

Light that can be Touched. The Photography of Karina Beltrán

By Teresa Arozena

“But meanwhile it flees: time flees irretrievably”
(Virgil, *Georgics*)

Todo es ganancia / si todo es pérdida
Camino hacia mí mismo / hacia la plazuela
El espacio está adentro / no es un *edén subvertido*
es un latido de tiempo

All is gain / if all is lost
I walk toward myself / toward the plaza
Space is within / it is not a *subverted paradise*
It is a pulse-beat of time
(Octavio Paz, *Vuelta / Return*)

Celestial Bodies

Rather than *setting out on a voyage*, Karina Beltrán’s life could better be described as transhumant. She moves her home with her through the world, following the season of light, like the Tuaregs and Bedouins in the desert. Nomadic peoples are privy to the secret of true fixity, of detention. Perhaps this is why they also better understand the nature of time and the relativity of movement; they know that the effect of fixity appears in the keeping-in-step of paths. “Stopping” within the dance of the days around the Sun means nothing other than adopting the body to the movement of the celestial bodies.

One attains a portable home by looking at the sky, following its variations. Without this other emphatic image of the outside, of the unfathomable, how is it possible to imagine something like a home? Perhaps the sky, the inhuman exterior space, with its immense paths and unconceivable laws, is the zero degree of all notions of home. The traveller’s searing desire to *return* could not arise without the age-old starry night above his head, without this enigmatic and completely silent outside which is the extreme opposite of any sign of interiority. At bottom, all voyage is about a home, or in other words, nostalgia is the very marrow of travel. Homer told us as much in the epic that gave rise to the concept. A voyage is the verification of the piercing need to find a centre or an island; to return to the hearth, to *Hestia*, the archetypal form of interior; it is a longing for the light of origin, the *dawn of return*. As Ulysses said to Calypso: “I pine all my days to travel home and see the dawn of my return.” The longing to *return* is a confirmation of the relentless drive to find a place where to stay or to settle.

Though different from the Homeric voyage, nomadic practices respond to reasons which are, in essence, similar. Deleuze says “that nothing is more immobile than a nomad, that nothing travels less than a nomad. It’s because they don’t want to leave

that they are nomad.”¹ Nomadic wandering is grounded in a highly specific symbolic structure: the establishment of an *axis mundi*, an axis around which to locate all residence. Wherever they go, nomadic peoples provisionally establish a beginning and a centre, a fixed point from which it is possible for them to recover a kind of sacred dimension. Creating a dwelling place in the desert by means of a simple act of sticking a post in the ground, which will serve as the nucleus of the *house-camp*, and the zero-image from which it is possible to represent the other. From there, the fearsome sky can be contemplated, distant and silent. This provisional anchorage alone enables the gaze to peer into the unfathomable, and perhaps print there the traces of a presence, barely imagined remains and subjective traces, constellations that make it familiar or, at least, legible to us.

Settling in the bosom of space, to inhabit it; that is the undergirdings of any modern nomadism, and also, if you think about it, of all art production that borrows its form from vital experiences. This is how Karina Beltrán makes photos, from the—intrinsically photographic—need to pay heed to the continuous happening, to the passing of the hours and days. From her desire to take pause in the dazzling spark of the encounter with the centre of her subjectivity. Her photographs are little pores, drill holes, pinpoints stuck into the multifarious and vibrant mesh of time, in its incessant passing; shiny little balloons, detained bubbles of air, floating on the vast shifting epidermis of the sea.

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While we are bathed in light

Interwoven in the very fabric of life and practiced as if it were a travel log, a diary, or memoirs, photography thus becomes a *writing of consciousness*, in a free flow that draws that “secret thread of the days”, with its evident Woolfian resonance. Just like the writer, Karina Beltrán searches tirelessly for a *tactility of the gaze*, a quality that—and this is true both for Woolf’s writing and Beltrán’s photography—is given by light’s absolutely constitutive quality. Light “writes” the world, light makes all things appear from nothingness; in the dense darkness of the universe bodies exist while light touches them, while they are bathed in light.

To perceive this *writing of light* we have to allow the image to envelop us, as we must accept it in the same way in which it was conceived; only “submerged” in it can we gain access to the experience it holds out to us. Combined with a kind of lyrical sense of chance, this *tactile quality* of the image is sometimes almost painful; the exquisite delicacy of textures, of fabrics and bristling surfaces bathed in light delivers us an unbearably intimate encounter with material, with objects in space.

Furthermore, we have gestures. For some time now, this whole order of minute enigmatic signs of the body that elude us in our everyday coming and going, has been a fundamental guideline in Karina Beltrán’s practice. Her tactile micro-gaze rests on the tiny inflections of a hand at rest, of wrinkled skin, of a reclining torso, of a

¹ Gilles Deleuze, in *Gilles Deleuze’s ABC Primer, with Claire Parnet*. Video, 1988-89.

contorted neck. Other times the image appears like a superficial and *interficial* intensity and pulls us into its interior with a kind of gravitational force, towards the subtle sensation or a minimum corporal intensity; an articulation that is tensed, a musculature that stretches. In its molecular absorption, it seems to discover new and mysterious configurations for bodies and surfaces. If the gaze is always politics, then here it becomes *micro-politics* and almost a secret tactile revolution.

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Time travellers

The body plays a central role in Karina Beltrán's work, not just in its more molecular aspect but also in one that is much more figurative and narrative. Over and above the superficial intensities, figures often appear; figures that are leaving, or that gaze towards the horizon in flight, turning their backs on us, others that are coming towards us, mysterious and shrouded. Like ghostly scenarios for the vague haunting of such presences, the images of windows, doors, stairs, or corridors presage an endless journey, the melancholia of continuous movement. A metaphorical image of life and of time, where nostalgia stands as the very essence of the mechanism of memory. Every effort to evoke, every act of retaining a fragment of lived experience is a mechanism-bridge between the past and the future that allows us not just to affirm that *this-has-been*—that Barthesian noema of photography that endows it with its indexicality and documentality—but which also enables a *return-there*, like true time travellers.

This mission, which is almost divine, or at least worthy of Marvel's promethean repertoire, has been one of the chief symbolic functions of the technical image since its outset. Memory is understood as a promise, as a marker launched into the future. It is an essentially nostalgic device: to register for the future, feeling the pain of time passing, knowing that the rose is wilting and will be lost forever, that we will never relive what we have already lived. That it is not possible to *return* because time is irreversible.

Photography and its special form of apprehending time could never remove itself from the long shadow that the concept of nostalgia has cast over the West. It is no accident that it was Homer who founded this conception based on the great voyage of initiation of *The Iliad*. In Greek *nostos* means a "return home" and *algos* "pain". Therefore nostalgia is the illness of the traveller, the suffering caused by the unfulfilled desire to return home, just like the hero of the famous epic felt. The photographic image fully assures this condition and, moreover, what it demonstrates is the impotence of undertaking this return; its supposed quasi-magical function is just a false promise, a trick everybody can perceive, a cloth flower.

Karina Beltrán is perfectly conversant with this essential deception of photography, and she often "portrays flowers" which are false, made of cloth or plastic. While the flower is one of the most recurrent images used to reflect the passing of time, a hackneyed way of expressing the fleetingness of all worldly things, capturing the forced immobility of a fake rose in a photo is an ironic and meta-reflexive act. "Not all

immobility is eloquent”, Sarduy claimed in *La simulación*.² That said, this immobility squared, the photo of the unwiltable flower, is indeed eloquent; the photograph of the “stolen representation of a false flower” contains a circular reflection on the photographic object. Almost as if it were a manifesto, the photographic image compared with the flower proclaims itself to be pure surface and pure simulacrum. A contrived detention of time, a forgery that only expresses the impossibility of *returning*, and the melancholia on the vertigo of nothingness. Photographs are vibrations of appearance, folds and furrows, nothing more than petals that unfurl their theatricality over the void.

Like a baroque mocking *vanitas*, Karina Beltrán’s false flowers, scattered along her path, remind us of the same thing as the *plasticky* affectation of the souvenir: that time flees irreversibly. And if the return is impossible, we at least have the deception and, of course, nostalgia.

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The Thread

But we undoubtedly have something more. At the point where those two great mummies of past and future meet is the extremely fine line of the present; a thread so difficult to grasp hold of. We often forget or give up on it, when it is the only tangible time and the only one charged with infinite potential, full of doors and windows.

Karina Beltrán’s photographic practice contains something that we might call, a little in jest, the “Zen substrata of photography” and which is probably the curative element of the nostalgic knot, that great suffering of time and the pathology of the life-journey in the West. The conception of the camera as a means of connection with the present and as a way of intensifying the *be-here-now*, transforming the photographic practice into a meditative practice. To a large degree, the long genealogy of the photographic snapshot points in this direction. Photographing then becomes a simple situational exercise: to settle in the present.

Living by the day. Detaining the linear time that runs between the past and the future; opening a hole in the dynamic of the hours, minutes and seconds. Firing at clock towers, as Benjamin recalls in imagining that messianic and revolutionary *now-time*, or *time-in-action*, capable of exploding the tyrannical continuum of History.³ Firing the camera shutter. In this fold or rupture we can witness the new. What is “originated”, what is “born to the world”, can be presented. Only in this disjunction is it possible to catch a glimpse of the *light of origin*,⁴ which is none other than the light that can be touched, always the most beautiful; the one that belongs to the tangible present, to the immediate materialness of the now.

² Severo Sarduy, *La simulación*, Monte Ávila Editores, Venezuela, 1982, p. 118.

³ Walter Benjamin, “Tesis de filosofía de la Historia”, *Discursos interrumpidos I*, Taurus, Madrid 1973.

⁴ The word “origin” comes from the Latin *origo* (“to begin”) and is related with the verb *oriri* (“to arise, be born”) and with *oriente*, which is the direction of the rising sun or “birth of the day”.

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