

THE IBIZAN SERIES

28.06–29.09.24



GONZALO ELVIRA

B20

W. B. IN IBIZA: FRAYING THE BANKS OF HISTORY

Juan de Nieves

In February 1933, Francisco Franco was posted in the Balearic Islands as Chief of the Military Command. Manuel Azaña, who at that time was the Minister of War in the provisional government of Alcalá-Zamora, had the idea of keeping Franco far away from potential promotions. Conspiracy theories and talk of military coups were common at the time; in fact, his name had already come up a few years earlier, in 1931, as one of the instigators of a supposed *coup d'état* plot against the Republic, along with General Emilio Barrera and General Luis Orgaz. As Azaña wrote in his diary: “Franco is the only one we have to fear”.

Besides spending time studying the topography of Mallorca and projecting fortifications and constructions to defend a possible invasion from the sea, Franco enjoyed Palma's peaceful, typically provincial lifestyle, making contacts with the most conservative sectors of Mallorcan society, while also establishing relationships with some of its leading members in debates organised at the Círculo Mallorquín. He also spent a great deal of time on his habitual hunting activities, and most specifically on rabbit hunts, organised by some of his friends in wealthy Balearic society.

Amongst the works making up Gonzalo Elvira's project for Exhibition Hall D at Es Baluard Museu, “Ibizan Series”, the artist imagines a chance meeting between Walter Benjamin and Francisco Franco at some location on Ibiza.¹ Benjamin had gone to the island of Ibiza in 1932 and 1933, meaning it would not be farfetched to imagine an encounter between the future dictator and the German

Gonzalo Elvira, *La cerca de cactus* [The Cactus Fence], 2023.
Ink on paper, 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy of the artist

1. Franco officially visited Ibiza on 6 May 1933.

writer. To recreate this “possible fiction”, Elvira has created an animation that has its origin in a few hundred drawings, where we see, amongst other content, both individuals: Franco is seen walking in military dress, with military gestures, while Benjamin is seated at a table, writing, in the shadow of a lush fig tree. Underneath this animated scene, in underlay, there is a still image of a ramshackle theatre, perhaps the future “theatre of the Civil War”. The animation proceeds in a simple manner, shifting between the image of the seated writer, pen in hand, apparently worried and brooding over some matter, who completely ignores the phantasmagorical appearance of Franco, marching militarily past him.

The German composer and singer Juliane Heine-mann received the commission to do the soundtrack for this animation, basing it on the popular German song *Die Gedanken sind frei* [Thoughts Are Free]. Ever since the Middle Ages, the song has been altered and various verses have been added; it interests us here particularly for the way it was used during the period of Nazi Germany by the White Rose resistance group, Die Weisse Rose. The first verse goes like this: “Thoughts are free. / Who can guess them? / They fly by like shadows at night. / No person can know them, / no hunter can shoot them, not with powder nor with lead: / thoughts are free!”

Returning to the subject of the Elvira animation, after various portrait shots of Benjamin’s face, a sparrow suddenly appears, darting into flight. However, the persistent image of the theatre in ruins, fixed in the background, gives us the dramatic key to this animated piece: the imminent threat of Nazism, which will soon destroy the foundations of European civilisation. Inasmuch as his practice strives to rewrite history from the present, Elvira parodies the figure of the dictator in his fleeting appearance as a soldier, making him seem like a puppet-like dummy with his vulgar manner and conceited gestures. Another image

immediately comes to mind from seven years later, in this case one that is real: the meeting of Hitler and Franco at the Hendaya train station, where they would stage a conversation, a German imperial pantomime, founded on evasive requests and replies, ending in a standoff.

The project “Ibizan Series”, which the animation we have described is part of, is based on these two crucial years, 1932 and 1933, when Walter Benjamin, like other European intellectuals of the time, spent long periods on the island of Ibiza. The Ibiza writer Vicente Valero has carried out a brilliant research project on the two periods that Benjamin spent on the island: *Experiencia y pobreza. Walter Benjamin en Ibiza* [Experience and Poverty: Walter Benjamin in Ibiza].² It is, in effect, the history of those travellers who, like Benjamin, went to the island in search of one of the last remaining paradises in Europe, locked in time. Its customs, language, natural habitat and architecture, as well as the traditional economic activities found there, particularly piqued the interest of naturalists, philologists, anthropologists and urban studies experts, who would lucidly observe and analyse the widening gap between the humanistic perception of culture and nature and the tyranny of progress and capital.

Benjamin, who was particularly troubled in those years by financial strife and sentimental problems, rather suddenly found himself in a kind of decline that preceded his imminent exile to that “poor Mediterranean island”. He was like a man both enlightened and fragile, damaged by the horror of the First World War and aware of the atrocity that was about to occur in his native country and throughout Europe. Ibiza, therefore, was like an “emergency Arcadia” where he could do his writing and thinking and go for walks. In case these noble activities were not

2. Vicente Valero, *Experiencia y pobreza. Walter Benjamin en Ibiza*. Cáceres: Ed. Periférica, 2017.

enough, he had recourse to certain drugs and to the island's community "protocols", as he sought fresh revelations and deepened states of altered awareness.

The modest though quality social life, his observations of nature and the daily tasks carried out by the islanders, as well as his sensitive perception of Ibiza's habitats and his poor understanding of the language, led Benjamin in turn to a deep feeling of dejection, fuelled by his own personal situation (his "painful constructs") and certain indications—already justified—of the early years of Nazi violence. During the months he lived in Ibiza the shadow of exile hung over him, although his true and definitive exile, and his condition as a political refugee, would begin in the autumn of 1933, upon his arrival in Paris.

Since the mid-1990s, Gonzalo Elvira has developed a particular body of work based on the revision and rewriting of the political and cultural history of the twentieth century. By using drawing technologies as tools to create images, his working method consists in revising the orthodox, linear history of events and their agents, returning once-stifled voices to the men and women who were to become victims of an even greater affliction than defeat: the silence assigned to so many anonymous struggles, relegated in turn by dominant narratives. Anthropological and social perspectives would be brought in by micro-history, with the goal of focussing on what has not been perceived, on everything that is not seen on the scale of a general analysis, which is necessarily always reductive. The narratives that Elvira constructs in each of his projects use archival images and testimonies, materialised through dot and line drawings to create an "other" atlas. His projects are thus groupings of images whose order and display leads us to find distinct possible interpretations and readings. As in Aby Warburg's *Atlas Mnemosyne*, the cartographies of Gonzalo Elvira are frayed, unfinished, opening up to new networks of interconnected relationships.

In this work, the (counter)narrative is determined by the choice and display of the images, as well (and this is just as important) as the technique of temporality that intervenes in their presentation. Through this, a perception of suspension arises that freezes the representation and obliges us to make a reflective, paused observation of the images, which here might resemble a film still, with mechanical and light effects giving them a certain sheen. To be sure, through this near-cinematographic resource, we are led to new (albeit deep and veiled) interpretations of the representation, and therefore of the corresponding narrative. History, and the course it might take, provides an opening to newfound domains of the subconsciousness, making it possible to perceive sensitive, revelatory illuminations.

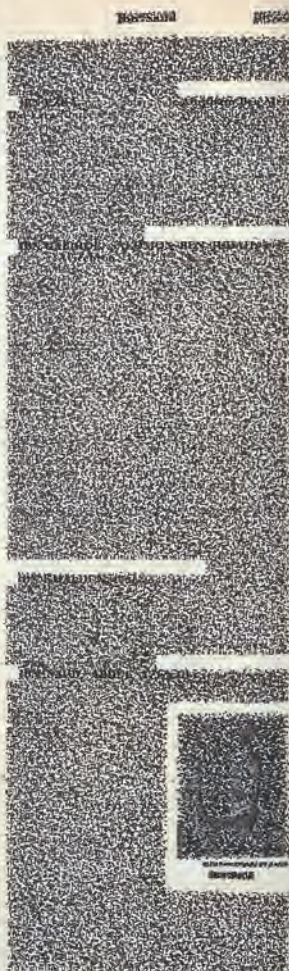
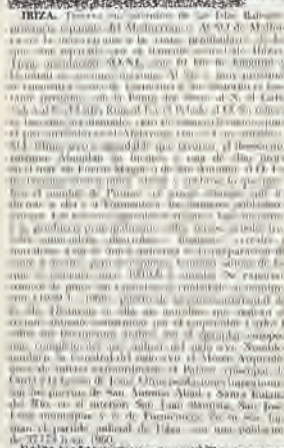
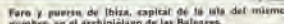
The "Ibiza Series" is an atlas of images derived from Benjamin's two stays on the island of Ibiza, jumping off at certain points to the historical moment in Spain and Germany in particular. The result is a disruptive, open-ended narrative, where images of the island (its landscapes, its architectures) are juxtaposed with various portraits of Benjamin himself and his friends. These in turn refer to his peaceful yet tense everyday existence, as evidenced most particularly in the German thinker's face, distressed as he was for financial and romantic concerns, yet well aware of the personal and political drama to come. In other drawings, his portrait is doubled or laid over other quite familiar images, like nightmares about to become real in the real world. On a different level altogether, we find books and encyclopaedias where the face of Benjamin is occasionally overlaid, although most of them refer to book covers, evoking titles, ideas and situations derived from his biography. As with other projects by Elvira, these book covers have a powerful role in the task of rewriting history, reestablishing its extraordinary value and wisdom in the face of the conflagratory destruction at the heart of totalitarianism.

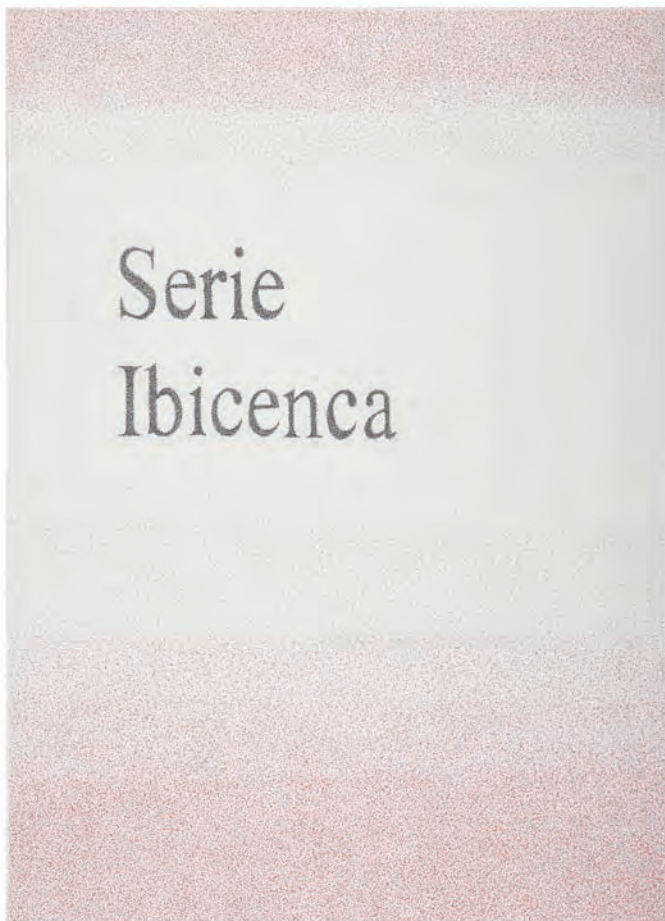
When taken together in the present, all these disorganised images, pertaining as they do to various registers, make a claim for the task involved in a new order. It is not a question of learning from history—nowadays, unfortunately, we are all too familiar with its dramatic, head-spinning loops—but to comprehend it on the basis of other complexities, which might include silenced voices and suppressed fragments, or at least the chance to construct emancipated narratives. In Elvira's projects, including this one, we are called to involve ourselves actively and responsibly, acting in a way that differs from our capricious, empty-headed consumerism, thanks to the collective schizophrenia brought on by communication technologies. No scroll is possible when it comes to reading these images: they are enlivened, in stark contrast, by a movement that synthesizes body and mind.

For this project, the images placed on the gallery walls and in display cases insist on a double gaze, which in turn converts the space into both an art gallery and a library or archive. With this exhibition layout, Elvira claims for art the possibility of consultation, while for the academy he calls for a perspective of subjective order that might allow us to come to other analysis, emancipated from orthodox documentary systemisation. Reading and contemplation are the two fundamental principles of Elvira's project; his method is reflected in the laborious, performative production of each of his drawings, the images sprouting out from the white ground, taking shape via the points and lines that distinguish them. *Techné* in service of a discursive procedure that transcends all formalisms, more profoundly exploring the meaning and logic of images as the ineluctable registry of the political. Their origins, and the strategies of their extensive production in the course of history, are definitive, while also being able to construe other gazes and other possible narratives. Once again, citing *Die Gedanken sind frei*: "And if I am thrown into the darkest dungeon / all these are futile works / because my thoughts tear all gates and walls apart: thoughts are free!"



Gonzalo Elvira, *El concepto de constelación* [The Concept of Constellation], 2023. Ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist





Gonzalo Elvira, *Serie ibicenca* [The Ibizan Series], 2023. Ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Gonzalo Elvira, *Belleza y serenidad* [Beauty and Serenity], 2022. Ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist



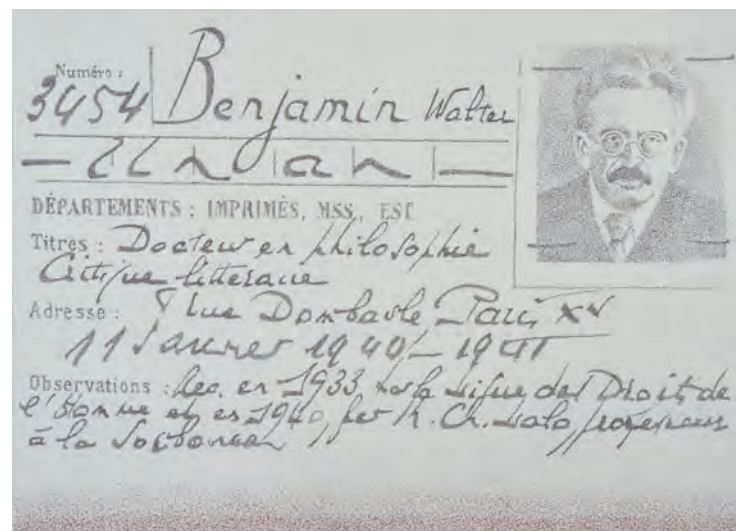
Gonzalo Elvira. *El ángel* [The Angel], 2022. Ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm.
Courtesy of the artist



Gonzalo Elvira, *6 de mayo de 1933* [6 May 1933], 2023-2024 (video still of the animation). Pencil on paper. Duration; 1' 10". Production assistant: Pepon Meneses Gutierrez. Music: Juliane Heinemann. Courtesy of the artist



Gonzalo Elvira, *Historia de amor en tres etapas* [Love Story in Three Stages], 2023. Ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Gonzalo Elvira, *Carnet de biblioteca* [Library Card], 2023. Ink on paper, 50 x 70 cm. Courtesy of the artist

IMAGE AND HISTORY: READING WHAT WAS NEVER WRITTEN

NOTES ON WALTER BENJAMIN AND GONZALO ELVIRA

Paula Kuffer

Ibiza, between Paradise and Catastrophe

On Ibiza, Benjamin's wanderlust was tinged with the urgency of exile. He first set foot on the island in April 1932—he would spend three months there—looking for a pleasant and affordable place that might ease his material woes and soothe his troubled spirit. He then returned for a further five months the following spring, by which time Hitler had been appointed chancellor of Germany, where people had thrown in their lot with the Nazi Party and were burning books in the Opernplatz in Berlin, a city to which he would never return. His two spells on the island were characterised by friendship, discovery and, naturally, discontentment, a feeling that was never far from the philosopher's side. In between these two visits, he had time to contemplate suicide, including writing detailed letters and making unique inheritance arrangements. On that occasion he held off, although he would take that very step only a few years later, after war had broken out, in the small border town of Portbou, between the Pyrenees and the sea. On Ibiza, Benjamin savoured the end of a world, warmed by Mediterranean sun and writing under pines to the sound of the waves. He realised that Jewish, communist and decadent writers—three boxes he appeared to tick—had no place in the Nazis' new world. He spent his days on the island with his childhood friend Felix Noeggerath, together with Jean Selz and Raoul Hausmann, one of the



Gonzalo Elvira, *Loggias*, 2023. Ink on paper, 70 x 50 cm.
Courtesy of the artist

founders of the Dada movement. Strikingly, far from the bright lights of the big city, the distant past emerged from the walls of the houses and ancestral stories echoed among the island voices.

Benjamin, however, was escaping from a Europe that, as he never ceased to prophesise in his writings at the time, was heading towards “annihilation”. He belonged to a generation which, between 1914 and 1918, had experienced some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world. The Great War—named for the unimaginable violence it unleashed in the history of destruction—ushered in the age of death by the millions, the indiscriminate use of poison gas and the erasure of the distinction between combatants and civilians: it destroyed any chance of a framework based on the rule of law and, in Benjamin’s view, threatened a potentially “never-ending” conflict. People returned from the front not richer but poorer in communicable experience, struck silent by the force field of destructive torrents that sucked tiny, fragile human bodies to their centre. Experience—which had hitherto been understood “precisely” as something passed down in words from one generation to the next “like a precious ring” in tales, proverbs and stories: in sum, legacy, inheritance, wisdom—was now plunged into crisis and fell in value to the point where it disappeared. Narrative itself, that is, the ability to share experiences, went into steep decline. Everything except the clouds, said Benjamin, had changed for those young people who had still gone to school in horse-drawn streetcars. The “tremendous development of technology”, with its macabre affiliation with war, brought with it a “completely new poverty” with a face of the same sharpness and precision as that of a beggar in the Middle Ages. Technical optimism, Benjamin concluded, only acknowledges advances in our mastery over nature and human beings, but not setbacks in social change. The disparity between progress within the framework of capitalist production and

our ability to elucidate it morally, he argues, feeds war at its most hardened and fatal core.

On the island, Benjamin could survey a remarkable landscape where a still austere way of life was yet to become trapped by the comfort and isolation—a modern fall into the primitive state, as described by Valéry—to which life in the metropolis is condemned when technology takes centre stage. Machines and devices “train” us, impose a reactive automation on the uniform crowd and are a symptom of the “interdependence between discipline and barbarism”. The world becomes a game of “coups”, tyrannised by “greed” and empty compulsion, a world always “beginning anew” and always “from the start”, plunged into an infernal time that destroys but does not “consume”. “We have become impoverished,” says Benjamin. “We have given up one portion of the human heritage after another.” This new poverty is not merely poverty on a personal level, but poverty of human experience in general. Its decadence suggests the loss of all connection with the past and an atrophied imagination. This is, he says, a “new barbarism”: for “what is the value of our culture if it is divorced from experience? . . . Mankind is preparing to outlive culture, if need be.”

Elvira, a Benjaminian historian

Benjamin’s angel of history—inspired by Klee’s painting that accompanied him from 1921 until almost his final days; also evoked by Elvira in this exhibition—is not announcing a catastrophe yet to come but acknowledges that we have already been engulfed: the present falls within an endlessly, inevitably repeating chain of violence, like fate in the world of myths. This is no warm or friendly angel: it is a tragic figure that turns its back on the future and is unable to tear its gaze away from the past, which piles up a mountain of

debris ever skywards. Wide-eyed and open-mouthed, the angel is horrified by the trail of destruction left by a modernity that prized itself as liberating age. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed: to save all those mown down by the ideology of progress proclaimed by the Enlightenment, faithful servant of technology. The storm of progress moves inexorably onwards, unforgivingly propelling the angel into an ungrateful and unrepentant future, blind to the death it leaves in its wake.

History is seen by the angel as a shadowy web of injustice. Its desire seems doomed to failure. It can do nothing to stop the victors' epic onward march, their narcissistic conception of a history that legitimises itself in its nihilism. The angel has simply come to "sing" its message before inevitably disappearing. Melancholy without return—it would appear that nothing can change the course of history, resolved to collapse into the abyss of self-destruction. But it is precisely this melancholic gaze that rejects the loss of the object for the second time, rejects the loss of loss itself and, albeit paradoxically, opens up the possibility of creating a reality that does not demand such losses. The angel heeds no promises of an ideal; its spectral materialism points to the pain we persist in ignoring. Elvira aspires to the same impossible desire as the angel of history, a desire that forms the very presence of the work, the pertinence of that image that interrupts the whirlwind of oblivion.

"How to recognise your strengths?" Walter Benjamin wondered in one of the aphorisms he might possibly have written during his days on Ibiza in 1932. "By your defeats," he concludes. For this philosopher, any true writing of history should draw more from the image of enslaved grandparents than the idea of liberated grandchildren. When history takes on the memory of the defeated, it borrows the most specific features of tradition: its non-linear character,

its ruptures and intermittences, that is, the presence of a radical negativity in tradition. The dream of happiness can only be built on shattered hopes. Rather than interpreting the past, it is time to transform it. For Benjamin, then, utopia is revealed to be a function of memory. He talks of his "Janus face", the guardian of the gates of the past and the future. In the dialectical instance, he finds a way to summon the unfulfilled promise of justice and urges that it be delivered. Elvira also returns his gaze, pointing to the power of the failures imposed on us, those present moments that slipped away from us. Like a Benjaminian historian, "a backwards-facing prophet", he recognises a frustrated past yet sees it not as a defeat but as still-functioning possibility. In a way, he produces "disaster writing" that confronts catastrophe: it does not succumb to the fascination of a ruin whose threat lies in its charm but revives forgotten remnants, signs of a past yet to come.

Benjamin suggests that there is a "secret agreement between past generations and the present one". The past still retains a longing for happiness, while at the same time calling for redemption. It is the task of the historian—and every present has been endowed with a "*weak* messianic force" to which the past has a claim—to update this demand in the way they represent this past. Their task is not to find the keys to the future but to open the hitherto closed chambers of the past, an act which, according to Benjamin, overlaps fully with political action. Our coming was expected on earth, he maintains, but adds: "Only that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that even the dead will not be safe from the enemy if he wins. And this enemy has not ceased to be victorious." In his work, Elvira turns to that secret agreement and invokes that past that went awry but which is present as one of several possible paths, like the constantly repeated attempt to breathe life back into what was once despised or sacrificed, perhaps like Benjamin himself.

“History,” Benjamin says, “breaks down into *images* not stories.” Set against the epic narrative of the victors, history devotes itself to revealing the secret tradition of the oppressed and their excluded voices. Articulating an image of the past does not mean recognising it “the way it really was” but “seizing hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger”. Benjamin overlays a “Copernican turn” on historical vision in opposition to the positivist tradition, which, by adopting the principle of progress, distances historical facts from the experience of the subject. This critique expresses a position, namely that memory is committed to the transformation of the present: “Facts become something that hit us just now.” A historian’s interest in an age—such as Elvira’s interest in Benjamin—translates into a kind of “elective affinity” between two moments in history, an affinity experienced less as a privileged consensus than as a sudden collision between two temporal entities.

Benjamin defines an image as “that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation”. It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or, indeed, vice versa, that what is present sheds its light on what is past. The image is the very dialectic that links two instants, like a flash, in the now. “Image is dialectics at a standstill”, an operation on the body of time that shatters its homogenous and empty course. An instance of interruption and articulation, of destruction and construction, the origin of something new, including a knowledge that extends experience beyond the factual. History does not depend on the past, but on a now that is closely related to the moment of awakening: in the dialectical image, “the historian assumes the task of interpreting dreams”, perhaps the other side to failures.

Not all hermeneutics are the same. In Elvira’s work, history does not point at the archive, evidence, record or document testifying to power but at “reading what was never written”, which—in this line from Hofmannsthal borrowed by Benjamin—is stated as the true method of history. The encounter between non-contiguous events gives rise to a hermeneutic model that tends towards another type of historical intelligibility, an image of thought in which the present fertilises the past and awakens the forgotten or repressed meaning it carries within, while in the heart of the present the past takes on a new actuality. Conceptually close to Freud, Elvira’s images bring forth the repressed and suppressed, things not printed because they have been erased, like the event that returns, time and again, to the present: a repetition as the transfer of an unfinished past.

Reading what was never written is only recognisable in the very moment it is expressed in dialectical images. It refers to the unattested—the history of the defeated can only be narrated as absence—but at the same time urges fulfilment of the historical. Philology is put at the service of reading the possible, as in the constellations mapped out in the clash between past and present in this exhibition. As a dialectical image of memory that suddenly appears, history can only be (re)read or recognised in *the very moment of remembrance*, that is, as an act of updating that seeks to question supposedly unassailable facts, to reverse oppressive continuity and salvage what has failed. In this sense, the historical index of images, as Benjamin points out, not only indicates which specific time they belong to but, above all, says that they only become *readable* in a specific time. This reading proclaims a political slogan and appears to prompt Elvira to echo Benjamin: “Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own threatens to disappear.” Only the encounter gives rise to the image, which for Benjamin is “the original

phenomenon of history” because it allows different aspects of the past to receive a higher degree of actuality than they had at the moment of their existence.

Like a Benjaminian historian, Elvira is an allegorist who reveals the phantasmagorias of the past as dialectical images, and by discovering the past in the present, updates what time has petrified. Far from representing a dead past, he creates a formal structure, based on quotes, in which the absent can emerge. Citation appears as the vector of the emergence of the new, as the irreplaceable dynamic of all authentic writing that allows the past to unleash the immense forces it contains. In his exhibition “The Ibizan Series” the quote is from Benjamin himself, whose legacy for the future, as he himself wrote, would be nothing more than the image of a defeated generation. And yet, in the quote, the past takes on a space in which its own meaning, never previously articulable, can now vibrate with a regained voice.

The writing in images presented in Elvira’s work can be understood as an act of a collector, with the emphasis on the action of recomposing fragments. This *montage*, based on the dialectical tension between a disintegrated past and its reintegration into a new order of the present, implies a form of exhibition of a world governed by its own constructive laws. Inserted into a metonymic order bound by relations of affinity, each object in the exhibition appears as a synecdoche, a partial representation of the complete image of an era reflected in the shattered mirror of the past. Recomposing also means rereading, reinscribing, building with the “rags of history”, traces of another time able to decipher us.

The Ibizan Series

Gonzalo Elvira

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to 29th September 2024

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Es Baluard Museu d'Art
Contemporani de Palma

Director

David Barro

Curatorship

Juan de Nieves

Exhibition Coordination

Jackie Herbst
Solange Artiles

Registrar

Soad Houman
Rosa Espinosa

Installation

Art Life
Es Baluard Museu

Transport

Art Ràpid

Insurances

Correduria Howden R.S.

Layout

Hastalastantas

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Paula Kuffer
Juan de Nieves

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