

THE WORK OF CLEMENCIA ECHEVERRI

(A Journey to the Core of Her Obsessions)

One enters every creative process in darkness, but a glimmer in the distance makes it possible to forge ahead. The "ahead" referred to here, despite its nebulous contours, must tug at the artist so strongly that she never loses her drive along the way, even when uncertainty leads her to stumble or simply stop. The creator generally walks a path of questions and discoveries: sometimes about the unknown, sometimes about how to approach what was known or intuited. The process experienced by the viewer could be described in a very similar way. We, like the artist, also tread a path of questions and discoveries, and may, at best, manage to glimpse the essence of the work, feel its resonances.

In much of Clemencia Echeverri's work this darkness is not merely metaphorical. In *Nóctulo* (2015), for example, the viewer penetrates a territory of almost total darkness. In the beginning, this throws us off-center and causes discomfort –since causing discomfort is, to a large extent, what this artist's work is all about. It might even be said that, from the very start, the viewer's usual condition is altered since *Nóctulo*, being three-dimensional, forces one to surround the object and, therefore, to approach the space in a more committed and dramatic manner than required by other plastic manifestations, calling on all the viewer's senses, especially the sense of hearing, which simultaneously perceives a flutter of bats, a "sputtering" of what sounds like grains dropping one on top of another, along with whispers, voices that at times turn diaphanous, but are slowly diluted, lost in the dark space that encloses them.

We are in a spectral, phantasmagorical setting. And one of ruin. As in *Comala*, those who no longer "are" continue to speak about what was, attempting to configure a story, but the result is a broken discourse, torn apart, unraveled, comprised of the nebulous matter of dreams. Inevitably, the work refers us to the notion of time. "What time is this?" the viewer asks. The patter of nocturnal animals provides an answer: it is time now vacated. Here there once was. Men, women, heat, after-dinner conversation. The grain that falls is

abundance, but it is also rain, a torrential sound that extinguishes the word, the last vestige of the memory of those who once inhabited the space.

Nóctulo recreates a rural space, a constant in the work of Clemencia Echeverri, who in *Supervivencias (Survivals)* (2011) explores the small towns in Caldas, the department where she was born and spent the occasional vacation during her childhood and youth. In this work we see a landscape of mountains draped in haze, in the darkness of night and dotted with flickering lights. The dense clouds that hide the peaks of these startling mountains seem to enclose some kind of threat; the same threat that becomes explicit when the rural farmhouse typical of the coffee-growing zone, anchored in the broken ground, opens before our eyes, empty but still intact, and we hear the echoes on its stairs, in its rooms, in its corridors, of the footsteps we previously felt coming through the brush. Nothing makes it explicit, but we can feel the presence of the predator, of the alien being that is tracking or appropriating something, and we intuit the hasty abandonment. The video acts as a mute witness to this dispossession, but also as a metaphor for the fear of the invader, like the ongoing story of these remote communities, pierced by violence belied by seemingly peaceful landscapes.

The same footprints suggesting violence appeared in one of Clemencia Echeverri's earlier works, *Exhausto aún puede pelear (Exhausted He Can Still Fight)* (2000), which takes us into the world of the masculine, an underlying theme in all Echeverri's work, but developed in its most resounding form in *Versión libre (Spontaneous Declaration)* (2011). In this video, the spectator also enters the darkness –here endowed with its traditional sinister connotation–, from which emerge, terrifying and constant, the enormous figures of hooded men dressed in black that seem to approach us, threateningly. These are former members of the AUC (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, or United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, in English), paramilitaries who committed atrocious forms of violence in many parts of the national territory, along with equally violent former guerrillas who in the video make the gesture of revealing their identities, of making their "spontaneous declaration", but the removal of their balaclavas is interrupted and in the end nothing is unveiled. As in *Nóctulo*, the discourse –which here is meant as a confession– is also

fragmented, so that we glean only fragments, unfinished but sufficiently-revealing phrases to know that we face the ambiguity of guilt, of the perpetrator's remorse. The screens, which seem to dwarf us, place us on a border: between what hides and also unveils, threatens and surrenders, goes away and returns, speaks but is silent. And although the image of one woman is mixed in with the others, the corporality of the remaining figures is archetypally masculine: that of the warrior, but also the bandit, given the hidden faces. Through the holes in their balaclavas we look into the eyes of these men that transmit nothing, contrary to the belief that, "the eyes are the mirror of the soul". As spectators, we seem to experience a dilemma very typical of this historical moment, the end of an important part of Colombia's armed conflict: to believe or not to believe.

Underlying this piece is the idea of truth, but as something that the artist plays down. Every version of history is always just one version, and of course it is not always spontaneous.

Another of the perspectives captured in Clemencia Echeverri's work catches our attention and moves us. It is that of the rooster in one of what I consider her most extraordinary and sensitive works: *Juegos de herencia (Heritage Games)* (2009). In this piece the animal is buried up to its neck below the ground as part of a sad ritual imported to America by the Spaniards and preserved by the inhabitants of El Valle (Chocó province), who celebrate the ritual every July 20, and recorded here by the artist, *in situ*, to be incorporated into a video installation. Once again surrounded by screens, the spectator watches as the young Chocoanos who participate in the ritual are blindfolded and brandish the machete with which they will "play" at cutting off the animal's head. Of course, Clemencia Echeverri saves us from the spectacle of death, but the tension in the spectator stems from the observation of the minimal movements of the cock's head as its body is tortured, and from its eyes, still alive, erratic, so impenetrable, and, although for different reasons, like those of the hooded men in *Versión libre*, and from the way in which the boys grip the machete and arrange themselves in the space, calculating the possibilities of striking their target.

These two relatively distant works share three fundamental elements: violence, although not explicit, the victimizer, and the victim. The victim's innocence appears supreme given the fact it is an animal, and not just animal, but one both beautiful and dignified, the rooster we associate with the morning light and to which we attribute, gratuitously or not, a certain lordship, but that at the same time, unlike a bull or a bird of prey, is essentially helpless.

And in the young Chocoano who celebrates the ritual that he considers his heritage –a custom he accepts without critically distancing himself in the least–, we recognize, not without a shiver, a kind of "innocence" born of familiarity with the abuse implied by this "game", the implicit belief that life is worth nothing. It is impossible not to associate the future image of the slaughtering of the rooster –which takes hold in our imagination despite being only a possibility– with the macabre practices of the paramilitaries, who during Colombia's armed conflict were known to carry out massacres and then play soccer with the heads of their victims while local bands played in celebration.

The human figure appears rarely in Echeverri's work. Except in *Versión libre*, the recognizably human elements we see are shadows, hands, feet, and details that suggest a presence, or a voice, another very important resource to which I'll return later. The animal figure, however, is recurrent, and is associated one way or another with violence. The first time it appears, also in association with a ritual, is in *Apetitos de familia (Family Appetites)* (1998), a work featuring the traditional Christmas pig slaughter and roast typical of the region where the artist grew up. Already in *Apetitos*, Echeverri had drawn attention to the relationship animal violence-tradition-familiarity-celebration that reappears later in *Juegos de herencia*. The immolated pig transmits its terror to us through horrible screams, which instead of reaffirming its animal condition humanize it by anticipating the pain of its sacrifice. A word that refers, doubly, to blood but also to the sacred. It is impossible not to think of Christian or pagan offerings to appease the gods, in all the mythical beliefs and primitive nature contained in them, as well as the notion of transcendence. This last concept, however, is not present in the same way in *Apetitos de familia*. The very title of the work indicates that the ritual has been stripped of its eminently sacred nature,

although much ceremony remains in the ancient rite of sitting down at table, a sign of fraternity in all cultures. The blood that slowly rises on the screen –reminding those familiar with Clemencia Echeverri's work of her future images of the river– reveals, nevertheless, the significance of the piece, turns it into a metaphor more powerful than that of the animal's death, containing as it does all the power of the allusions to violence, to the "blood bath" that Colombians have suffered for years.

Every solid work of art allows us to trace the obsessions of its creator. It is therefore unsurprising that later, in 2012, what was merely suggested in *Apetitos de familia* grew into a work of its own. And so, *Sacrifice* emerges once again from the most profound darkness, that of night in the countryside, in which corralled beasts struggle in the face of fire, desperately twisting and turning in their confined space, in such a way that we feel their hooves beating the ground, the weight of their slamming bodies and, paradoxically, the silence in their throats that is pure terror, stampede, the grief-stricken search for a way out. A silence that reveals more than any bellowing. In this video installation, the viewer also feels trapped, while at the same time intuiting that beyond the fire lurks another threat, and not exactly a natural one. Pulsating here is the vital instinct, resistance, a searching, enveloped in a nightmarish atmosphere.

The rooster that was but a victim in *Juegos de herencia* is, in Echeverri's early work, *Exhausto aún puede pelear*, a fighting animal, a possible victimizer, and also a possible victim. It is the fight that is emphasized here, the animal's brio, its fury, and its resources, although not in an open field but within the confines of the cockfight, which suggests external manipulation, but is also a ritual, a violent game, a gambling scenario in which we are left to guess at the unspoken looks on the gamblers' faces as they provoke violence while trivializing it. The gesture of the spur tearing the fabric also represents the implicit threat associated with the marching boots that appear in the same video and lend meaning to it: the military, masculinity, confrontation, wounds, etc.

The year 2007 marks, in my view, a point of inflection in the work of Clemencia Echeverri. If up to this point she has been concerned with the land, and in it the houses and the

animals as elements that allow her to symbolize and resignify violence, water now appears as the great protagonist. The large-scale work titled *Treno*, "submerges" the spectator in the torrential waters of the Cauca River, which, apart from its vital place in the lives of riverside dwellers, given the myriad resources that enrich their existence, is also, unfortunately, marked by a history of violence as, for years now, the whole or dismembered bodies of the victims of Colombia's internal conflict have been disposed of in its waters.

The viewer is initially impacted by the force of the water, its density, all the life-giving and destructive power in it. And this is not something that we can ignore, because Clemencia Echeverri's work has recently begun leaning towards a reflection on man's relationship with nature, not in its most harmonious or idyllic form, but from the perspective of man's attempts to tame, subdue, and even violate it. This is not the case with *Treno*. As its name indicates, this work alludes to a lament in the absence of the deceased: a voice calls to someone by the person's name, and the silence that follows the call draws attention to the absence, but also to the search, which contains both anguish and hope.

Treno emphasizes the river's indifference to the calling on the shore from a voice that gets no answer. This voice that is swept away by the river also speaks to us of the tremendous solitude experienced when faced with the "divine indifference of Nature" –as Montale put it–, but also of the human indifference to an armed conflict that has resulted in thousands of victims who leave behind nothing more than an unmarked grave, if that: a hole without so much as the victim's mortal remains. Standing in front of the huge screens where the river roars and shines powerful in the darkness, we are once again dwarfed, as we were by the enormous figures in *Versión libre*, but this time not out of fear, but because our stature is revealed: that of the ephemeral and perishable human on the shores of an original, seemingly eternal force. From the shore, a hand uses a stick to rescue several garments: once again, the trace, the residue, the testimony. The anecdote seems to be insinuated but is diluted before it can materialize because Clemencia Echeverri's pieces refuse to narrate: they are almost abstract pieces, focused on their metaphorical and symbolic power.

I'd like to expand a little more on two topics: the trace and the voice. The first is manifested in one of the artist's very early works, *De doble filo (Double-edged)*, in which it appears in a more literal way than in later works. Here, a hand uses a stick to trace the schematic image of a house in the mud, like a child's drawing. The image is erased again and again by running water. It is amazing to see, in retrospect, the persevering force of the same obsessions in all of Echeverri's work; already in this piece the artist is speaking of houses, loss, the search, and also water that erases memories.

However, this conjugation of the trace and the voice appears once again in other later works. Both are from 2006, and represent a recovery exercise. The interactive sound installation, *Voice: Prison Resonances*, was exhibited at Colombia's National Museum, itself designed in 1850 by Thomas Reed to serve as the Central Penitentiary of Cundinamarca, which it did until 1946. Inside these monumental vaults enclosing a history of imprisonment and punishment, the artist installed testimonies extracted from conversations with present-day prisoners that reveal some of their tenderness and emotions, as in *Versión libre*.

And, as in that work, the testimony of each inmate is edited in such a way that it appears broken, fragmented, giving the impression of being a mere echo from another time. Or, perhaps, a failed dialogue between the present-day Colombian prisoners and the impenetrable silence of those who inhabited the place during its 72 years as a prison.

Acidia is a very different and, to an extent, more intimate piece. The latter characteristic is less common in Echeverri's work, which tends to be more a record of the public, with very political connotations. In *Acidia* the artist reproduced on the walls of a cell in the Santa Clara monastery in Tunja a fragment of *Afectos espirituales (Spiritual Affections)*, written by Sister Josefa del Castillo, a mystical author from the Colonial period whose text served as her confession of corporal penalties and spiritual uncertainties, as she was obsessed with the presence of malignant spirits that stole her peace of mind. Clemencia Echeverri uses invisible ink to allow intermittent ultraviolet lighting to expose the text to the spectator's eye. This small, subtle work –rarely considered in the overall body of her

work— has, in my opinion, the capacity to speak to us of multiple realities: of the enclosure of reclusion in a convent, of a woman's efforts to express in writing her mental universe, of the memory trapped symbolically within those walls, silent witnesses to that life, of the traces left behind by a nun who survived to the present day thanks to the written word, of her voice, ancient and modern, both trapped and free.

Clemencia Echeverri's most recent work focuses primarily on another type of violence, this time against nature. In *Sin cielo (Skyless)* (2017), the artist records the events occurring in Marmato (Caldas), a small town set atop a mountain riddled with veins of gold, mined, first by locals and more recently by multinational companies, for over 400 years. Once again, the video shows the river, but this time exposing the contents of the mine's spillways: cyanide, mercury, and every imaginable lethal poison resulting from the search for gold. As we experience wonder, outrage, and pain at the outrageous levels of contamination in the water, we hear the constant hammering of the miners as they strike the rock, reminding us of the presence of humble working men and women in the shafts below, earning a meager living and perhaps unaware of the tremendous environmental damage caused by their mining.

Echeverri's camera also records the desolate panorama of a village with no signs of wealth, only chaos and ugliness, far from the dream of a more dignified world. The title *Sin cielo* refers perhaps to the double condition of working underground and, more metaphorically, the total lack of hope for this situation. *Subterra* (2017) seems, therefore, redundant. It is, rather, a prolongation of the same reflection made in the piece about Marmato, but this time with a focus not on the water, but on the land. The work explores again the idea of sacrifice, this time a sacrifice of the land: the huge gash in a mountain pierced from top to bottom by metal, which leads us to associate it with a living being barely supported by this "backbone" symbolizing man's painful intervention.

The retrospective exhibited here in Colombia's Central Bank Museum provides a look at the forcefulness of a body of work that responds to several obsessions. Although the viewer might assume that Clemencia Echeverri's artistic motivation responds to external

demands, a look at the complete body of work, and especially its roots, shows just how much of it is linked to the artist's own origins, to her close attachment to this earth, and to genuine emotions transformed not into a pamphlet or an indignant voice, but rather in a sober approach to conflicts in order to show their knots, their edges, their complexity, and to truly move people, something often achieved only through art.

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