

Body, Space, Time, Light

I.

When Suwon Lee held her exhibition *Bling! Bling!* (Periférico Caracas, Venezuela, 2008), she was deploying for the first time the set of themes, strategies and elements that would become recurrent in her artistic practice. In this sort of declaration of intent, Lee was laying the foundations for the development of a work built from self-reference as a possibility for shared experience.

As the descendant of a family of Korean migrants, born in a Latin American country, the main argument of that exhibition was erected around the difficulty of constructing an identity in a context just as personal as foreign. So, while exploring her life story, Lee went back, with *Spring of Stars*, to her paternal ancestors, thus building a correspondence, in an immersive sidereal night, between the genealogy of the family name and the title of the piece. She went back to her origins, incarnated in a golden pig with her mother's *Birth Dream*. She addressed cultural references transmitted in her family, symbolized in the act of drawing a circle. And she aired spiritual concerns as well as her interest in the study of light. As well, Lee worked on the dynamics of the family economy in a series of vanitas that alluded to false luxury, to fatuous shine, and she represented herself through photography as multiple, unstable, always moving identity; like a foreigner¹.

Since then, Lee has produced different bodies of work and exhibitions which, in the most varied ways, return to some of the various approaches developed in this seminal exhibition experience.

However, *Body, Space, Time, Light* is the first exhibition after *Bling! Bling!* that calls for such a broad and at once concise, reading of Lee's work. One more time, an exhibition of hers can be read autobiographically; but it functions as the artist's introduction to her parents' Korea.

1. Fuenmayor, Jesús. «Looking into the invisible: Self-Portrait as Maria Martins». P.p. 38-45. In: *Suwon Lee. Bling! Bling!* Caracas: Periférico Caracas, 2012,

II.

It is no coincidence that it was the piece *Body, Space, Time, Light*, from the *How to Measure Time* (2021) series, which gave the exhibition its title. With its statement, it synthesizes the coordinates through which the works that constitute it as well as the oeuvre of the artist circulate. Although Lee has made photography her privileged medium, she has resorted on numerous occasions to video, installation, ceramics and the word, to develop her artistic ideas.

The clocks in *How to Measure Time* are perhaps some of Lee's most direct and transparent works to date. In each of them, as if in a self-portrait, the artist expressed a set of intimate concerns, fueled by the confinement experienced during the pandemic, such as her uncertain immigration status, her half-Asian/half-Latina hybrid identity, her beliefs about life and death, her spiritual principles, her age or the reconfiguration of the current era since the onset of Covid-19. Thus, each clock in the series exposes a different problem by using words located in the spot that hours should occupy.

In *How to Measure Time*, the representation of the passage of time is altered: as the hour and minute hands have been removed, the second hand is the only one that ticks to mark it. In these images, fixed time is not one but several; different times that leave a trail, a wake, and make us question whether it is only possible to conceive time from notions associated with linearity and sequentiality, because far from a sequential time, they propose simultaneity—in the present of the reception—of different instants—already past—, which have been compressed into a single image, due to the effect of the overlapping of photos.

To be clear: if long exposures are a constant in Lee's work in order to photograph luminous bodies in the dark, in this series the use of shutter speed acquires another meaning, since to produce differentiated marks—in shape and intensity—of the needle of the clock, she has used varying exposure times. Thus, this series is anchored in aspects inherent to photographic practice, insofar as its meaning is accompanied by principles and techniques of image production—both analog and

digital – to generate situations/images that are real in the fiction proposed by the artist, who in her desire to represent the imperceptibility of time, takes us back to those notions of photography that conceive it as a temporary instance between past and present.

That is why, when Suwon Lee attempts to address the issues that concern her, she matches two systems that verify the passage of time – the clock and the camera – to produce an instant in which everything happens simultaneously, but at different speeds. In this way, she tries to expose the impossibility of reducing the world to fixed categories, and points out the changing nature of what exists, because she understands that life is a process of becoming in which time is not homogeneous. Of this series as a whole, the work *Stranger/Undocumented* is perhaps the most eloquent. On this clock, the artist has arranged fourteen ways of naming the legal or migratory status that a citizen can have, emphasizing her status as a foreigner. In English – a language that belongs to her as much as Spanish and Korean – it reads: foreign, tourist, undocumented, in transit, expat, migrant, resident, asylum seeker, local, while different needles – which are the same – rest, or pass diffusely, over most of the words. With this enumeration it is not only possible to observe the autobiographical trace of the piece, in light of Lee's current condition, but also to make visible the problems of millions of fellow Venezuelans who are the protagonists of one of the most massive migratory phenomena of recent years at a global level.

III.

It is worth pointing out that the self-referentiality that runs through Lee's work also appears in places where one would not expect them, since she has managed to reconcile themes and genres, which are located and oscillate indistinctly between the intimacy of the artist and the magnificence of outer space. In this sense, this «exteriority» is manifested through a wide body of landscape

photographs, with which her work is usually associated, and with which she has claimed a genre that is thought to be extemporaneous in its most traditional forms.

Natural, urban, stellar, twilight or nocturnal landscapes, constitute a wide roster that account for the wandering condition of the artist; they trace an itinerary of life through different continents, which has been recorded from remote locations, deliberately unusual points of view, and at specific times of the day with a treatment of light and/or luminous objects, which give it a very distinctive look.

That is why *Body, Space, Time, Light* begins its journey precisely with the urban landscapes of her *Crepuscular* and *Korean Nightscapes* series. This selection serves to draw an almost imperceptible thin line between her American surroundings and her ancestors' homeland. In her images of her childhood city Maracay and of Caracas, the city where she spent most of her life, it is difficult to distinguish, as in most of her urban landscapes, a feature that characterizes them. Nor do her titles make any geographical allusion to the photographed place. For example, Caracas is titled *The Most Dangerous City in the World* (2011), but it is curious that the same does not occur with those taken in the Republic of Korea, whose names do refer directly to the recorded areas: *Paju DMZ II* (2019) and *Euljiro II* (2019), as if with this gesture she wanted to dispel any ambiguity about the place.

And here I allow myself to digress. Paju is the northernmost city in South Korea, close to the 38th parallel, which separates it from the north, and where the most militarily armed border in the world is located. Lee's image was taken near the DMZ (demilitarized zone); a quiet and sparsely populated zone of crops, where the threat of the enemy from the north is always felt.

When we are faced with the luminous landscapes of Caracas and Paju, both territories marked by violence and by the fracture of a nation are lodged in the peaceful and silent night. Their lights in the midst of darkness are the elements that define the landscape and whisper the tense calm of danger zones. The numerous losses that both countries have experienced at different times are reflected on the poles of that axis that has shaped the artist's life. Because it must also be stated, the luminous

image of Eujiro –an old neighborhood in the central part of Seoul– is likewise a document of an absence, but in the future: that of the city that devours its past, that of a time doomed to disappear due to the zeal of consumption and novelty.

Suwon Lee's interest in light must be understood from various perspectives: as a working resource, that is, as a principle of photographic practice, as a symbol, as a subject of representation, but also as a sensible, spiritual experience. *The Darkness of Light*, for example, is an extensive series of starscapes that position her gaze in front of a universe that opens up infinitely. Sublime, in the romantic way, they testify to the artist's search for places far from urban life (Iceland, the Uyuni salt flat, the Gran Sabana, the Canary Islands) to insist on her exploration of light.

Without light there is no photographic image. If in her urban landscapes it is what makes the image emerge, in her stellar visions it is the celestial vault and bodies that emanate light. Just as in her clocks, the effect of long exposures helps us appreciate their movement: the position of the sun throughout a day (*Untitled. 1 Day*, 2013), of the stars visible as traces (*Moonset*, 2013) or as the drawing of concentric circles (*The Wheel of Time*, 2014). They remind us that not only is the time of the photograph deferred, but that those stars that shine in the sky also belong to another time in the galaxy whose light reaches us as a trail. «The infinite cannot be made into matter, but it is possible to create an illusion of the infinite: the image»².

Given that the artist has signaled that she understands her work as a practice for self-awareness, we could think that her images of the cosmos may be one of the most direct routes to understanding the way that Suwon Lee has developed a body of work in which this exteriority –of the world– and the interiority of being –hers– are integrated. In this sense, her sidereal landscapes provoke terrifying fascination in the face of what exceeds our knowledge; they invite a connection with the immensity,

2. Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Sculpting in Time. Reflections on the Cinema*. P. 62. Madrid: Ediciones Rialp, S.A. Madrid, 2002..

with other worlds, and force us to redirect our gaze on the human condition to practice a decentralizing movement that allows us to assume it as part of a larger order, which is beyond our control. And so, as if there were a reflex effect, they also open for Lee the possibility of mystical experience as a resource for the search of self, as a threshold for seeking the infinite being.

IV.

If «sight is what establishes our place in the surrounding world»³, in Suwon Lee's case one must add that one of her work's main aspects is the gaze's time; a feature that she sets out from her artistic practice and as an experience in the viewer, through different instances, such as the time of waiting, the time for contemplation, and the time of meditation. In this exhibition, this temporality of the gaze can be found in numerous pieces, whether in starry landscapes such as *Constellations over Velez-Rubio* (2020) and in *The Pleiades from Velez-Rubio* (2020) or in a video such as *Le Passé* (2015), in which in just under ten minutes in the same shot, the artist's belongings are consumed by the flames, in a gesture that precedes her departure from Venezuela.

Fire is also a recurring element in Lee's work as an element associated with the idea of transformation and ritual practices. In the case of *Le Passé*, fire is a form of mourning, it is a destructive force that concludes a period of time to make way for a new one, while in *No birth, No Death* (2017) it is the source of the smoke that vanishes.

Within this personal cartography that is the work of Lee, *The Garden of My Exile* (2017), a ceramic piece whose pigment was made from the ashes of a fire in El Ávila mountain (Caracas), should be placed alongside *Le Passé*. Just as its name suggests, this piece carries the emotional weight of having left her country and her affections behind by means of a simple gesture on the clay: its golden

3. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. P. 13. Barcelona: Editorial Gustavo Gili, S.A., 2000.

indentations recreate the marks that, on the beaches of her first exile, water would imprint on the stones when retreating.

On the other hand, *Self-Portrait as Consciousness of Time I and II* (2020) and *Cosmic Serpent* (2017) are works that are part of a series of reworkings of her old practice of self-portraits over recent years. If in her first photographs she appeared as a specter in search of a place and an identity, in this set of works her self-representation is constructed with solid elements of nature such as stones that draw the outline of her body –in the manner of Ana Mendieta– or that seek balance, or through the clay turned into iridescent body –due to the effect of the Raku technique–, like a snake constantly shedding its skin.

V.

If we understand Body, Space, Time, Light as a journey through the different bodies of work that make up Suwon Lee's oeuvre, we could begin the final journey of a loop that starts in *Bling! Bling!* and now concludes in Korea with the piece *Time to Be. Time to Be Asian, Latin Asian, Latin, Asian Latina, or invisible?* wonders Lee as, going back to her origins, she rehearses other ways of articulating her split identity.

To do this, she first gives back to the country of her ancestors the life of the *Kyopo* (2010-2014), a photographic series about the Korean community in Venezuela, with a documentary approach that is rare in the artist, in which the intimacy of their homes and workplaces, as well as celebrations and mourning, are recorded. Exhibited in Caracas in 2014, for this exhibition the series is presented as a photographic portfolio/portable exhibition of fifty images.

And lastly, Lee has narrated the story, both separately and together, of a Korean couple –that of her paternal grandparents– in a two-part, limited-edition artist book entitled *Mr & Mrs* (2021), in which she worked with images recovered from the family archive that she then rephotographed and

reframed. In this piece, through numerous portraits ranging from the protagonists' youth to their adulthood, she traces, with a strong filmic vocation, two timelines that account for the passage of time in their lives in 20th-century Korea, as well as in the different photographic prints that she found. But in the end, with this piece and the archive that gave rise to it, Lee has also managed to reconstruct her own genealogy, since the lives of *Mr & Mrs* are also her own.

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