

Destroying history at 36 frames a second

By Alexia Tala

*For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror
which we are barely able to endure*

Rainer M. Rilkeⁱ

As if each of the videos were a mirror of the exhibits in the room, and each of the pictures (*stills*) a romantic painting with beautiful colors and organic shapes, and as if every subtle movement could be engraved on our memory...but definitively only one image can leave its mark on our consciousness: the picture in which the diaguita ceramic begins to break up and lose its shape, until the moment when each fragment and its dust—which float slowly in front of the camera—dissolve and vanish.

Josefina Guilisaste's work deals with questions about the value of a cultural heritage and its connection to painting in various shapes and formats, while it arouses reflections about political and cultural subjects. She has a particular interest in the concept of the museum and the way in which museums represent a paradigm of the history/patrimony relationship, provoking sharp questioning about *how*, *where* and *why* historical pieces are united with contemporary art. Her vision crosses the boundaries of regular artistic concerns and enters the field of museography.

The scale of her paintings is diverse. She has experimented widely, ranging from the installation of dozens of little paintings on shelves to large format paintings accompanied by videos projected on small tablets. *Display* is an inseparable theme in her way of conceiving a work. Indeed, one could approach her production as one that seeks to establish a fresh horizon between the painting and its observer.

"The work of the archeologist, like the anthropologist, is to make apparently extinct documents speak," says Gonzalo Ampuero. The value of a contemporary artist is varied and debated, but doubtless debating and reflecting on the world's woes, as well as creating awareness of these subjects, has become an important mission whether in history, at the present time, or in a possible future. In the case of artist Josefina Guilisaste, she does not explicitly seek to explore or represent, but, with or without deliberate intent, to question the context of conflict in which the Spanish conquest of Latin America took place, which meant the eradication of its cultural tradition—beliefs, dialects, religion and customs—and imposed evangelization.

In the Chilean Museum of Pre-Columbian Art, a marvellous range of ceramics—vases, ceremonial plates, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic jugs, as well as adornments and fabrics—show traces of the symbolic production of an ethnic group which speaks through these pieces of its thinking and cosmivision. This is why *Free fall 2017* can't leave the spectator indifferent at seeing an object so loaded with history destroyed in a sort of harmonic dance in which each fragment dialogues with another. This is not an attempt to

tell an ancestral story but to level a sharp critique at the history of today's ethnic minorities and yesterday's indigenous peoples.

A work like *Free fall* is more pertinent than ever given the recent history of Latin America, in which violence against indigenous peoples who are fighting against the invisibilization of their culture and robbery of their lands is met with silence, when the legitimated oppression of those in power threatens to erase their history despite their extraordinary and fierce resistance.

When we study the different ethnic groups of indigenous Chile we find that the existing information depends on the discoveries of researchers and explorers; indeed the diaries of the *Conquistadores* provide many details to help us understand how a particular ethnic group was. We know little about diaguita culture. Nevertheless among its most distinctive aspects are its ceramic crafts, which are full of symbolism. This makes them into an important source of information to be re-interpreted.

In this context, to encounter the work of Guilisaste is to return to the object—in this case a replica of the originals modeled and painted by diaguitas— as a tool for denunciation, reflection and appreciation, but shorn of any utilitarian or decorative function and indeed closer to a political language. Even though *Free fall* is an intervention framed by a collection of archeological and ethnographic objects that approaches the spectator with an educational/ cultural mission, the work is able to capture the spectator based on its contemporary relevance.

By choosing ceramic pieces as representative elements of an ethnic group, Guilisasti astutely converts her intervention into a tool for thought about the conservation of our cultural patrimony and the value of objects. It serves at the same time as a denunciation of the loss of memory, and, we could say, the extermination of the beliefs of our native peoples. Seeing the vessels fall and break into a thousand pieces is a violent and metaphorically accurate representation of the historical truth about what happened to the diaguita people in the 3rd and 4th Regions of Chile, whose numbers were reduced from 30,000 to 1,200 during the conquest.ⁱⁱ

The artist successfully plays on this convergence between beauty and stark injustice and horror in a single piece in which the poetic combines with the political. If we think of artistic beauty as an expression of the spirit, we can find a double convergence in *Free fall*: between the manifestation of the indigenous diaguita and that of the contemporary artist. In the words of Eugenio Trías, “beauty is presented here with a powerful and defined reference to horror, and it is this encounter that gives power to this work.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Thus, *Free fall* focuses on the dialogue between the space of the contemporary world and the space of our indigenous patrimonial history, between ancestral handicrafts and modern technology, between the creation of painting as a form of personal expression,

on the one hand, and the destruction of painted objects as a form of social expression on the other.

ⁱ Rainer María Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, tr. Leishman and Spender, London: Hogarth Press (1963), p. 25.

ⁱⁱ Gonzálo Ampuero Brito, *Antiguas culturas del Norte Chico*, Santiago: Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino, p. 29.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.diseño.unnoba.edu.ar/wp-content/uploads/LO-BELLO-Y-LO-SINIESTRO-Eugenio-Trias.pdf> p. 7