

## **Precarious surfaces: "Light. The Shadow of Time. By Amparo Sard"**

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"...in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition (...) The perceptual process has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest."<sup>1</sup>

More than a century ago, around 1915, the Russian writer and literary critic Viktor Shklovsky wrote down these reflections in black and white. If someone read them and then went to visit "Light. The Shadow of Time" by Amparo Sard, they could think that the author wrote those words purposely for this exhibition. The often quoted essay "Art as device" anticipates most of the features related to Bertolt Brecht's programmatic strategy of "estrangement". Shklovsky's words make the contradictions of reality visible so that the familiar, which is often perceived unconsciously, appears to be something estranged and thus attracts new critical attention. At the same time, Shklovsky describes a state of "alienation" that has erased the experience of the physical and visual environment from conscience. Industrialization, new means of transportation and life in large cities had generated a sensory atmosphere that seemed to exceed human perception. It was also in this era when electricity became more prevalent in everyday life as is happening currently with new electronics and the digitalization seen in last years.

The years around 1900 are usually described as an era of nervousness in relation to concepts derived from electricity. Behind Walter Benjamin's idea of "shocks" — bombardments to human sense— lies the metaphor of electroshocks. As for the "aura," that Benjamin saw destroyed by new technologies, this could be considered an electric field. The notions then circulating about scientific photography had formal resonances with art, as we can see in many of Wassily Kandinsky's paintings.

We can also describe our era, the one in which Amparo Sard develops her objects and her —at first sight— fantastic visual world, as nervous. People who feel "at home" in the digital world are easily troubled when the regular rhythm of emails, Facebook messages and other internet information services become interrupted. One may think

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<sup>1</sup> Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose* (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), p. 6

that, for many people, the physical environment is almost entirely a continuation of the virtual world and not the other way round.

In this context, we can compare Amparo Sard's methodology to Shklovsky's proposal for the art of his time. How does her art prolong the process of perception to make the stone stony once more?

At the beginning of "Light. The Shadow of Time," we see a group of works made of paper that might at first be considered drawings. However, she has not drawn the motives, the figures with a classical appearance, the animals or even the technical devices —like a laptop— with pencils or brushes. Instead, they result from perforations in the paper. The imagined volumes develop from the play of light and shadow that arises from the interesting holes, which are sometimes small, other times bigger and can even look like wounds or incisions. The white paper is almost a reminiscence of marble, of old or classical sculptures and bas-reliefs. Every now and then, Amparo Sard exhibits a disturbing vision of the harmonious and balanced Classical World. Clarity and purity will be gradually replaced by distortions, deformations and darkenings. Initially, the fragility of the paper sheets stand in contrast with a large white bas-relief made of resin that shows a forest landscape. The structure of the bas-relief is not only made with puncture holes but also through raised peaks and the shadows they cast.

The same process occurs when materials suggesting different states of aggregation of matter —liquid and solid in this case— darken, both physically and atmospherically, and we find smaller bas-relief paintings that show fragments of groups of people whose figures seem to be just shadows. Gloomy associations may arise, for example, with the silhouettes of the victims that lie burnt as a consequence of a nuclear attack. In this piece, not only the shadows are black, but also the material that partially is **visible** through the surface holes.

This phenomena is even more interesting in "Emotional Intelligence", where she has created a generalized sculpture of a head whose eye sockets fester with a black liquid that also appears on other side of the room as a large projection. The empty eyes make a glaring impression. However, the body of the head seems to be just a shell, as if it were a virtual 3D object generated by computer although it has been made by traditional carving techniques. The uneven surface of the head is similar to that of Frankenstein's monster with his stitched skin or to the outdoor sculptures made by Franz West, in which he deliberately transformed the usually smooth aluminium foil surface into a grid imitating papier mâché figures. The surface of "Emotional Intelligence" is also

reminiscent of a damaged insect shell secreting fluids. It reminds of David Cronenberg films. In his imaginary universe, the human body can be an interface for technical implants and body fluids are an analogous residual matter.

The tree shapes also remind one of special effects in horror movies, seemingly like hands coming through the wall to catch us or as if from a film of Rorschach's inkblots seamlessly melting into one another. However, Amparo Sard's work develops the uncanny and the threatening through the use of atmosphere rather than with specific special effects. Thus, the suggestion of ecological disasters arises as a subliminal message. The trees consist merely of a wrapping, made of polyethylene. The material firmness of nature gives way to the imitated object, appearing as volatile as the projected images.

The "Screen Shapes" —transparent flat forms with fragmented rough silhouettes— seem to be the solidification of a temporary state of a liquid or the materialized visualization of digital data flows that hang out in the projection channels, as it happens with tree bark. A visualization of the data flows we are all exposed to everyday.

Here the artist links to the worlds of Surrealism and surrealist forms. Thus, they make us think of the amorphous structures that inhabit the arid landscapes by Yves Tanguy or of the strange forms we see in Salvador Dalí paintings that oscillate between the organoid fluid and what is built as the form generated through hollows and holes in the "The Enigma of Desire" (1929). The anamorphic distortions —that particularly affect "Screen Shapes"— remind of Dalí's "soft watches" from 1931, hanging as cloths over a ledge or a branch.

Amparo Sard displays the softening or dissolution of the supposed solid parts through the interaction between sculptural objects and video projections. The material objects and their surfaces always exhibit a dangerous situation. Everything we see or feel can instantly disappear. Regarding its form, everything that is physically fixed is, in a certain way, brief. On another level, what is precarious or threatened, is shown and literally revealed through political speeches and comments in cinematographic images that unveil a refusal attitude towards the influx of refugees to Europe.

The torn and fragmented forms also recall scenes of imminent disgrace very common to Surrealist painting —especially in Max Ernst's work. His paintings "The Fireside Angel" from 1937, shows a metamorphosis human/animal, while "Europe after the Rain I" and "Europe after the Rain II" contain rough silhouettes similar to the ones

we see in Sard's work, resulting from objects and the images focused over them. Regarding Max Ernst, danger is not only revealed through the subject but it also appears in the pictorial figuration. The art historian Werner Hofmann defines the "cracked surface, careless and full of scrapes and scratches" as "precarious painting"<sup>2</sup>.

Similarly to how Max Ernst makes his painting directly perceptible — what Shklovsky would describe as making a stone "stony"— Amparo Sard's work shows the sensitivity and vulnerability of the material through the punctures in the paper which causes an appearance almost like human skin. The association with skin, imitated through marble, is extended in her works made of resin while the rest of the objects interacting with projections illustrate a physical and analogue world. A world that is more and more determined by data flows that we cannot see or feel straightaway. "Screen Shapes" can be understood as obsessions of the digital nervousness or as witnesses of periodic convulsions of the stock market. With her scenes that are somber but also appeal to our inclination for different materials, Amparo Sard tries to sharpen our senses to what lies on the other side of the tangibility of our world. A world that strongly determines our ability to experience our environment while being polluted from an ecological perspective.

Her precarious scenes invite us to perceive how electronic means of communication penetrate the physical world, as if it were a sort of acid rain. After all, the belief that art is able to sharpen the perception of the doomed advances, makes of "Light. The shadow of Time," despite all the threatening voices, an optimistic vision.

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<sup>2</sup> Werner Hofmann, *Phantasiestücke. Über das Phantastische in der Kunst*, München: Hirmer 2010, p. 280.