

Universale – Mar Hernandez

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Solastalgia – from the Latin, solacium, and the Greek root -algia – expresses an ‘emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change’. Paul Bogard subtitles his book, Solastalgia, ‘An Anthology of emotion in a disappearing world’. A kind of homesickness, the emotion speaks to loss, but also to retention – what is held, what survives – and, as such, need not be understood negatively, or pathologically.

It is in this more optimistic mode and mood that one should consider Mar Hernandez’s interventions in photographs through drawing. Titled ‘Universale’, Hernandez instinctively crosses boundaries, compelling us to consider the psychic, physical, and emotional impact of destruction, especially the destruction of what we consider ‘home’. In Hernandez’s case, what matters is brick and mortar, and the rubric within that generates a personalized space and place – a chair, a table, portraits, a bowl, the stretch of a floor and its human imprint, the silence that clings in a fallout, some loss, be it private, political.

I’m not sure that Hernandez can blithely accept the view of the French Anthropologist, Victor Segalen, that ‘Houses and temples are still tents and platforms, just waiting for the procession to depart’. And neither, I think, would she accept the view of the East German novelist, Jenny Erpendeck, that one must embrace ruin, become ‘Homesick for Sadness’. In Hernandez’s artworks, one senses the potency of being in situ, one with the unsettlement. Her art is neither absurd, nor surreal, certainly never cynical. It is not victimhood one senses, but compassion – an umbilical connection, across time and place, and, in the connection, the creation of a new psycho-geography – one that binds loss, dignifies self-belief, accepts the universality of fragility.

The technique is cartographic – a mapping of place – which is overlaid or underscored with more fleshed out realistic detail. One immediately thinks of pentimento, of an x-ray, an archaeology of traces, a choreography of the visible and invisible. That Sigmund Freud should use the archaeological metaphor to describe the unconscious, further amplifies Hernandez’s quest to find, in a strange and estranged home, a psychology of place, the House as a mind, a heart, a soul, which, seemingly evacuated, emptied, nevertheless maintains an auratic and magnetic pathos.

Melancholy is typically assigned to such scenes. Walter Benjamin described Eugene Atget’s desolate photographs as the scenes of a crime. This is true, only in so far as one accepts the precipitation of a cruel violence. Desolation, in and of itself, is not automatically a negative state. One can be empty in order to replenish oneself. A void can be the foundation of a structure. If a ghostly mood appears to pervade Hernandez’s paintings and drawings, this is because history hurts, because one cannot suppose novelty as a solution.

One might think one has erased the past, still, it remains legible. This is the lesson of the great post-war Algerian- French philosopher, Jacques Derrida – we return, we are haunted.

In knowing that modern domestic life is profoundly informed by design, that at every turn we are invited to reevaluate our taste, the atmosphere of the home we want to inhabit, including the art we desire for our walls, Hernandez never allows for irony, or cynicism, to infect our passions. A house, for her, remains a sacred place, no matter the fragility of walls, the quaking ground beneath, the shot psyches of its inhabitants. When we look at a work by Hernandez, one encounters no dark reckoning. Loss in an of itself is not dark – it is inevitable. Knowing this, Hernandez is no fatalist. On the contrary, given the gloom all about us, our anxiety-stricken worlds, perhaps what Hernandez offers us is a beneficent truth, some elegantly composed difficulty.