

ALL UTOPIAS GO THROUGH THE BELLY

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CARLOS GARAICOA

B20

HEAD, LEG AND CHEST, NOTES FOR “ALL UTOPIAS GO THROUGH THE BELLY”¹

Lillebit Fadraga

I

This is tricky. I wanted to start by talking about Karl Marx, but my esteem for Iván de la Nuez prevents me. So I won't be publicly proclaiming that I have devoured *Capital* and I certainly shan't be troubling the dead: we wouldn't want to be summoning up a communist better left in peace. I studied this gentleman—Marx, that is—in snippets, reading his shorter essays, just enough to remember the maxim that one thinks best on a full belly. All of which brings me to the other Karl, or in this case Carlos, who concerns us today. Some years ago, he told me a joke, which he claimed to be true, about a particularly dim-witted student who, when asked to name the parts of the body in a biology exam, replied astonishingly: “It's simple, miss, there are three parts: head, leg and chest.” Cerebral minimalism, parochial conceptualism. Ideas correspond to the head; the heart, to the chest, and action, to the legs (all said in a Cuban accent). The path from thought to action naturally crosses a world pierced through the chest—manipulator of impulses, distorter of precise orders.

So, “All Utopias Go through the Belly” (2008–2024) could be summed up as a fanciful, irreverent idea which, on its way to action or materialisation, is forced to pass through none other than the belly, home to The Grinder.

1. This text has been adapted from the version that will appear in the exhibition catalogue in conjunction with the Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM).

Carlos Garaicoa, *Contrapeso (Ciudad Plomada)* [Counterweight (Plumb Line City)], 2022. Installation. Bronze, iron, steel, nylon. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez, Galería Filomena Soares and Galleria Continua

The trunk containing the heart, stomach, lungs, liver, kidneys, reproductive organs and other rather less eminent ones, is basically where we somatise and squeeze out our thoughts, the sap for our actions, the (organic) fuel for our existence. Our body encases all these cells, organs, bacteria, fluids, muscles and chi in a separate being. From the most microscopic cell to the outer layer of the epidermis, we behold the infinite varieties of this generally perfected and temporarily efficient chamber. It should be clear by now that here I am going to write that this eponymous installation replicates the most basic vital functions and crafts them into a metaphor to speak of pressing universal ideas: loneliness, war, hunger, illness, isolation, noncommunication; our own faults and those of others, avarice, greed. Let's take an example: mandarin oranges inside a glass jar that brings to mind those in an old pharmacy, the sugar jar at home or the vessel displaying foetuses in formaldehyde found in any anatomical pathology lesson. The mandarins are in there alone, but alongside, in an identical jar, is a model of a Modernist building, which mimics and simplifies what we assume we understand by contemporaneity, community life and society in its simplest expression. After a few weeks, as these mandarins start to decompose and become covered in mould, and even bugs, the model will remain unblemished; but, since it is a representation, we can imagine people living there—after all, this is the main function of architecture. And if there are people, there may well be a community (in Spanish, *mancomunidad*, a word I learnt in Spain) or a CDR (Committee for the Defence of the Revolution, a term I learnt in Cuba)—and we all know what happens then . . . So, taking these two examples, these two primary units, let's think about how they might be connected. I know that the artist originally wanted to link several jars together by creating a series of little bridges to serve as visual and physical connections. While it is true that unexpected bridges can

sometimes crop up in life, we also know that this doesn't happen as often as it should, so I personally find the final result—sans connections—more effective. Everything in its own space, alone, in solitary confinement. Going out is as tempting as it is dangerous. We escape the mould but accelerate collapse. Covid presented us with a stark dilemma when pondering escape: inwards or outwards? The sense of safety and phobia we felt in equal measure in/during lockdown is simply mirrored in open spaces. If, furthermore, the territory in question has an obvious natural limit, that is, if it is an island—be it Cuba or the Canary or Balearic Islands—then the natural border or container, the jar so to speak, is omnipresent. This border is usually the sea, and we islanders either love it or hate it. It simultaneously shuts us away and sets us free and requires us to have an early awareness of our own limits as escapists. Reality and desire, to paraphrase the artist, go hand in hand—and at times it is a personal option, and at others a moral obligation, to stay inside or venture out. The island, in a nutshell, is a glass jar itself, and we, its inhabitants, are the ingredients, its contents.

The extreme heat caused by the greenhouse effect as a result of living in a glass jar is similar to the intense heat inside a pressure cooker. Black beans or bean stews like *rancho canario* or *fava parada* are good examples of the positive and delicious side to slow cooking or, in modern times, express pressure cooking.

One negative side would be when your daily life becomes a vestige of something that is no longer there. Here we can appreciate the way in which Carlos Garaicoa has worked since his student days: first, a photograph, that initial document showing a ruined building; then, a second moment with the image of the void left behind after the building has been demolished. There is usually a third item, independent of—or contained within—the first image, where the vanished building is reborn, as if by

magic or sleight of hand, without any nostalgia but with a sense of sadness, with the objectivity of one who suffers the state of things.

The artist has a need to inventory the city and things, to capture them in their state of decadent beauty, or in their extreme form: emptiness. That space full of nothing, which saddens us for what is lost and offers us the unexpected possibility to be reborn, to re-create, to resist.

II

In his book *When We Cease to Understand the World*, Benjamín Labatut recounts how Fritz Haber, who won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for creating the first synthetic fertilisers, died riven with remorse because “his method of extracting nitrogen from the air had so altered the natural equilibrium of the planet that he feared the world’s future belonged not to mankind but to plants, as all that was needed was a drop in population to pre-modern levels for just a few decades to allow them to grow without limit, taking advantage of the excess nutrients humanity had bestowed upon them to spread out across the earth and cover it completely, suffocating all forms of life beneath a terrible verdure”.²

In recent decades, we have become increasingly aware—though still nowhere near enough—of the catastrophic impact that our rampant consumption and lifestyle has on Earth. Readers will require no convincing of the urgent need to find a model of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, given that over the last two centuries, we have gradually self-excluded ourselves from forming part of this quintessentially unifying concept. We

are nature, no matter how we act. However, a balance must be found between dissident humans and the rest of life on Earth, between the world of glass, iron and concrete architecture to which we are in thrall and the jungle.

Recent works such as *Yo nunca he sido surrealista hasta el día de hoy* [I Was Never a Surrealist until Today] (2009, 2017) and *Babylon* (2022), echoed this powerful image that terrified Fritz Haber: nature, plants to be precise, setting out to reconquer lost space.

We humans are so fixated on waging wars of neo-pilaging and conquering lands we believe to be ours by right for all eternity that we have forgotten we are only passing through this world on loan, so it is only a matter of time.

The “Infamous Hidden Houses” series (2014), one of the artist’s most biting pieces, raises questions of justice and morals that go beyond the usual ecological issues and tackles matters often overlooked. In this case, subtle drawings depicting architectural elements in the suburbs, set bucolically amid nature, acquire a more sinister edge once we discover that they are the homes of murderers, corrupt politicians and financial swindlers. The semiwild plants here work to hide the residents’ public shame; they are the accusatory finger and executioner of their ostracism. The lines between architecture and environment, inside and outside, are blurred by the exuberant vegetation that makes the scene succumb to the darkest side of human action.

De la serie Ciudad Armero [From the Ciudad Armero Series] (2021), comprising *Spine*, *Bronchi*, *Intestine*, *Brain*, *Stomach* and *Heart*, also tells a harrowing tale, the tragedy of a small Colombian town engulfed by mudflows from the Nevado del Ruiz volcano in 1985, leaving more than twenty thousand dead and buildings half-buried. Human frailty, represented by its main organs and structures, is extrapolated to the fragility of the affected area, the fragility of busted architecture. Years later, the jungle has ended up devouring them, returning us to a dreamlike, bucolic

2. Labatut, Benjamín. *When We Cease to Understand the World* [trans. Adrian Nathan West]. London: Pushkin Press, 2021.

landscape we would never immediately associate with suffering.

At this point, I shall make a brief reflection on the concept of *Resistencia* [Resistance], which the artist synthesises masterfully in his piece of the same name, which in this exhibition should not be read solely in relation to humans but should also draw a parallel with the scientific concept of Natural Resistance. From a microscopic virus or bacterium to the top of the food chain, resistance is an extremely efficient defence mechanism. Only in this way can one survive the bombardment of antibiotics or totalitarianism. Coming from a country like Cuba, the artist understands and captures these signals with absolute fidelity. Adaptation and physical and/or intellectual demands, in equal measure, constitute the only possible formula.

In her acclaimed book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Native American biologist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer tells us: “In the indigenous view, humans are viewed as somewhat lesser beings in the democracy of species. We are referred to as the younger brothers of Creation, so like younger brothers we must learn from our elders. Plants were here first and have had a long time to figure things out. They live both above and below ground and hold the earth in place. Plants know how to make food from light and water. Not only do they feed themselves, but they make enough to sustain the lives of all the rest of us. Plants are providers for the rest of the community and exemplify the virtue of generosity, always offering food. What if Western scientists saw plants as their teachers rather than their subjects? What if they told stories with that lens?”³

Architecture, with ruins—and not nature or ecology—as an aggravating factor and leitmotif, has been

the main thread running through Garaicoa’s poetics for thirty years now; nevertheless, this exhibition has brought together works that, if not exclusively, at least consistently, explore a concern for our place in the natural order. The pandemic and lockdown also brought about a moment of introspection for the artist, a return to drawing—*De la serie Modelos-C* [From the Model Cs Series]—and works where the elements of nature became more obvious and recurrent, as in the case of the photographs he intervened with pins and thread, from 2004, and which, in the last five years, have shifted attention from the usual architectural elements towards vegetation, represented in the image of the growing tree that shatters an already wrecked building with its roots.

I recall the horrified comment of a friend of mine, a civil engineer, who told me that her neighbour refused to rip out the roots of a laurel tree (*Ficus benjamina*) that had sprouted on her balcony because “it looked really pretty”. Its roots eventually cracked the walls and ultimately brought down the balcony, but then many of us prefer to ignore imminent violence in exchange for a minimal dose of beauty amid our daily chaos.

Las raíces del mundo [The Roots of the World] (2016), for example, takes this idea and sets out a mirrored vision of the origin of a contemporary megacity. A skyline of skyscrapers, resembling those found in the most famous cities, is contrasted—like root and tree inside and outside the earth—with different types of knives. Behind every contemporary city, there is a past—and a present—of violence, oppression and usurpation that goes beyond people and affects displaced animals and uprooted plants, and even extends to polluted air and overexploited resources. The artist speaks of this work as “an image that invites us to think about the dynamic of opposites that have marked the structure of ways of existing in society”.⁴

3. Kimmerer, Robin Wall. *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013, p. 412.

4. Artist’s statement on *Las raíces del mundo* (2016).

Another work that uses this metaphor is *Contrapeso* (*Ciudad Plomada*) [Counterweight (Plumb Line City)] (2022), a central piece in the exhibition both for its dimensions and for summarising this duality that accompanies much of the artist's recent work. On one side, a penetrable, hanging, aerial city—"graceful and ethereal"⁵—where the buildings are golden plumbs; on the other, a series of counterweights we guess to be extremely massive, meant to represent a visible gravitational force, a "terrestrial, industrial and heavy"⁶ counterpart to lightness, beauty and craftsmanship. Utopia and reality, ambition and limitation, canopy and root, head and leg.

III

In his large-scale jigsaw puzzles,⁷ eclectic Havanan architecture is falling apart; the buildings depicted include some of the city's architectural gems spanning many years, now sick as a result of their leaders' negligence, the lack of resources and the widespread failure of a political system that has been incapable of reinventing itself and meeting the minimal basic needs of its "loyal" citizens. Like any good Cuban, I want to think that these pieces contain an invitation to dream of reconstructing these dilapidated buildings, the hope of a miracle to save this terminally ill patient; but I know this is an illusion and that pragmatism will demand they be torn down to start again from scratch. A lift in Calle Egido, just a stone's throw away from where the artist had his first studio, hangs precariously in

the air—complete with attendant inside—defying, with a stroke of luck, the laws of physics: this is how we live, exposed,⁸ the artist once said in an earlier work.

Línea rota de horizonte [Broken Horizon Line] (2021) is another of the artist's titles that sheds further light on his poetics. This installation, designed for outdoor spaces, reveals the sad reality of felled or sick trees in parks and gardens in Madrid (which could just as well have been any other city), surrounded by cigarette butts that betray the state of our lungs, full of tar and pollution instead of the oxygen these trees would generously offer us, if only we would let them. A single bronze tree stands as a memento and suggestion of transformation. Those of us who see the glass half-full still hope that nature and human sanity will somehow prevail and thrive, no matter how physically and politically battered we are; that we will withstand the daily challenges despite control, neglect and interference.

Those who see the glass half-empty will find a nod in this direction in a work like "Arqueológica" [Archaeological] (2022), a series of black-and-white photographs with a building on the verge of collapse in the background and, in the foreground, a notebook presumably belonging to an archaeologist, someone who, years or centuries later, has returned to study the ruins of a lost civilisation. Roots have been breaking through the concrete for years, and trees now poke through windows hanging off their hinges...

At a time of financial crisis, fragile human beings are being pressed to delve deep into their desires or frustrations and—probably—to make an attempt at personal growth. Rather than extolling the sacred power of art we no longer believe in, Carlos Garaicoa's work doesn't seek to be transcendental but is content to make us think about

5. Artist's statement on *Contrapeso* (*Ciudad Plomada*) (2022).

6. *Ibid.*

7. *De la serie Puzzles: Egido* [From the Puzzles Series: Egido] and *De la serie Puzzles: Perro negro* [From the Puzzles Series: Black Dog], both from 2023.

8. Carlos Garaicoa, *Así vivimos, expuestos* [This is how we live, exposed] (2001). Ink-and-graphite drawing on card. DuraFlex colour print laminated on Perspex. 70 × 100 cm (diptych).

what we really want and aspire to become, making us see the need to take that first step to achieving it, no matter how outrageous it might seem. All that remains is to hope that the ideas we create will fill our belly, so that, in the short term, we might have a happy heart in our chest.



Carlos Garaicoa, *Resistencia* [Resistance], 2019. Installation. Iron, steel, bronze and gold, 30 x 20 x 32 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, *De la serie Ciudad Armero (Estómago)* [From the Ciudad Armero Series (Stomach)], 2021. Acrylic on birch. Pigment print on gelatin coated cow bone, 123 × 103 × 9 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, *De la serie Ciudad Armero (Columna)* [From the Ciudad Armero Series (Spine)], 2021. Acrylic on birch. Pigment print on gelatin coated cow bone, 123 × 103 × 9 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, *Toda utopía pasa por la barriga* [All Utopias Go through the Belly], 2008. Installation. Glass, wood, acrylic, PVC, edible items, charcoal and stones. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, *Sin título (La casa del árbol)* [Untitled (The Tree House)], 2022. Pins and thread on Lambda print mounted and laminated on black Gator board, 125 x 160 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, *De la serie Puzzles: Egido* [From the Puzzles Series: Egido], 2023. Black-and-white print on puzzle, Dibond laminated photograph, wood, Plexiglass, 201 x 153 x 15 cm. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, Serie "Arqueológica" [Archaeological Series], 2022.
Black-and-white photograph on Hahnemühle William Turner paper,
graphite, walnut, 75,5 × 63,5 × 21,5 cm each. Courtesy of the artist,
Galería Elba Benítez and Galleria Continua



Carlos Garaicoa, *Línea rota de horizonte* [Broken Horizon Line], 2021. Installation. Bronze, limestone, silicon carbide, metal, wood, cement, soil, cigarette butts. Dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist, Galería Elba Benítez, Goodman Gallery and Galleria Continua

CARLOS GARAICOA: TRANSFORM THE GAZE

David Barro

With particular perspicacity, Pier Paolo Pasolini apprised us of it: the angle things are seen from would only need to be adjusted a millimetre for our vision of the world to be completely altered. It is within this equation that the exceptional condition of Carlos Garaicoa's gaze resides, as he focuses on minute details that work as triggering mechanisms. Rather than inviting us to look at his work, the artist insistently invites us to look at life through it: a reflection on reality to create a reality that arises from this reflection.

It is not hard to state this categorically: Carlos Garaicoa is one of the finest landscape artists of contemporary art, because his works explore how landscape operates in the city, combining beauty and critical query. This landscape of a natural and social nature is fundamentally fragile, sensitive and hard to approach, because its breadth and complexity is greater than that of architecture itself, allowing us to reflect on it—but also to reflect on urban planning and ecology, collectivization, politics and economics. As viewers, we must make an effort in our interpretation of his works, which remain open to various cracks in our perception. This is the reason his exhibitions at Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno (CAAM) and Es Baluard Museu are radically different, even while showing some of the same works, for Carlos Garaicoa does not modify reality but rather our way of comprehending it, and his work takes on meanings which adjust to the observer and his or her context. In this case, observation is a political attitude that is able to project critique into the present and, as a consequence, allude to an uncertain future. This is something that has been seen throughout his career,

from his first photographs of ruinous buildings in Havana in the early 1990s, to his recent drawings with thread on photographs, or his glass flasks, which refer to the decomposition of lived time while architectural models remain impeccable, projecting the fragile side of utopia. What is imagined imposes itself on the real, and the real, in effect, contrives with desire to give meaning to the exhibition's title: "All Utopias Go through the Belly".

This general title is in turn taken from a work of the same name, which could continue to grow like our most chimerical, extravagant ideas, with these glass flasks of vintage style, in many cases holding the most ephemeral side of our existence—in this case, decomposing food-stuffs—displayed alongside neatly finished architectural models. This all comes together to enable him to speak of universal contemporary concerns, such as solitary confinement, isolation, illness or opulence, of everything we are required to digest on a daily basis, passing through our bellies.

A similar operation is projected in "Birlibirlogue" (2018), where a series of works blends that type of magic that makes it possible to retrieve emptiness from ruins—using photo-documents of what is no longer, because it has been demolished—and transform it into glass sculptures. Finely engraved by laser, these sculptures are utopian reconstructions of architectural memory, where the artist restores its historical value. The same restorative exercise is seen in *Línea rota de horizonte* [Broken Horizon Line] (2021), an installation centred around a tree, with all its symbolic potential: a solitary figure, defeating cement looming threateningly, whose presence acts paradoxically as the sole depiction of humanity. The tree is a feature that makes it possible to refer to the political on the basis of the poetical, in a work where the artist performs a brilliant transposition: nature becomes sculpture and sculpture becomes nature. *Línea rota de horizonte* sets up a dialogue

with the structures of the city and their relationship with nature, which in many cases is mistreated or untended, or just as well, as in this case, has been mutilated. With his concern for the linguistic, social and artistic structures that society itself is "built" on, Carlos Garaicoa examines the features that make up or construct our surroundings. This work is a reflection of all this, narrating the relationship of nature with urban space by means of these cut trees, typical in the parks and streets of many cities, with their gratings set around them as if to imprison them, tossed cigarette butts surrounding the trunks, turning them into large urban ashtrays. Garaicoa observes how we are constantly seeing this fragmentation of nature that goes along with the city, turning green spaces into small tombs, or into small, tree-lined cemeteries. In this case, a single bronze tree is reborn above the rest of the entire work, as a poetical ensign, like an homage or monument to this compressed landscape. This tree is raised with political motivations, like one of those advertising billboards that Garaicoa has so often worked with. Once again, what we see here is a projection of desire, and of how it should enter into dialogue with reality. It is not by chance that bronze was the material chosen to portray this tree, in this way empowering that parallel fiction that emanates from the artistic realm to combat the ephemeral; nor is it by chance that it emerges from a kind of shiny surface, created with meteorite dust.

The coherence of Carlos Garaicoa's work is undeniable when seeking to comprehend the conceptual lines that *Línea rota de horizonte* might share with much earlier installations, like *Jardín japonés* [Japanese Garden], a stone and sand installation that Garaicoa presented in 1997, featuring architectural fragments pulled from the ruins of Havana, like a Zen garden. The capitols came from demolished buildings, inviting us once again to inhabit ruins and precariousness. Essentially, we are speaking of architecture

and landscape as utopia, something already considered in the ideal cities depicted in Renaissance paintings, those marvellous illustrative, illuminating canvases. I think of the ideal city of Alberti, with its hierarchised streets leading to gates or bridges; or of Palmanova, attributed to Vincenzo Scamozzi, a city with a nine-sided polygonal layout, its fortifications in star shapes, and a large square encircled by the main public buildings; or of Sforzinda by Antonio Averlino (known as Il Filarete), with his paradigmatic geometric layout framed inside a circumference; or just as well the cities conceived by Pietro Cataneo, based on regular polygons, surrounded by a walled perimeter with pentagonal bulwarks. They were all balanced cities, opposing to the anarchy of medieval cities, while nevertheless sharing another common feature with them: in none of them can vegetation be found, as it seems to have been exterminated. They are not, therefore, ideal cities, at least not from our contemporary perspective.

Ancient cities had more fortified walls than gardens, in the same way that other cities have more to do with bollards than trees. They are cities that are founded in prohibition. Bruno Latour defines these persuasive components as “quasi-objects”. This historical theme leads to our present day. Obviously, there are subtle exceptions, like the Greeks’ love for an occasional grove of trees, or of course for Persian gardens, the oldest we know of. Although the most unique case is that of the city of Babylon. Thanks to Herodotus of Halicarnassus, a historian and traveller, we know how Babylon was built inside a large, fortified wall, surrounded by a deep moat. The wall itself was like a shell, and the city’s imposing temples were in consonance with the arrogance we associate with that metropolis. It was divided by the Euphrates, which in the Bible is known as “the river”. Yet if anything has endured to our day, it is the reference to its sumptuous hanging gardens, considered one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

Nevertheless, and to be precise, those gardens did not really “hang”, but rather appeared in every fissure, crack and possibly propitious place for a plant.

Carlos Garaicoa does indeed present landscape in the form of an impenetrably dense hanging city. In *Contrapeso (Ciudad plomada)* [Counterweight (Plumb Line City)] (2022), he makes his case for a city in the form of a forest, allowing the viewer to pass through it. Golden plumb lines dance, held by a series of heavy counterweights, which recall that there will always be a weighty part that makes it possible for beauty to shine. This is the unstable reality that upholds utopia, which is drawn with the same fragility as that resistant vegetation, striving to be consolidated as a kind of shadow of architecture, like the darkness removed from cities in favour of bright, artificial lighting. Light and cement project security, but they constitute artificial noise. Ultimately, man has tended to separate himself from nature. First of all, to find haven from predators, and then building walls that made it difficult for cities to grow outside of them. Nature and agricultural activities were found beyond those walls. In effect, as Stefano Mancuso has observed, the separation between the space outside the city, where nature reigns supreme, and inside of it, where nature has been eradicated, evokes an ancestral memory of those distant times.¹ In human territory, nature is not welcomed until we begin to miss it, whether to provide ourselves with food or to come up for a bit of air, after living in such a crowded state.

One ancient human occupation was to conquer territories to settle or exploit. A contemporary example is portrayed by Carlos Garaicoa in *Cúpulas* [Domes] (2020), a work showing the best-known domes on emblematic Madrid buildings, recalling notorious cases of political corruption. The viewer can pick up a set of brochures spread

1. Mancuso, Stefano. *Planting our World*. New York: Other Press, 2003.

out on the floor and keep them as a souvenir. As always, the artist shows us that to understand the physiology of a city we need to comprehend its ecosystem, comprehending a city as a living product of its history, and that any positive or negative interaction with what surrounds us might determine whether our lives are successes or failures.

If at CAAM this exhibition was fragmented into many galleries, showing the work as if episodically, the exhibition at Es Baluard Museu unfolds with no established directionality. The artist, like Borges, leaves the doors open for us to find the path we think is best for us. The exhibition display is handled in the same open way as the intellectual challenge of his works themselves, which is accomplished by addressing the terms for a critical, reflective gaze, as any artistic gaze must be, consistently shaped like a social and activist sounding box, ironical in nature. It is a question of understanding the space we inhabit, where life takes place. To do this, Garaicoa does not require technology, as he is fine with a way of regarding and empowering components that above all are reborn, as was already seen in early work like *Nuevas arquitecturas para Cuito Cuanavale* [New architectures for Cuito Cuanavale] (1999), where a tree rises towards infinity. Carlos Garaicoa's work consistently opens up uncountable paths for us, various ways of thinking, in line with the literature of Borges or the aperture proposed by Umberto Eco. An example would be *Yo nunca he sido surrealista hasta el día de hoy* [I've Never Been a Surrealist until Today] (2017), the enormous installation he did for MAAT in Lisbon, a kind of natural Babel shaped like a Borges-style library, with paths diverging at a life-sized garden. Garaicoa knows that in all fictions we are faced with various alternatives. For this reason, his work is grounded on contradictions, as well as certain convergences. The equation of the game is subjective, surrealist and impossible for the viewer to fully grasp.

Carlos Garaicoa has a subversive attitude, because it is based on reflection and knowledge. As Claudia Gioia has remarked, it is conceived "as an urban landscape that hopes to be inhabited, not only visited. Even if it may occasionally be inappropriate, it responds to neither small desires nor great expectations, and despite all, it continues to seduce us with the promise of a future that should be sought in the past."² It is reflective, in effect, as it is not oriented towards nostalgia, but to the transformation of the gaze. The artist encourages dialogue between what we see and the way we comprehend what we are seeing, placing himself in that Borges-like territory where we observe slippage between reality and fiction. His work always invites us to connect a series of dots that might enable us to set up some final puzzle. All we have to do is think of the drawings in the series "Infamous Hidden Houses" (2014), which are apparently innocent until the title informs us that they are drawings of houses or havens of despicable characters in history. As in those games of the past, the search for answers is what ends up resetting the order. Because in the apparent simplicity of some of its images, there is always a hidden desire to question the space of power, the economy, the space of official discourse, just as today we have ecology and sustainability. We perceive this in the invisible threads that the sawn cork oaks connect to us with in *Línea rota de horizonte*, able to open up cracks in our perception. In this work, once again the line holds sway over the equation, while the gaze is tensed and then relaxes, as we see in the play of threads in his photographs, which occasionally will be reduced to cobwebs and loose ends, like reality itself. The horizon line,

2. Gioia, Claudia. "Carlos Garaicoa: Stories on the Logic and the Dream of Construction". In *Carlos Garaicoa. El palacio de las tres historias* [Carlos Garaicoa: The Palace of the Three Stories]. Santiago de Compostela: Centro Galego de Arte Contemporánea, 2018. [exhibition cat.].

with this mutilation of the trees revealing a totalitarian gesture, is here a beautiful trap, set to denounce and visualise underlying power structures being forged behind apparently small gestures, quite beyond all good words.

This will to restitution is also what guides “De la serie Ciudad Armero” [From the Ciudad Armero Series] (2021), a set of paintings based on the ruins of that Colombian city, which arose from the tragedy of a volcanic eruption: the imprints of its inhabitants and the vestiges of their lives, live alongside architectural ruins and the botany of the site, in paintings that are crudely beautiful. In this case, to sound out one’s surroundings involves entering into a dark domain, into an outside where what is missing is the world, if we think of Maurice Blanchot. A reality that is longed for, full of light, plants and reflections, inviting us to speculate, to introduce ourselves into a space of excess information that keeps us constantly awake, leading to a utopian terrain dominated by a saturated landscape, where what is psychological, emotional, symbolic and could be dramatized finds a way to impose itself. The tension that settles into our memory reveals its cracks. Just like Borges’s character Pierre Menard, in diptychs like *Sin título (Árbol)* [Untitled (Tree)] (2021) he works it so that the reality of the disappeared tree coincides word by word, line by line (or in this case thread by thread) with the original motivation, in a kind of Quixotesque impossibility. For as Borges himself observes, there is no intellectual exercise that is not ultimately useless. Garaicoa repeats forms in a distant language, as universal as art itself, with the urge to reconstruct memory on the basis of its formal richness. Craft, in a few cases, works to evoke that kind of ruin in the form of a palimpsest, while in other cases, like *Las raíces del mundo* [The Roots of the World] (2016), contained violence arises fearlessly, evidencing the tensions of a landscape that will always pose serious questions.

All Utopias Go Through the Belly
Carlos Garaicoa

From 21st September 2024
to 5th January 2025

Organization
Es Baluard Museu d’Art
Contemporani de Palma

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David Barro

Curatorship
Lillebit Fadruga

Exhibition Coordination
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Registrar
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Texts
David Barro. Director of
Es Baluard Museu
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curator and director of
Estudio Carlos Garaicoa

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#IMAGINAELFUTUR
#CARLOSGARAICOAESBALUARD
@ESBALUARDMUSEU



WWW.ESBALUARD.ORG

ESBALUARD MUSEU 20ANYS

PLAÇA PORTA SANTA CATALINA, 10
07012 PALMA
T. (+34) 971 908 200

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