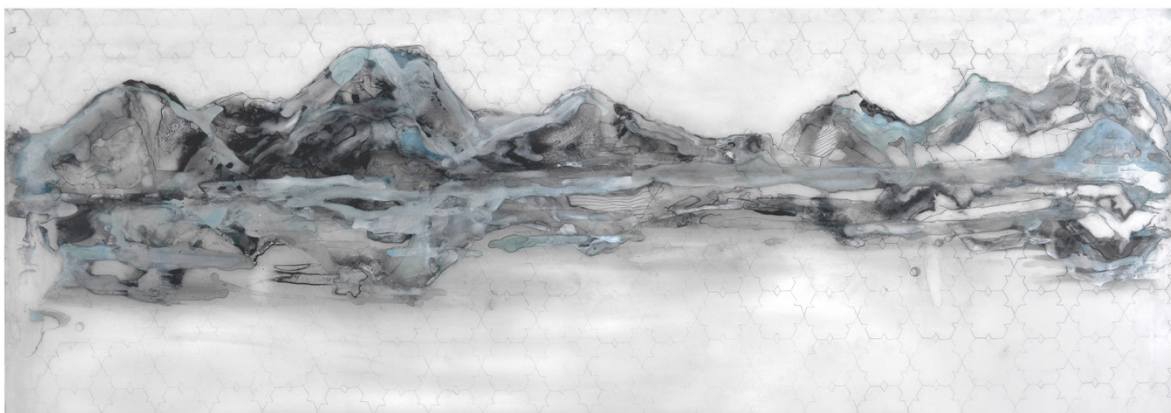
The work by Soledad Salamé that I have the privilege of seeing every day, exudes an air of chilliness (naturally) but also one of melancholy. Yet the sense of dislocation that I experience when contemplating this print is hardly the same as when I look at a more conventional work by nineteenth century Romantic era artists who traveled to far-away places in order to experience the awe and grandeur of nature. Soledad’s “inner portraits” of natural environment are not simply renditions of a time or place but acute investigations into the inexpressible qualities that inform the world around us and can only be intuited, not observed. A product of the artist’s expedition to Antarctica with naturalist fellow-travelers, the “Aguas Vivas” series was one of multiple testimonies to a constant theme in her work – intimate engagement with an ever-mutable nature. Salamé’s investigations into the natural world have become more poignant and more urgent, even during the almost-twenty-year span between her initial incursions into the world’s southern-most continent. As climate disasters and subsequent human

catastrophes continue to mount, Soledad Salamé has made it her principal concern to document, interpret, suggest, evoke and counsel her viewers as to the imminent risks to the all the earth's inhabitants, especially the most vulnerable. These include the migrant populations with which she deals in her most recent exhibition, people who must flee their habitats for such impending natural calamities as lack of sufficient water, or human-precipitated cataclysms as violence of all descriptions: political, moral, substance-induced, or simply the inexplicable hatred that can be conceived on the part of one group for another.

As a historian of the arts of the Americas, I have long been drawn to Salamé's art, (since I was first introduced to it in the early 1990s) for the kinship that it demonstrates with visual, moral and literary concerns that have been pervasive in American culture (south and north) since the late eighteenth century. When Prussian naturalist Alexander von Humboldt made his epic trip to South America and the Caribbean from 1799 to 1804, his recordings and intense involvement with the natural life of the flora and fauna of the Americas, codified for European audiences, the thousands of years of importance that nature and its constant mutations had had for indigenous peoples throughout the Western Hemisphere. In the literature produced during the American Enlightenment and into the later decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the vast pampas of Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil, the volcanoes of Ecuador and Mexico, the Atlantic and Pacific shorelines and the power of ocean water for transport and river water for substance, all played determining roles in the artistic imagination of the Indigenous, Spanish, Portuguese, English and French-speaking populations, whether tribal descendants or colonists from Europe.

Soledad Salamé is one of the most distinguished artists of our time for harnessing the essential and most urgent messages provided to us by the natural world. With near-shamanic prescience she has understood the warning signals offered by the cataclysmic droughts, raging forest fires, ever-increasing extinction of animal species and many more cautionary chapters in the recent annals of nature. She employs these in order to create images that serve as paradigmatic semaphores for imminent danger. However, I do not wish to suggest that the art of Soledad Salamé consists principally of

only topical themes or deals simply with issues of impending disaster. I think of her as a contemporary heir to the concerns expressed by nineteenth century artists from all corners of the Hemisphere who have turned to nature in the spirit of both celebration and caution. U.S. artist Frederic Edwin Church and Uruguayan painter Pedro Blanes Viale understood, in their extraordinary images of waterfalls, that cascading water was more than a picturesque feature of the wilderness. Water's power may be harnessed for energy – until it runs dry. Mexican artists José María Velasco (as important as a naturalist than as a painter) or the twentieth century volcanologist-artist Gerardo Murillo (popularly known by his assumed *Nahuatl* name Dr. Atl [meaning “water”]) employed representations of volcanoes as metaphors of both grandeur (national and spiritual) and potential destruction (see, for example, Dr. Atl's many depictions of the eruption of Parícutin that unexpectedly and violently surged in a cornfield in the State of Michoacán in 1943). I would also undoubtedly connect Soledad Salamé with some of the most extraordinary women artists of natural subject matter in the twentieth century. Georgia O'Keeffe is most remembered for her desert landscapes of the U.S. Southwest. While these are impressive modernist icons of visual experimentation they are, at the same time, warnings to her audience of the fragile balance between nature and the incursions of humankind into the desert climes of New Mexico. Similarly, Emily Carr, whose career developed in the Province of British Columbia, Canada, was an assiduous reader of the biological timeclock of the forests and wetlands of Vancouver Island. These and many others form the art historical genealogical chart from which Soledad Salamé descends. Like Velasco, Carr or O'Keeffe, she calls attention to natural realities. Although her means and forms of expression are thoroughly contemporary, with all of the experimental forms and materials that she has employed, Salamé nonetheless forms the most recent link in a long and powerful chain of artists and writers for whom nature and its supremacy over humanity – and its unstable delicacy – stands as the quintessential subject for reflection, meditation and as an implement in a “call to consciousness,” an admonition for all to heed: Nature can protect, but it can also destroy – and be destroyed.



**Fig. 1.** Detail of *Antarctic Reflection I*; print drawing, graphite and acrylic on Mylar.

Edward J. Sullivan is the Helen Gould Shepard Professor in the History of Art at New York University. He specializes in the arts of the Americas in the modern and contemporary eras. He is the author of more than thirty books and exhibition catalogues and has curated exhibitions of Latin American art in various museums throughout the world.