

SIN CIELO / SKYLESS

Clemencia Echeverri: unrestful waters.

Isolated territories in Colombia, where the action of the state is weak or absent, are fertile ground for all kinds of illegal activities to thrive. It also happens that these often remote areas with no proper roads are only served by rivers, which in consequence become actors in the political situation. Rivers both provide a historical context and are territories laden with histories and images that have been taken up by artists in the country time and again. Both works by Clemencia Echeverri in this exhibition, *Treno* (Threnody), 2007, and *Sin Cielo* (Skyless), 2016, reference directly the rivers, the territories that they structure and the illegal activities that take place in or around them.

Beginning as a painter and sculptor, Echeverri finds an ideal artistic medium in video and sound in the late nineties, and has remained in these media since. Echeverri manipulates sound and creates very precise spaces for her projections to be shown, building image and sound sculptures by modifying the existing architecture or creating new structures which require the viewer to move in and around the artworks in order to experience them fully. Working on long-term projects, Echeverri has established a body of work in which absence, ruin, and ritual are some of the recurring themes, with a subtext of violence, which manifests itself in various ways in everyday life in Colombia. This exhibition includes discrete works that belong to larger bodies of research, but that are powerful enough to embody the issues at stake in the installations they are versions of.

The first one consists of two large prints, done after an arduous trial-and-error process in order to silkscreen stills from video on the mirrored surface of steel. They depict two unrestful bodies of water and evoke the potency of the original video installation, *Treno*, which consists of two video projections of a mighty river which completely cover two opposing walls. The surround sound helps create a space of great sensory power. The viewer, standing in the middle of the two projections, looks alternately from the two banks to an impossible center of the river that flows on opposite sides. A voice calls out as if demanding an answer from the river, but the river remains impassible. The title is an archaic Spanish word that means *funeral chant*, from the Greek *thrênos* (lament). In ancient Greece, the *thrênos* was intoned when the dead body for some reason could not be found, and often entailed philosophical reflections on human destiny. The idea of a funeral chant for an absent body references the innumerable bodies that are routinely thrown into the Colombian rivers, where they disappear, foreclosing any possibility for the victims' relatives to achieve closure. The casualties of a war that has lasted for half a century are innumerable, and thus the river has become, in many respects, a mass grave. These beautiful and haunting images speak of the Colombian river as a fluid mass grave in which the bodies of our war disappear.

The video was shot on opposing banks of the Cauca River, a tumultuous body of water that runs parallel to the Pacific coast in Colombia and that eventually becomes a tributary to the Magdalena, which dies out into the Caribbean. This region has historically been, and still is, the site for violent confrontations. In Echeverri's installation, images of the roaring water are interspersed with shots of a man fishing out garments from the river with the aid of a pole. In many cases, the armed forces controlling the territories forbade burials, so the gesture of trying to retrieve a body from the water takes an attitude of defiance. Echeverri has signaled that since the installation shows the two opposing banks, it positions the viewer inside the river, as it were, and thus allegorically within the conflict: "Some rivers in Colombia have been, in their silent course, witnesses to a history that we reiterate tirelessly: an endless flow of all that we attempt to redress or amend. In *Treno*, a video installation developed (...) with local people, I put on an event whereby the moving image and sound bring into focus a time that the place itself keeps silent. Notwithstanding its apparent nature as a scenic viewpoint, a resting place, a natural wonder, the river carries unheard and errant voices; the juxtaposed experiences of a country that proposes and attempts its reconstruction at every step, while it is dragged down by a history that is tied to horror. I create a dialogue by way of two confronting projections that highlight discord and disintegration as constants that hamper the construction and that point to the void instead: an unanswered plea that speaks, indeed, of hopelessness".

The second work also shows of a river, interspersed with close-ups of flowing water, crumbling rocks, and landscape. This projection is a single-channel version of a large multi-part video wall originally commissioned by the Banco de la República in Colombia. In *Sin Cielo*, montage enables Echeverri to create several narratives within the immersive projection, aided by a carefully composed soundtrack that provides other parallel stories: extraction, processing and discharge of the polluted byproducts back into the river. It also shows how the territory itself disappears by being continuously eroded into the river below. If *Treno* spoke about the criminality of illegal armed groups and the disposal of the corpses of the bloody war they waged on the social body, *Sin Cielo* talks about other illegal practice: unchecked and unregulated mining, which poses a deadly threat to nature, poisoning the waterways and in so doing putting in peril the survival of entire communities -thus becoming a veritable social as well as environmental crime. The river in *Treno* carries dead bodies; the one in *Sin Cielo* is in itself a dead body of water, bringing destruction downriver with its inexorable flow.

José Roca, 2017.