



FERNANDO PRATS :: *ABOUT SHIPWRECKS AND EARTHQUAKES*



With the extraordinary experience in Venice behind and new horizons ahead, **Fernando Prats** removes the veil from his works, a heart of darkness made of utopia, hazardous journeys and the conquest of spaces going beyond any limit. *Carnet de voyage* of courageous captains.

The work by Fernando Prats, which stands out for having extraordinary rigour, and for reflecting the Chilean reality conditioned by the different geographic aspects that make it up, turns into a transcendental card to represent Chile at the 54th Venetian Biennale: **Gran Sur** is the starting and arrival point of our conversation.



For his art exhibition, Prats, a Chilean citizen based in Barcelona, has visited different places of his home country hit by natural disasters. He set out from the region of Chaitén, still inhabited because of a major volcanic eruption occurred some years ago, and later he moved to the small fishermen's bays near Concepción, struck by the earthquake of 27th February, 2010. These territories cherish the memory from the past and for the artist they represent a source of resources.

It is interesting to analyze how the issue of natural catastrophes has touched the heart of the Chilean people until reaching the souls of the artists. We should also remind that the national Pavilion of the Architecture Biennial 2010, entitled *Chile 8.8* – referring to the magnitude of that awful quake measured on the Richter scale -, was totally dedicated to the earthquake.

When we asked him what he thinks about all this, Prats replied: "Every time I plan to travel and reflect on these natural disasters, I actually find a direct link with the seismic aspect, with the energy held back in the subsoil. It is not only a geography matter, it is more complex. Think about the paintings by Roberto Matta, his *Inscapes*, his *Psychological Morphology*: they refer to the seismic energy, to the inner dynamics of the things. I connect to the places according to a travel schedule. When I say travel, though, I mean an intellectual pattern. For this reason, I give great importance to the processes and the procedures; not only materially, but also mentally. Seismic phenomena, regarded as a sensory experience, can have a wide range of levels. On the one hand, sensoriality is linked to the appeal on the people who share your work; on the other hand, it depends on the ethical intentions, such as those of Shackleton in the Antarctic. During my expedition in the town of Chaitén, for example, such intentions have been decisive."

A project that brought Prats in the Chilean geographical territories where nature “explodes or exploits”, and whose consequences are “tracked” on the artist’s map, who documented the process in a video where he gathered “the trails” of such natural phenomena.

“The relevant aspect of this geologic idea is its movement, this energy is a form of thought and intuition that I let slip on to my painting. The project carried out during the earthquake is entitled *03:34:17*, the exact time of the earthquake. It is the precise moment when human beings have to deal with strength. In these moments, the dimension of the human fragility, fear, pain, darkness, loss, etc. reduces. It is the highest breaking point in the relationship between man and nature, art and catastrophe. My feelings in front of the devastation are the same as any Chilean citizen: immeasurable grief. And as an artist, I immediately think of the restoration place. It is there that the entire working-through process of painting takes place, both existentially and materially. In Venice, the work turned up at the right moment, as it was part of a general working procedure that I already devised some years ago. I have talked about geology and painting. I should also mention the words “dynamography” and “seismography”. Words that every Chilean knows, because we bring with us the memory of several devastations.”



A process, therefore, in which he relevantly lets Nature speak and be what it is – the birds, the worms, the tree branches -, significantly, delete, leave a trail on the pictorial surface cured with smoke by the artist. Therefore, to uncover what was hidden in the depths of the work. In a nutshell, he lets shine the light peeking out from the depths of darkness. Nothing else, then, but the miracle of a revelation.

“Although we also try to detect the energy of geography, the driver of the work

is the loss, the destruction, the pain. My work is conditioned by the people who experienced the tragedy. I acted as a mediator of the art work, in order to catch such energy.”

In the presentation of his work, the Spanish curator Fernando Castro Flórez, writes: “Fernando Prats travels across his country with a map blurred by smoke, treading on a soil made into ash, inserting his papers into the cracks, gazing into a glacial horizon. His remarkable seismographic method demonstrates that the map is not only a representation of the territory but also that, following an extreme event, its testimony is inevitably sombre. The project carried out by Fernando Prats is, in every sense, epic and poetic, in which he claims that art is a travel to the unknown.”

Prats resumes the idea of painting from the point of view of an alchemist, stones his paintings, lets the branches whip them or the doves to leave the marks of the flapping of their wings on them, cries over this, over- coming the traditional elements that characterize it. What are the main difficulties to assume this different approach as a painter?

“The most important thing in painting is to know how to find the energies that can prompt this pictorial surface. The process and procedure are significant. In the works displayed in Venice, they are the journeys. For me a journey is a model of work. I plan a journey through poetic diagrams as, for example, Saint John-Joseph of the Cross or the diaries and maps of Shackleton. I consider them inventors of knowledge schemes. It is the methodological process. The painting procedure deals with the preparation of the supports; I work with the smoke, everything comes from that. It is an archaic material, a residue, which allows to detect the slightest signals and beats, because painting generates from there.



My paintings are smoke cured panels that record the beats of the collectivity. It sounds quite pretentious of me. The fragility of my support corresponds to the fragility of the viewers, because it highlights a distressing moment of their existence. As a critic and friend of mine says, every work generates its most appropriate audience. Negotiation is planned there. Moreover, we should consider that in my work process, the contact with the people is very important, because it occurs always in moments of affective exception. Without such involvement, without this engagement, artworks would never exist.”

More than in the visual result of the work, Prats is interested in the internal processes of its realization; more than the aesthetic pleasure, he tries to create a powerful experience; more than success and comfort, he keeps pursuing risk and utopia. Also, the particular reality of a seismic, extensive, mountainous, etc., country, exacerbates above all the differences, which appear to be even more dramatic when catastrophes strike and countries cannot draw upon the same resources to cope with them.

On 16th March 2011, Prats sailed off on the crossing from Punta Arenas to the South Pole. Aboard, the Navy icebreaker “Almirante Viel”, the admiral Jorge Montenegro was in charge of the crew of 105 members to put through the project of Prats, entitled Gran Sur, reaching its destination: Elephant Island, the same point where, in 1914, the Shackleton’s expedition became trapped in the ice. They didn’t run less risks. The same experience of the Irish explorer served as an antecedent. The explorer wanted to cross the Antarctic continent, but his ship was trapped fast in the ice pack, leaving the crew stranded on the ice floes for more than one year, until when, in 1916, the Chilean pilot Luís Pardo rescued the stranded crewmen in a heroic exploit. South Pole has always been risky. “The expedition carried out with Prats had a military rigour and discipline –

said the admiral leading the expedition. Elephant Island is an inhospitable mountainous island with few accesses to the sea, indeed this is the first time that our ship gets there. The climatic conditions of wind and sea are tough, there are giant waves, and fog deepens as wind speed increases.”



“Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honour and recognition in case of success”: written in neon lettering, the advert attempted to relate the entrance to the Pavilion with the snow-covered and inhabited territory of the South Pole, through an original dialogue (Shackleton published this advert on the London newspapers in 1900, when he was organizing the National Antarctic Expedition, calling for men for his mission). So, the artistic portrait of a nation is assembled, whose dramatic force, the lack of bashfulness and the post-apocalyptic and epic mood, were a sensation among the general as well as the specialized audience. Viewers had the feeling of being in front of a lonely Romantic artist, who goes back to his native land to trace its soil and history, as if in a sort of cult and mystification of the man/artist/explorer. An advert with ethic connotations, which highlights how the human being manages to survive in extreme environments. It is eventually related to the conditions that characterize Chile through its catastrophes.

Prats ends our conversation saying: “In short, it is a statement on the limits of the art. Ultimately, on the limits of human resistance. Art constantly places you in this zone of resistance, and in Venice it has an amplified reverberation. Nonetheless, the central element of this choice is the ethic attitude of Shackleton in the Antarctic.”

Antonio Arévalo

05.07.2012