

The Roots of Flight

Texts for the cycle Reading the Collection:
Works Mamá (1984 – 2019) and Papá (1977 – 2019),
from the series Identity, by Yapci Ramos
at CAAM Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno

BY NORA NAVARRO, 2020

By way of introduction:

When we dive into the funds of the CAAM collection to choose one or two works of art in which to look at ourselves through lyrics and music, we think, first of all, of the enormous amount of art that we discard in favor of a single piece. But the truth is that, both in art and in literature, the themes that inspire and confront us are just variations or faces of the same polyhedron: death, love, the passage of time, who we are and why we are here. The exhibition *Know Us*, by the Tenerife photographer and visual artist Yapci Ramos, was exhibited in the San Antonio Abad Room, attached to this same house, last March 2019, exactly one year before the beginning of this atrocious crisis that has shaken the foundations of the world as we conceived it and that, in many cases, has returned us to the original questions about what to cling to in the midst of chaos and uncertainty.

The quarantine against the pandemic confined us to our homes and, when we returned to the streets, the world was no longer the same, because the puzzle had been blown up and no piece fell back in the same place. Our most intimate task was to reinvent our place in the midst of this global storm of severed freedoms, deaths, isolation, and loneliness without hugs.

Yapci Ramos, in the search for identity that she displays in *Know Us*, traces an introspective journey through the three paths that inspire and confront us in order to be a little more free: the body, others and art. To explore these three paths, the artist retreats to her roots and unearths a gallery of family portraits to blur into her different faces, and reconstruct the map of her identity with her affinities.

In this time, we will draw our own evocation and interpretation of the artist's journey through her transgenerational legacy with a fragmentary literary-musical journey, composed, for my part, of shreds of monologues, poems, poetic prose or

micro-stories, and clothed, in the musical section, by a piano and drums duo as a symbol of the dialogue of art, and that we believe that, together, represents that complex photograph that is the sum of the stories and faces that we are.

To tell me, first I have to tell us

In the spring of 2019, I decided to enter that half-built building that, for more than 40 years, had crossed my path. This story began on the edge of any chapter in my history, when I used up the ink of my few certainties and I wanted to rewrite my doubts in the emptiness of the missing pages. And that perhaps they guarded the closets or drawers of this house.

Sometimes, on the periphery of the day, I would hide against the transparent glass of the facade and guess cobwebs in dark rooms beyond the oak door. So I set out to conquer this taken house little by little, because all the stories that have marked my life begin on the threshold of a door. Or slamming the door. But this time I am a spider that goes to the center of its web without anything urgent getting in the way, as the poet with the sad blue eyes said.

When my skin touches the target, all my questions rise. Every time I am very close to the entrails, the photograph overflows my lens and I have to take a distance to look again, from another place, at the patches of light from the windows, where the noise still creeps in. And I want to turn them inward, turn on the interior lights, and go back to the windowsill only when the birds fly.

Finally, I go through the door without ringing the bell because, deep down, it was always open, as if I was waiting for myself on the other side of the peephole. Despite the chips and dust that dot the ground, I take off my feet because only then does an adventure into the unknown begin. Actually, it was taught to me by a woman with a hat, "like a painting by old Chagall,

so close to me that it could be me”, I hum as I wish in the rooms, where each one resonates with its own music and its own time. Little by little I recognize myself in this abode, which is separated from my gaze by a single letter: I think that perhaps between these chords this little uprising that I am myself began to take shape. But at every corner there are unopened boxes, hanging mirrors, an inheritance of forgotten, lame and intact furniture, and of family albums that treasure their own history on each page. I’m still writing mine: that’s why I knocked on this door.

Because this building is me. Although it could also be you.

To rewrite this story, I dust off the shoeboxes of Madre and Padre, and also of Tía, Tío Manolito, Abuela and Bisabuela, and I walk through the rooms of my memory full of voids. How excited we were by this lesson from Attikus Finch to his daughter Scout in the rocking chair on her porch. I am not afraid of cracks or dampness in the walls, because I know that the past is also a wound that never finishes drying. I bring my ear closer to its grayscale, I listen to its heartbeat and its silence, because the family is that house you always return to after Ithaca, that splinter on the Achilles heel and also the skin that covers it to cross the road of life with a firm imprint.

Know Us means “knowing us”, so in order to photograph myself inside, I had to play chess with the pronouns and put the self in check from this journey to the we.

No daughter, no son, is a blank page until she breaks the lines and invents her own alphabet. But if I have wanted to rescue the stories from my family album, it is because each one is a brick in the building that I continue to build of myself, *blow by blow, verse by verse*. Ultimately, what I want to say is that in order to tell my story I have to start this book all over again. Or that to be able to tell myself, first I have to tell ourselves.

Every portrait is a self-portrait

“Photography is, first of all, a way of looking. It is not the look itself. (...) All photographs are memento mori”.

Susan Sontag

Art is not neutral and language is never innocent: that is why I chose the shore of poetry, although I was not always saved from the wave of shipwreck. I’m not neutral either, and no word is random. Padre and Madre always worked in the port of Tenerife, a crossroads of back and forth paths, from which

I myself left when I was 18 years old. It was in 77, seven years after this photograph of Padre, when this woman-island was born within an island, an anthology surrounded by water and questions, that she crossed borders to discover with her camera the sea behind the sea, because they taught her that the only limit of flight is the horizon.

When the sea that we are withdraws, it opens the way to a sea behind in which to look at ourselves and what others are. I chose photography to tell their stories, but also to unravel my own narrative in this game of mirrors. Deep down, each portrait is also a self-portrait, because the other’s gaze also builds us. A reunion with loneliness in an instant of shared loneliness, which is one of my highest notions of beauty. But today I sail the Atlantic again and return to my first shore, where everything was yet to be written. My goal is to redraw my biography from the first family X.

However, what is the scale of the maps that measures our own steps? What scale represents with real measurements my mother, my father, my grandmother, in the graph of my memory? On what scale to measure the true distance with respect to an other so close and, at the same time, unknown? And what fraction or proportion calibrates that temporal and spatial gap between his world and mine to decipher my steps in his tracks? Am I more me in the areas exempt from their influences or am I perhaps the result of our similarities and bifurcations?

In my hands I take the photograph of Padre and in the backlight of awakening I redraw myself in the lines of his face: the same equilateral complexion, the same large lips, the same curve of the neck, the same expression of astonishment, and his long hair that it falls on his shoulders just like my short hair falls on mine. And I take the photograph of Madre and superimpose my glittering eyes on hers like a lenticular hetero-portrait in continuous movement, from me to you, from you to me. When I look at the photographs of Padre and Madre at the age that I am now, the questions that my adolescent rebellion blocked years ago emerge: who were Padre and Madre before being Padre and Madre? What illusions did they cultivate, what defeats brought them down, what seas did they renounce?

When I unfold this drawbridge towards the constellation of my past, I remember that each story we tell about ourselves is, in a way, a fiction, because even photographs lie. However, we are the fruit of a story that goes beyond ourselves and ourselves. To listen to that silence, I cross oceans of time and I blend in with their poses, their gestures, their clothing, and try to decipher the invisible maps in their gaze: the steep

mountain complex of their fears, the meandering rivers of their doubts, the wind and lava climate of their youth, when they tended their dreams to the sun of the Transition and the promises of a renewed air of democracy. It does not escape me that they both jumped over cliffs, valleys and deserts so that, in my years out in the open at the dawn of a new century, I could make my own revolution.

I look straight ahead at this specular dance of times and lives united in the curve of my eyes. The space that mediates between both worlds is the mystery and the miracle on which we continue to dance.

Poem and short story from the work Madre:

My sister Elena also writes poetry and once told me that the literary theme par excellence is motherhood, first person.

Of mothers and daughters (I)

Mother and daughter. A lonely woman. Two lonely women knotted in the cord that re-found each war at each reunion. How many times did I put a mirror in front of your mirror at your mirror level despite your mirror against my mirror. Mother, I had to fly away to find this photograph: notice that we both twist our smiles to the left, two wire eyebrows frame the worlds of the retina and on the phone they still confuse the same timbre and color of voice, which I called so many times to take refuge in your wing and tear it off, the same sweet accent as quince. Sometimes we love each other in different languages with the same meaning. Mothers and daughters sometimes draw the same shadow on the wall, we understand too late that a mother is a Woman before a mother and the mother looks at her girl and cries because she cannot drive away the ghosts that have the exact form of her fears, this truth has no century, like the girl who closes the door and daydreams about assaults on other firmaments and deep in her heart as a child of hers, a single fear: mother, don't let go of me.

Of mothers and daughters (II)

“Thank you for teaching me to swim and row. (...) As for me, I have things to do in the world and I have to put myself to them and be more ruthless than you”.

Deborah Levy

Mother, I propose a game to you based on this black and

white photograph dated 1984. Close your eyes, imagine that you return to the minute this photo session ends, you leave the stool and thank the photographer, who disappears in his lab to reveal all your faces. You go to the window and, as you focus on the horizon line, someone knocks on the door. As there is no one around it, you shyly open it, after cutting out a familiar but unfamiliar face in the sphere of the peephole: a young woman, with a happy expression, more or less the same age as you. It seems like he's coming from a very long journey. You like the sparkle in her eyes, her vintage dress from another time, which she stretches down in a gesture of shyness, and she goes barefoot. The music of her accent is from a nearby geography, but crossed by inflections of other accents that you do not know then. That's what you thought to yourself when you heard her say: “I like your hat.” Suddenly, you are afraid of the future. In fact, you were always afraid of the future, and you always faced it with courage, although you still did not know that when you bought that hat with a fine brim, one ordinary afternoon, because you had decided to take a portrait for posterity.

And we may never finish believing how immensely strong we are.

Finally, you look again with curiosity at this young foreigner and ask: “Who are you?” And she answers that she is your daughter, the one who has just started going to school and that, 40 years later, she has returned to this scene of revelations to tell you that she too fulfilled her dream of dedicating herself to art and photography.

He thanks you for teaching him to swim and row, even if sometimes he did it against the current. And before going back to the future, she tells you: mother, I will never let you go.

Patchwork of literary scraps inspired by the works Red-Hot (2018), Freedom (2019) and Mamá y Papá (Mum and Dad) (2019).

In February 2018, Yapci Ramos inaugurated at the Catinca Tabacaru Gallery in New York the piece Red-Hot, an 18-channel video installation where he turns his back on the ancestral taboos about the female body, and writes 24 cries on the canvas of the shower. with the blood of her menstruation. Like cave paintings that are then diluted in tap water, this creation-destruction loop evokes the ritual of purification of Aboriginal women in the sea each time they finished their menstrual cycle. Asked why Know us's journey to the genealogical roots culminates in this piece, this voyeuristic

at dawn that does not come
spectator throws her answer into the air: we are the owners
of our blood.

Bleed words

Art is not chaste or caste, art puts the body, it is stained, and it is life. I write my doubts with the ink of my blood on the marble wall. Words like those that they bleed that do not bleed. And yet we hide the stain, we dye it blue, we call it waste because it is a sacred source of life, but My waste is my right to name my non-violent heart with it. My pain is my detachment, not my shame. I exile myself from the trap of pure things. I shake off the scabs of the taboo and I free myself when I write with the tips of my dirty fingers: How, Why, Time, Now, Truth, You, Home, Yes, Wake up. And I am reborn in the ash drain of my anguish.

Whistle on the wire

My grandmother, an ant woman clinging to the earth like the stem of a plant, blooming against the seasons, her hands entangled with leaf litter, the aroma of a gardener and fresh coffee and broth for seven, repeats to me through the folds of time : “Be free”.

Far from my beach and my island, the story of the sound piece Freedom was born:

My name is Yapci Ramos and I wake up in another valley far from my valley, in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, surrounded by other waters and questions, which, in turn, are the same waters and the same questions. Woman-island in the heart of an isthmus, a stranger confined to a lonely hotel, where shots pierce the silence of this lawless city, like the song of migratory birds in the trees. This dissonant music between the noise of the bullets and the hiss of freedom brings me back to the original tension for which we are. And it is that I often go back to being a woman in a cage, because a long trajectory of confinement precedes us. Then, I think of my grandmother’s hands polished by the dew of dawn; in the hands of my mother weaving the future in a weave of green stitching; blood of my onion blood of a lineage that, as the poet said, “wanted to separate the earth part by part / to dry and hot bites”.

I look out on the balcony at this fragile panorama of pain and freedom. And like the song, I choose to whistle on the wire.

At the bottom of the pool a bird

At the bottom of the pool
a bird pierces the center of my boat
I throw myself into the infinite chill of the night
I drink the water in the dark
I still do not stand
in the immensity of my thirst
I drown in the void
I cut myself off in the bud
I scream in a muffled voice
at dawn that does not come

but I have the words
that bite me from the inside
We’ll just walk through this ruined sky
this poetic delusion of childhood
with the raft of language
that names and denotes the impossible

tonight I hit rock bottom
I pluck my pens and write
that tonight I hit rock bottom
with the foots
with the hands
with throat
and I tremble like water when
The wind blows

and I tremble like the air
when the bird
finally
flaps

The swallows

At the end of this journey to the center of the earth that roots our history, we put an end to this literary-musical album with a timid revelation of the between the lines: the photographs do not age, but we age them when we return to them. After all, the act of fixing an image as a testimony, as a trace, as a trace, as a mask, as a tribute, is, above all, an exercise in memory. And memory is our only victory against death, since, like art, it involves that act of redemption that saves us from nothing. When we revisit the memory of others, we shed our relevance, but in family memory we re-signify our history. Because memory is the only possibility that keeps our story alive, that of those who precede us, and that of those we love. And that’s why I returned to the mirrors, cobwebs, albums and shoes of that old building: because swallows always return home.