

The Vertigo of Matter

A fall toward objects without reservation, embracing a world of forces and matter, which lacks any original stability and sparks the sudden shock of the open: a freedom that is terrifying, utterly deterritorializing, and always already unknown. Falling means ruin and demise as well as love and abandon, passion and surrender, decline and catastrophe. Falling is corruption as well as liberation, a condition that turns people into things and vice versa.

Hito Steyerl, IN FREE FALL³

This striking image of falling is uncomfortably opportune and allegorical. It incarnates a historical sensation with History or infinitely fragmented bits of history that we reference to give ourselves a perspective of time and place. Our epoch indeed begins with almost fearsome clarity as a time without horizons, like the hinge of a century of catastrophes that gave no sense either to the present or to the future. Our epoch is marked by falling, for there is no hunger for foundations that might nourish some kind of stability. Hito Steyerl beautifully describes this image almost as one of sublimity in which we and objects float without direction, together and indistinguishably. Yet falling has this paradox: if everything is falling we probably don't realise we are falling .

Falling can also be an interlude, a kind of liberation. In *Free Fall* we see this, a sort of liberation from time, pared down to a single image. Josefina Guilisasti deposited this liberation rigorously and excessively in earlier works on the still life, one of the most eloquent themes in the history of Western art, a place in which art discovered a philosophical window in which to reference matter without turning into matter itself, without becoming pure surface. A type of painting in which objects and time are dramatised protagonists par excellence.

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Free Fall is another kind of tempered image: tiny fragments of Diaguitas Indian pots that are flying synchronically after an impact that is invisible to the spectator. The ground or any spatial reference is hidden from us, and the action is slowed down so that it's impossible for us not to concentrate on the movement of the pieces. The insistence, the repetition, the hygienisation of a scene protagonised by objects are elements that appear again, but now in a moving image. The audiovisual language, however, is blindly governed by the pictorial matrix, in that the scene is literally an extension of the same image, with faint variations (a strategy we see repeated throughout Guilisasti's artistic career). So, video is yet another opportunity to speak the language of an annulment of temporality that makes time *appear*: the work thus holds its place in the territory of still life painting.

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But this work contains other questions. The type of object alluded to and the place from which we are contemplating it are both strongly emphasised. Together, these two elements seek to take a further step in a solid investigation centered on the search for a type of vertigo *with* and *of* the matter found in the objects themselves. In this sense it's no coincidence that the objects we see in Josefina Guilisaste's recent series—almost entirely unlike those we saw in the first ones—have nothing to do with *our* everyday life but the everyday life of an enigmatic other, distant from our time. It is a gesture that we find ourselves progressively adopting. What is the artist telling us with this shift of perspective?

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In *Free Fall* these objects are subtly transported into a state of non-destructive banalisation that radically eliminates any trace of the element of vandalism inherent in an image like this. Guilisasti's work is not political in a symbolic sense: even a superficial knowledge of her work is enough to discard the notion that the artist's main purpose is to stress or divert the archeological expectations generated by the objects we see in this exhibit. Her work is always a strategy to speak about something else. It's as if her approach to these objects is, paradoxically, to pass over them without touching, tampering with them or destroying them, in *that* sense. That's a cause for relief: this work in a museum of pre-Columbian art is not about the disjunction between art and artifact which is at the heart of the still current debate about the definition of a work of art that so obsessed art historians and critics a

couple of decades ago. Her interest is not in pronouncements related to ideology and power inherent in the institutional theories typically formulated in response to that debate.

If the museum is alluded to in this work at all, it is somehow as a place in which a confrontation like this aims to be silenced. This is the sense described by Roc Lañeca: “it would be ingenuous, then,” he tells us, “not to recognise that the relationship between museum and exhibit is far from being linear and pacific. Indeed, that’s why the museum’s role is so like that of an explosives expert who must learn to conduct himself with extreme caution to avoid the sensitive material he handles exploding in his hands. In general, the museum does not have the remotest idea of what it exhibits, and even so projects an image of solidity and authority with which it proposes to educate the visitor’s gaze”ⁱⁱ The experience of an object in a museum, the author explains, does not seek to express its inherent complexity; on the contrary it keeps us expectant for the knowledge that only the museum can authorize. The notion of the heritage that may be referred to in this work is always synonymous with the “fall” mentioned at the beginning: a reminder that what we have before us now are only a few objects that we have obstinately rescued from oblivion for our curious inspection.

What is interesting about the detour these slowing-down exercises generate is precisely what the image silently opens: how this movement leads us slowly to a peaceful, undeniable and pleasurable abstraction. With that movement and almost without us being aware of it, the objects become just materiality, which is why painting is where we will always find the key to thinking of this work.

In *Free Fall*, as in all Josefina Guilisasti’s earlier work, we are faced with objects that are protagonists in a conflict. Faced with her work we rapidly turn into spectators of our own fluctuating condition through the medium of these objects. Appearing shorn of any world or identity to which we can cling, they somehow turn themselves into a movement that makes any context, any information, any interpretation, any anecdote, anachronistic. This

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is where melancholy can be just a force to mobilize the production of knowledge, an epistemological principle, as Walter Benjamin said. Isn't a museum of dead cultures not the most melancholy of institutions? The artists takes us even further, pushing us to think of the material of these objects while suspending their status as a global process (spiritual and social), reduced in their meaning as a grace of the material exploding into multiple fragments. The objects are also a reflection of the abstraction of perception, Guilisasti tells us, sensibility theatricalised in an *atemporal act*. We have that only for moments, the artist reminds us: we fall, but embracing matter.

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Carol Illanes L.
Diciembre, 2016

¹ STEYERL, Hito, "In Free Fall", from *The Wretched of the Screen*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012, p. 3.

² LASECA, Roc. *El museo imparabile: sobre institucionalidad genuina y blanda*. Santiago: Metales Pesados, 2015, p. 23.

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<p>sería ingenuo entonces –nos dice– no reconocer que la relación que mantiene el museo con lo expuesto dista mucho de ser lineal y pacífica. De hecho, por eso el rol del museo se asemeja tanto al de un artificiero que debe aprender a manejarse con suma cautela para que no le explote en las manos el sensible material con el que trabaja. Por lo general, el museo no tiene la más remota idea de lo que expone y aun así proyecta una imagen sólida y autoritaria con la que plantea educar la mirada del visitante”.</p>		
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<p>La experiencia del objeto en el museo, explica el autor, no busca expresar su inherente complejidad; por el contrario, nos mantiene ante la expectativa de ese conocimiento que solo él puede autorizar</p>		
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<p>La noción de patrimonio que en esta obra llega a ser aludida es siempre en tanto sinónimo de la “caída” mencionada al inicio; el recordatorio de que lo que hoy tenemos son solo algunos objetos que, obstinadamente, recuperamos del olvido para ser contemplados con mirada inquieta.</p>		
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<p>"Become into" no existe en inglés. Se puede decir "become only materiality." Es lo mas cerca al original. OK</p>		
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Lo interesante del desvío que generan estos ejercicios de ralentización es precisamente lo que abre la imagen de manera silenciosa: el cómo este movimiento nos conduce lentamente a una pacífica, innegable y apetecida abstracción. Los objetos se vuelven, en ese movimiento y casi sin que nos demos cuenta, solo materialidad; de allí que encontremos siempre en la pintura los principios para pensar esta obra.		
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Tanto en <i>Caída libre</i> como en toda la obra anterior de Josefina Guilisasti nos enfrentamos a los objetos como protagonistas de un conflicto.		
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Delante de aquella nos volvemos rápidamente espectadores de nuestra propia condición fluctuante por medio de esos objetos.		

