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ELSEWHEREES

9. - 30. September, 2023

With works by Paula Baeza Pailamilla, Isaac Contreras, Mónica Naranjo Uribe and Mathias C. Pfund

Curated by Adriana Domínguez

ELSEWHEREES takes a look at archeology and palaeontology, two disciplines that excavate the ground searching for the past or the “roots” of our civilisations. These fields of study have framed themselves as scientific disciplines that study human, animal and plant history and prehistory through the excavation of sites and the analysis of physical remains. For the most part, they have been practiced under the pretence that interpretation of the data they recover can be done without biases.

But interpretation is always done *from* and *with* a certain orientation. Having an orientation means taking certain points of view as given¹. And this is what this exhibition is about: it questions which are the orientations, or the discourses that have been replicated through the interpretation of material remains in archeology and palaeontology. It asks who have these discourses benefited, who have they erased, and which long-lasting effects they have had on humans, non humans and the earth.

The title of the exhibition is a word that was coined by Mexican writer José Rabasa while studying Nahua (Aztec) writings². According to him, “elsewheres” name spaces and temporalities that define a world that remains exterior to the spatio-temporal location of the observer. Elsewheres are also forms of affect, knowledge, and perception that underlie what an individual in a given culture can say about the world. “They are ineffable but intuible and disrupt the assumption that western thought exhausts what can be said and thought about the experience humans may have of the world³”.

In her video, *La otra mitad* (The other half) **Monica Naranjo Uribe** tries endlessly to make two small stones fit together. This subtle gesture becomes the perfect metaphor for the impossibility of acknowledging the “elsewheres”, or of their purposeful erasure. Her work is a reflection “on the tendency of the human mind to make fit what does not necessarily coincide, both in a scientific and affective level”. Monica’s work stems from an interest in the intimate experience of territory and its representation. In recent years she has focused on geology, looking for a way to understand places from their physical condition, beyond their political limits. In the context of ELSEWHEREES, Monica’s piece becomes an image that powerfully and poetically frames the reflection of how archeology and palaeontology have addressed their objects and subjects of study.

Mapuche artist **Paula Baeza Pailamilla**, participates in the exhibition with their performance *Mi cuerpo es un museo* (My body is a museum). Inside a vitrine, Paula sits motionless, covering their entire body in black and wearing the traditional Mapuche jewellery that women wear and which is traditionally passed from generation to generation. In Chile, it is normal to find in museums sacred objects, jewellery, textiles and everyday utensils that have been looted from tombs and houses as a result of colonisation. These objects are usually displayed on faceless mannequins. Paula’s action stresses the appearance/disappearance of the Mapuche bodies, who continue to live while the state institutions try to erase their existence.

The performance is accompanied by an installation consisting of a video and four photographs. Altogether, the piece questions how racialised bodies are put on display on exhibition spaces, how often they are stripped away of their right to self-representation and, and of course, exposes the extent of colonial desire expressed in the looting

¹ Ahmed Sarah, (2006) *Queer Phenomenology*, Duke University Press

² Rabasa José, (2011) *Tell Me the Story of How I Conquered You: Elsewheres and Ethnocide in the Colonial Mesoamerican World*, University of Texas Press

³ *Ibid.*

and forceful appropriation of objects and bodies (there is a long history of indigenous people being kidnapped to be exhibited in Europe, including Zurich). Paula's performance highlights what mainstream archeology has done: erase people. Entire museums are full of objects presented as if the subjects who made them had/have no agency.

This kind of archeology is known as scientific archeology, or mainstream archeology, which instrumentalises indigenous cultures and transforms their objects into cultural merchandise. This archaeology has served as a "technology of conquest" contributing to the creation of a whitewashed history based on coloniality. The other kind of archaeology seeks an understanding of the past as a thread where structured dynamics of exclusion, pauperization and environmental destruction can be appreciated. This archeology has been theorised as *borderland archaeology* and is one of the few current attempts at a decolonial archeology in the present ⁴.

In his works, **Mathias C. Pfund** uses a case study approach, in which he pays attention to the traceability of images: their origins and modalities of appearance. Art in the public space and in museums are among his favourite subjects, as is possible to see in his works at the exhibition. In his new work *En position probable de vie*, Mathias focuses on a paleontological discovery: the unearthing of a *Tyrannosaurus* in Brussels in 1882, which was displayed standing in two feet, in the most spectacular way. In his research, which departed from a painting that the artist found at the Royal Belgian Museum of Natural History in Brussels, he discovered that in order to display the dinosaur in such a way, the palaeontologists had to break 2 vertebrae, meaning that it was not the natural position of the dinosaur. Thus, Mathias shows the *alternative history* that the bones seem to tell: he cuts out the figure of the dinosaur on a reproduction of the painting and places it with four legs on the ground.

In the same manner, the artist did a replica of a Cycladic statuette (Dokathismata type), the kind which are usually exhibited in a vertical position in museums. In his work, he placed the statuette horizontally in accordance with the position of its feet, questioning western's obsession with verticality.

In the two sculptures presented in the exhibition, **Isaac Contreras** investigates references to the existence of queer individuals during the prehispanic past of Baja California. "Ambia" (the broken sculpture) is inspired by the Pericúe nation, a tribe inhabiting the region lying approximately one degree below tropic of Cancer. Their name means sweet pitahaya in Guaycura. As described in the missionary chronicles, the pericues were "so effeminate in character that by way of describing their manner, customs, and traits, some one has truthfully said: They are women in words, accent, quarrels, disputes, anger, changeableness, trust"⁵ They were known as *Joyas* (jewels). Ambia is decidedly ambiguous, their nudity and possession of pearls embodies a certain Catholic-colonial terror and desire. As a counter-narrative, Ambia's story is constructed as a prequel to the Missionary History of the Californias, before the persecutions of the "Joyas" and the rebuke of the "hermaphrodite Indian" described in the missionary chronicles.

The sculpture is accompanied by the video *Ambia in the field* which is a digital scan of the sculpture, but presented in a way that "queers" archeology: as an abstract composition of sound and image that mixes the affective and the intellectual.

Finally, *Giganta*, is a sculptural installation inspired by the oral tradition that narrates "according to the common voice of the elders" the ancient presence of giants in the Southern Californian Sierra. Based on the Jesuit chronicles that relate the discovery of bones of extraordinary grandeur, Giganta tells the mythical return of a giantess of pink stone, spirit of the Sierra and guardian of the peninsula, built, like much of the city, in volcanic tuff.

ELSEWHEREs is the second exhibition of the series "Earth is the heaviest element" which addresses the need to de-construct and re-construct our relationship to the earth, other humans and non-human entities. The exhibitions bring together the knowledge and practices of Latin American and Swiss artists and scientists, in order to suggest alternative ways of co-existing.

⁴ Londoño Diaz Wilhem. *La arqueología pública en Colombia: del esoterismo a la decolonialidad*.

⁵ As read on Taraval's journal of the indian uprising in Lower California.