

The penetrating light

Fernando Gómez de la Cuesta

The beautiful, without reference to the sinister, lacks the strength and the vitality to be beautiful¹

Skirting the limits, going around and overcoming them, finding the interstices and the breaking points, putting your fingers into the cracks, perforate the surfaces and touch cavities, pushing branches aside with your hands, finding the clearings in the forest and the conflict areas, bringing the experience and the disclosure from contemporary art.

Beauty cannot be defined without transgression, without recognising those places where the concept itself becomes complex and sometimes wild or, as Amparo Sard points out in this project: "without resorting to the contexts where the matter, almost alive, communicate us with the uncanny". These peripheral and bordering spaces are as important as its core: the video "Hauptpunkt" (2013) is the seed of so many things, a real generator of essential matter where the artist herself show how arise some of the infinite declinations of her work as she completes her ethical and aesthetic deviations. The exhibition opens by placing us into a beauty that, if there were such a possibility, could seem objective. Sard begins her research from a tactile and recognisable place so that none of us could lose our references; and, from that preliminary and privileged position, she expands a network of paths that seek different areas of uncertainties, these areas of polyhedral perception in which the physicality of the images loses transcendence, in which ideas overflow with nuances and connections, while her work generates a cartography that transit through the territories of the beauty, the sublime and the depraved.

In the complex and unfathomable territory that is oneself, which is both a bridge and a border to the reality surrounding us, our feelings and reasons get moved, mutate and swap at the devilish speed imposed on them by the unstoppable flow of ideas and emotions that each one of us feels and generates. The human being is a place of doubt and decision, an intimate space in which the will that precedes action is built and where the succeeding experiences and knowledge take shape. A life –various lives– full of what we are and the encouragements we receive, which make us feel and

¹ Eugenio Trías. *Lo bello y lo siniestro* [*The Beauty and the Sinister*]. Editorial Ariel, Barcelona, 1992, p. 42.

decide which path to follow, whether intentionally or fortuitously, wrongly or rightly. All this occurs in a context of constant change: in which the nature from which we have evolved and the artefacts we generate complement and compete with one another to exist and be present. Contemporary art is one of those human acts that should plunge us into a state of "stimulating uncertainty", of "clarifying shadows", a skilled activity which, instead of casting an enormous beam of light that floods everything, is responsible for accompanying our gaze through the relative darkness of knowledge, trying to focus our attention on some of those transcendent points that remain in the shadows, without distracting our interest, by means of a powerful, wide and uniform spotlight, able to blind us with such an insolent light that makes us forget that the deepest beauty is that which is barely perceived.³

To understand such a dim source of light that illuminates only the essential things, to understand the shadowy forest that extends before us, it may be advisable to start with the immaculate white, with that uncommon place that may be the beginning of everything, the newly written first page, the barely painted canvas, the first ray of dawn penetrating through the branches. Let us begin with the minimum to apprehend the maximum, let us begin with the expression of a silence that may sometimes appear to be the castration of a passion, but which, in this case, is a deliberate and effective form of communication. Amparo Sard's work is the beginning of many things, a white that is perforated with work and pain, with interest and hope, with the stitching of a feeling that tacks the invisible thread of the concerns that gradually link together doubts and certainties, a colour that silently expresses much more than any chromatic excess, more than any verbosity. A subtle perforated white that simply makes us feel the artist's emotions through her works: delicate, forceful, strenuous and beautiful pieces that begin with the artist herself, but which can also unfold the map of uncertainties of anyone of us. Her works are ethereal yet possible constructions that move within that concrete and intangible point in which passion exists, although it is still seeking the appropriate path to become transcendent⁴. In

² "Into the same rivers we step and do not step, [as] we are and are not [the same]". Heraclitus. "Sobre la naturaleza. Doxografía y fragmentos" [About Nature. Doxography and Fragments]. *Revista de Filosofía*, Universidad de Costa Rica, San José de Costa Rica, vol. XIV, n. 39, julio, 1976, p. 41.

³ "Like a phosphorescent jewel gives off its glow and colour in the dark and loses its beauty in the light of day. Were it not for shadows, there would be no beauty." Junichiro Tanizaki. *El elogio de la sombra [In Praise of Shadows]*. Madrid, Ediciones Siruela, 2007, p. 69.

⁴ We refer here to her series of perforated white papers, such as: "Fly Woman" (2004), "Error" (2007), "Impasse" (2009), "La Otra [The Other]" (2013), "Limits" (2014) and even

"Light .The Shadow of Time", as in many other proposals of the artist, that which is human, collective and individual, is all related to nature as an ecosystem that both reveals and integrates the self. That connection generates its own space, a peculiar animated forest, a landscape with a soul –with souls–, which demands the singular symbioses that take place, as well as some of the grievances that man claims to himself, to people surrounding him and to the environment in which he performs, with the entity and each one of its elements, because a "piece of nature" is, in fact, a contradictory expression: nature does not have pieces, it is a unity and even if we break off a fragment of it that gains autonomy, it does not stop being a part of nature understood as a whole.⁵

That is the reason why the exhibition begins with the roots deeply sunk into the ground, in that meeting place where the viewer and Sard have met before, a space of (re)cognition that sets the essential proposals before leaping into the unknown. The perforated papers, mentioned above, that the artist has been making since 2004, now show a change that suggests what happens next. In other words, a prologue in which the qualities and peculiarities of the surfaces and its holes start to gain ground to the draw made by precise incisions, that are closer to the line than to the expressive element they really are.⁶ An example of this evolution is the series of small formats on paper entitled "Reality/Real" (2016) exhibited at the start [room 1].

"Autonomy", where the artist applies the technique of perforation (and microperforation) on some pictures that, to an extent, anticipate some researches of TEA's exhibition.

⁵ Sard's piece "Hauptpunkt" (2013) certainly speaks about these issues, alluding to the nature of the landscape. This also applies to the exhibition "La Otra [The Other]" (ABC Museum, Madrid, 2013), where she uses the fragmentation as a form of research that she calls "a surgical analysis of the soul, giving the load of dead flesh to the soul", as well as to "Autonomy" (Sala Pelaires Gallery, Palma, 2016); it is a title that appeals to the capacity some animals have for detaching a part of their bodies to protect themselves against danger. Some of these animals, not all of them, can regenerate the lost parts. Sard transfer this concept to the inner fight with which she faces her work as an intrinsic part of herself, to the dialectics founded on how the piece gains autonomy and on how the spectator acts as predator of that artwork. The artist splits into two: she serves as food for the "necessary enemy" but she also manages to "escape" thanks to "detach" a part of her body that, despite this, never stop belonging her and that, occasionally, is able to regenerate.

⁶ However, the exhibition begins with a black perforated paper in which the succession of points appears as if they drew a line. "Pillars" [room 1] is the only piece from 2015 selected for this project and, somehow, can be considered something as "a prelude for a prologue". A symbolic work in which happens a total disclosure that reveals the infrastructures underlying nature, a revelation of the inner construction that supports the landscape and that acts as a preliminary statement/clarification that confronts the evident reality with what's hidden, the natural and the artefact.

The holes, expressive objects by themselves, aim to increase the sensitive qualities of the proposal: “contemporary art is full of the uncanny because we move towards a sensory experience. Today the transcendence is based on the feeling”, as Sard indicates. This permanent search for what is sensitive, for certainties and uncertainties, affects also to the subject; in fact, the play on words for the exhibition’s title, “Light. The Shadow of Time”, refers to the ambiguity of visual perception, to how light can become a shadow, to how each one of us has a different perception of what happens, reporting the confusion to which new technologies subject us appearing as truth, standing between our perception and the reality, changing it and us, while its primary goal just seemed to be to communicate. So the artist introduces prisms of projection, devices, interfaces, screens and other intermediary elements that complete and distort the usual worldview she uses on these paper works, changing meanings and concepts, while, at the same time, she looks towards other side and, therefore, we too.

Nevertheless, this is only the beginning. Amparo Sard’s search for senses goes beyond new technologies, it also stresses in the matter. In other words, it is not just a search for the uncanny in that confusion between reality and fiction that comes from the moving image or the exaggeration of the expanded collage; it is a search in the confusion between the object itself and the living thing.⁷ For this reason, the artist had to carry out a research on new materials that could exceed her previous work, an innovative factor that makes the current project unique. By using epoxy resin —a substance able to expand and amplify all the resources that we could guess in the series “Reality/Real”— as base material, she manages to make orifices that no longer are the lines of a drawing, but real trepanations that connect the backside of the canvas with the visible front design, resulting in a suppurating matter “almost alive” that explores the confusion between reality and fiction, between the object and the self. It proposes a relation that, from the gaze, links us with the uncanny and its language. In some of those series of subtly perforated whites on paper, a layer of thick, black, opaque rubber began to appear, as plasmatic as the one that appears in the abovementioned video “Hauptpunkt”, a ductile, malleable, mutant and

⁷ According to Freud, E. Jentsch has taken as a paradigmatic case of the uncanny, “doubts whether an apparently animate being is really alive; or conversely, whether a lifeless object might not be in fact animate, and he refers in this connection to the impression made by wax-work figures, artificial dolls and automatons”. Sigmund Freud, “Lo siniestro” [“The uncanny”], preceding Ernst Theodor Amadeus Hoffmann. *El hombre de arena [The Sandman]*. Editorial José J. de Olañeta, Barcelona, 1991, p. 18.

polymorphous mass that turns man and the landscape over which it spreads into much heavier beings and places, into subjects, objects and contexts that bear the matter integrated into them, with fears, doubts, problems and imperfections, with all those burdens that the excess and a permanent uncontrollable injustice, in which contemporaneity is immersed, pile up on our backs.⁸

“I have always thought that you have to take three steps to understand my work. At the first step, the spectator sees the technique, the most eye-catching and superficial thing. Some people do not go further. The second step is the *artist’s excuse*; in this exhibition, “Light .The Shadow of Time”, I was interested in explaining how technologies deceive us, how they make us tolerant of the intolerable. We can have breakfast, lunch or dinner watching images of refugees on our screens, as if it were a science fiction movie. But “Light. The Shadow of Time” is also a play on words that refers to what our gaze perceives; the processing and interpretation will always follow the action happening in front of us. A fact that, with new technologies, enhances the surprise and, consequently, the *uncanny*. That is the third step to understand my work. A language loaded with subliminal images that link us with the uncanny, with sensationalism, through the confusion of reality/fiction or living thing/object. While behind the perforated draws on paper was metaphorically concealed ‘what our eye would not be able to stare at it without a white veil’ —another definition for the uncanny—, in the series “Refugees”, made with resin, the hole —which is now an object, not a technique— opens the exit to the shadows, that seem to suppurate here as a living mass”.

A similar substance comes out of the new pieces by Amparo Sard. Works in which the leading figures —subjects, objects, landscapes— bear their own responsibility while they face ethical issues concerning the self and its environment, to integration and the other, to exclusion and belonging, to migration and permanence, a disturbing research but also a proposal of hope, of knowledge, of resistance and, to some extent, of restitution. “Light. The Shadow of Time” reveals that, in the midst of the forest, in the core of the vortex and the confusion, we can barely see a dim light that, for the attentive viewer, discloses that the same (un)reality can be understood in different ways.

The piece “Landscape of Shadows” (2016) exhibits all these characteristics. Located at the entrance of the exhibition, this large resin painting (3 x 6 meters) is a

⁸ The works in black and white belonging to the series “Sights and Shadows” (2015) convey this.

thesis work that addresses to and overwhelms the spectator, being the perfect reference to start the visit. The holes drawing the forest begin to split open at the top of the painting and release branches made of transparent polyethylene, creating a three-dimensional artwork through its matter and depth thanks to its shadows. At the backside, we find two medium format works from the series "Refugees" (2016). Like the initial piece, the successive layers of resin are revealing a drama of unquestionable beauty that faces us with the uncanny. However, in "Refugees", the directness of the title, of the forms and the concept provoke the most distinct approach of the artist to subjects of a social content of her whole career. Finally, the sculpture "Emotional Intelligence #1" [room 2] exhibits the first symptoms of intellectual and visual exhaustion that the current project suggests as a metaphor to develop. A tilted head on a shelf, dropped, that may remind of Brancusi's "Sleeping Muse", but that, far from appealing to inspiration, it denounces the satiety, the excesses and the current lack of moderation. Its eyes has stopped assimilating, absorbing, to begin suppurating that black mass —brain matter in this case— that indicates the breaking point of what is humanly acceptable, a surplus that relates to contemporary outburst in which we are all immersed. "Emotional Intelligence #1" is a piece that, despite its small size, becomes transcendental in the exhibition plan; this artwork connects the first two rooms with the conceptual knot developed along the two following rooms, and that is completed with the floor sculpture, occasionally illuminated, "Emotional Intelligence #2" (2016) and the video projection "Emotional Intelligence #3", (2016) which, to an extent, portrays the gestation process of the previous piece.

In her project "The Invisible Man" (2003),⁹ the three-dimensional human figure was already included in her creative and expressive heritage, with some parts —made of polyethylene— sectioned, offering simple silhouettes that take on a new perspective thanks to its transparency, becoming more and more opaque in the current proposal. These figures transcend the function of mere containers, considering not only the external form that makes us all equal and different, but also the border and nexus that separates and unites us to other beings and, of course, to our environment. Bodies or part of them that occasionally appear pierced, exceeded and permeated to everything surrounding us, material and spiritually overwhelmed. The artist resorts to what is close to us, what is simple, what is intimate, what is human, to overcome the evident, to tell us what lies beyond, the extremes hidden beneath the skin, what we can and

⁹ "The Invisible Man", Ferran Cano Gallery, Palma de Mallorca (2003).

cannot contain; and she does it with the subtle yet torn apart poetry of someone who is able to see the invisible, to understand and enrich it and to tell us about it.

Re-entering the forest, the works of Amparo Sard for the third room have become luminously dark: this search of the dim light that the artist works with and that implies the knowledge in the middle of blackness,¹⁰ also helps to explain that, although they are not always visible, wisdom, beauty and the uncanny may reside anywhere. The large installation, made of polyethylene, entitled "Displaced Landscape" dominates the space breaking the walls; it consists of two enormous trees that, with their matter and shadows, seem to occupy all the room, while they invite the spectator to get fully in the necessary mood to assimilate the rest of the itinerary exhibition. Both María Zambrano's "clearings in the forest"¹¹ and Heidegger's *Lichtung*¹² are metaphors for this way of thinking that tries to unveil what is hidden in the darkness, a type of knowledge that is characteristic of a "revelation", of a wisdom that cannot be induced, and whose acquisition is not methodical, which surprises us with "unpredictable insights" that cannot be found by searching for them, but for which we can, undoubtedly, prepare ourselves, be alert, predisposed and sensitized. That is the base on which this installation operates, preparing for a visit in which conscience and unconscious, certainty, verisimilitude, unreality and untruth alternate so the public goes into a real spiral of symbiotic and mixed emotions, in a path of introspection and insight.

Since the beginning of "Light. The Shadow of Time", it is possible to guess that something disturbing and appealing lies beneath that epidermal layer in which the

¹⁰ "Ce n'est plus avec du noir que je travaille, c'est avec la lumière (Pierre Soulages)". ["I do not work with black anymore, I work with light"]. In Bernard Paquet, "Pierre Soulages: entre l'ombre et la lumière". *Vie des Arts*, Montreal, Canada, vol. 40, n° 164, 1996, p. 23.

¹¹ "The clearing in the forest is a centre in which it is not always possible to enter; one looks in from the edge and the appearance of animal tracks does not help us in taking that step. It is another realm inhabited and safeguarded by a soul. Some bird issues a warning, calling one to go to where its voice marks. And it is obeyed; then there is nothing, nothing but an intact place that seems to have opened up at that very instant and which will never be the same again. It is not necessary to search for it. It is not necessary to search. It is the immediate lesson of the clearings in the forest: it is not necessary to seek them out, or to seek anything from them. Nothing determined, foreshadowed or familiar". María Zambrano. *Claros del bosque [Clearings in the Forest]*. Seix Barral, Barcelona, 1977, p. 11.

¹² "The substantive *Lichtung* goes back to the verb *lichten*. The adjective *licht* is the same word as *leicht*. *Etwas lichten* means to make it light, free and open, e.g., to make the forest free of trees at one place. The resulting free space thus originating is the *Lichtung* (clearing) [...]. The open region is not only free for brightness and darkness, but also for resonance and echo, for sound and the diminishing of sound. The *Lichtung* is the open region for everything that becomes present and absent". Martin Heidegger. "El final de la filosofía y la tarea de pensar", en *¿Qué es filosofía?* ["The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking", in *What is Philosophy?*]. Narcea, Madrid, 1980, p. 108-109.

contemporary gaze and understanding get trapped by a self-absorbed beauty, by a pixelated and shiny silhouette of the reality, provoked by the light of the new technologies, that is just the reflection on a wall of liquid glass of some images played ad nauseam. A world of which we only know a mirage of some concepts completely decontextualized, a shadow that, perverted by the interface, appears without its true essence in the core of the digital cavern. The mystery becomes a revelation before the poignancy provoked by the sublime, which is both appealing and repelling, before chaos, before lack of moderation and infallibility, before elusiveness, before the unfathomable and the uncontrollable. The predisposed and sensitive spectator who walks through the rooms in TEA makes a journey where the beauty will be defined by its own limits, because the essential description of a place and an idea emanates also from everything around, from things in collision and in association, from what repels and integrates. In this exhibition, doubt turns into knowledge and experience, it is a place where the uncanny gives shape and contents to beauty.¹³

“Hauptpunkt” (2013) [room 4] is the piece leading this space, but it is also the seed from which it derives many equations of the current proposal, an essential point that illuminates the rest of the pieces in this room and, by extension, the whole proposal. In the “illuminated” pieces, fiction, metaphor and dimensions are important to continue the crescendo that Amparo Sard brings up in all her exhibitions. In the video installations “Screenshapes #1”, “Screenshapes #2” and “Screenshapes #3” [room 4], the artist highlights the fake the new technologies provoke: on one side, we see images of Brexit supporters proclaiming false statements to defend their position; on other side, Donald Trump, before being elected president, appears in a piece declaring the “tremendous” mistake Angela Merkel was making by facilitating the entry into Germany of Syrian refugees; while in the third projection, some Greek residents complain about sharing with the refugees the same space they live in because they make their lives uneasy.

Speaking of these pieces, Amparo Sard points out: “My goal is to make the viewer hesitate about who is suffering or even if they have the right to suffer, if people speaking are good or bad, and to achieve it, I had to make the uncanny beautiful. For that reason, there are some figures made of transparent resin between the projector and the projection wall; the figures create a beautiful play of lights, a vision that

¹³ “And there may be some who argue that if beauty has to hide its weak points in the dark it is not beauty at all. But we Orientals [...] create a kind of beauty of the shadows we have made in out-of-the-way places”. Tanizaki. *El elogio de la sombra. op. cit.*, p. 69.

immediately trapped the viewers without them noticing that, in fact, they are silhouettes cut from a plasma monitor, outlines of children, of famines, of exiles. Confusion between reality and fiction, between the beauty and the uncanny, that reflects the distorting sieve the computer screen or our TVs are, the interface sweetening the harsh reality, providing it with a stunning brightness that make us blind with the excess”.

In “Forest of Lights and Shadows” (2016) [room 5], Amparo Sard integrates the public in its core. The filtered light, assume by the foliage, is what emanates from the “Hauptpunkt”, from the first transcendental essence, from this subtle and discontinuous source of light that illuminates the tree with black and white lights that project changing forms like internal flows up and down the trunk and the branches. A point of light as weak as powerful, a light that has certain difficulty in lighting what is on the surface, yet one that is able to make visible the knowledge that inhabits this unique forest that the artist has gradually built.¹⁴ Sard attempts to raise the veil of ignorance, to approach what is internal, to know the architecture that supports our being and the space within which we develop ourselves, to describe the pace of the flows nourishing us, the cadence of the circulation that makes us, the pillars that maintain us upright and the elements we are made of, something that is structure, but also breathing and heartbeat.¹⁵

This last installation gathers the craving for knowing what fluctuates between the poetic and the scientific, being interested in that which is natural, human and organic, that which is physical and metaphysical. The artist starts out with what is simple, transcending and purifying it to make it accessible to us. Her night vision penetrates the depths of the forest to capture its true substance and rigorously reveal its true essence, its virtues and all its possible evils, in an attempt to find those “clearings”, those meeting places that possess the not so obvious spirituality of constituting places of revelation, quasi-magical contexts where that which is non-evident appears and reveals itself.

¹⁴ It is not only the piece we are concerned with here, there are other Sard’s artworks that make use of this formalization by means of a sculpture of a tree made of polyethylene onto the surface of which the abstract lights of the video “Hauptpunkt” are projected. Those pieces are “Shadowy Landscape” —Santo Domingo Convent Church, Pollença (2013) and Trinity Chapel, Barjola Museum, Gijon (2015)— and “Pareidolia” —Es Baluard, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Palma the Mallorca (2013).

¹⁵ The heart, the centre that houses the flow of life, not to hold it, but rather so that it passes in the form of a dance, keeping up the pace, approaching, through the dance, to the reason, that is life. María Zambrano. *Claros del bosque*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

These forests and their clearings, now constituted as fields of light and shadow, of knowledge and aesthetics, also compose a metaphor for life, like a form of vegetation shaped with alveoli, veins and capillaries, one which fulfils the oxygenating function of giving us breath, of making us breathe, of renewing corrupted breath and of providing us with more or less fresh air. Over the visual pace of vital flows, that is accompanied by the polyphony of Cristóbal Morales, the human figure begins to take form; on this occasion via the opaque shadows of the public, who complete the installation by placing their figures between the artwork and the light illuminating it, thus adding a new and evocative register in which man's place fluctuates between the capacity to become part of the whole or being overwhelmed before a nature that is both perturbing and protective. Because "if all places in the universe are in the Aleph, then all stars, all lamps, all sources of light are in it, too".¹⁶

¹⁶ Jorge Luis Borges. "El Aleph", *Narraciones*. Salvat Editores, Barcelona, 1982 (1ª ed. 1944), p. 71.