

Gabriela Torres Ruiz – *Silence*

(Speech on the exhibition opening at Tempelhof-Museum)

The photographic work of Gabriela Torres Ruiz takes us on a journey into the unknown, towards secret locations and uncharted places, abandoned and void of people. It seems, that long time has passed since they were filled with life, since they were home to mankind and a place in which animals roamed, seeking food or shelter. However inhospitable and uninhabited they seem, these images instantly intrigue us wanting to explore their pathways and to perceive their tales, compelling us to linger. A certain tension emanates from them, a desire to dream, to remain in an in-between state, evidently invoking the existential by retaining all its mystery.

The photographs main composition is based on a clearly perceptible structure. Gabriela Torres Ruiz mostly conjoins her pictures as diptychs. One image shows a morbid interior space, the other unveils a view onto an unspoiled open landscape. The two completely different subjects immediately engage into dialogue with each other.

Formally, they have a lot in common: their subdued monochrome colours are of the same hue, mostly greys, greens, browns, but also blues. The lines shift from one composition to the other, finding their continuation – here a run of staircases – there a mountain ridge, here the pale light of a built-in shelf – there a rivulet of water, cutting centrally through the landscape – here nature overgrown by lichen and moss, the shades of green showing iridescent patterns – there an abandoned corridor, it's mildew covered walls playing a luminous game in dapples of green with the incoming sunlight. The parallels of hue and composition are so multifaceted that the viewers glance leaps from one side to the other, between the left and the right, in an attempt to discover every single one of all the corresponding traits.

These works are evidently based on a rigorous concept. Shot with a medium format camera, the motifs originate from different locations, yet all are subject to the defined square format. Symmetry seems important – not only in the dynamic run of lines, but in succession of the subject matter, the format, the pondering on left and right and so on. The aesthetic principles connecting these diptychs become even more apparent in the book, elaborating the series even further: the images are arranged in a gradient arc of colour suspended throughout the book and segmented into separate groups; in the beginning and the end of the whole series, the viewer's glance strays back to focus on the sky.

Guided by Gabriela Torres Ruiz's lens, the viewer gains a glimpse into interior spaces, places which are obviously left to decay. They are one part of all the diptychs and not specified by name, just generally mentioned to be located in Poland, Germany, Italy. They are not about a certain places, moreover about a glance into spaces abandoned a long time ago, in which time seems to be standing still ever since. These are mostly transitory rooms, interfaces, such as staircases, corridors, maybe a church

nave. A sparse ray of light falls through windows into these spaces, a source of life shining on the lingering infirmity of these relics of civilisation. Simultaneously, this illumination seems to open a way out of this world of morbid decay, however being denied, it merely shines as a bright spot of desire for salvation.

Gabriela Torres Ruiz takes photographs of spaces which seem to be set up like a theatre stage, but she takes them without any manipulation, shot just as found. Often, the artist needs a long time to find them, since they are almost nearly forgotten locations. It is not easy to gain access to this world into which Gabriela Torres Ruiz intrudes only for a short while. She does not want to disturb these spaces in their quiet existence. These locations emit something magical, could tell many tales, if they had not already succumbed to their own silence by the passage of time.

Simultaneously, Gabriela Torres Ruiz's photographs seem intent on holding onto just that one moment in time. It is that instant of a blowing curtain or the playfulness of sunlight frozen into time indefinitely expanded. Both levels of time merge in these images – photography being an art form devoted only to the moment and therefore subject to inherent contradictions on a time line. Photography always shows the present moment in it's past state: past and present simultaneously, though certainly not a whole span through time such as decay or memory.

These images convey to us a strange sensation of timelessness, rendering their places unreal. In photography, the suspension of time manifests itself in a rather uncanny way: it stalls. There is this mysterious point of presence, a strange congestion which is the epitome of stasis. Photography never refers to the time ahead, it does not reveal the future, bestowing it with pathos and melancholy.¹

Turning from these magically enchanted interior spaces towards the respective counter image, one looks upon wide, unspoiled landscapes spreading out almost majestically in their *primaeval* dimension. The contrast to the decaying interiors could not be bigger; it is sharpened by the sublimity of nature.

This view on nature inspired Gabriela Torres Ruiz to her series she worked on between 2009 and 2015: It was a fascination for the nature of Iceland. Humans are only occasional guests in this inhospitable expansive landscape where nature rules with *primaeval* force, the Anthropocene not yet commenced.

The motive for this intensive engagement may also be founded biographically. Gabriela Torres Ruiz grew up in Mexico City, which, for a long time, was the largest city in the world with a population of over 20 million people. The contemplation of nature is not exactly part of a citizens' daily past-time there – a vantage point which she first encountered in Europe.

The artist often takes a panoramic long shot of a landscape. There are very few objects in this primeval

1 Roland Barthes, *Die helle Kammer, Bemerkungen zur Photographie, „the bright chamber, remarks on photography“*, Frankfurt/Main 1985, p. 93 and p. 101.

environment to indicate the scale, not even a tree to hold our gaze. Brown-greenish moss and lichen cling onto rock formations whose age cannot be measured by human standards. They simply exist: beyond time and space.

However, despite all the pathos, the artist does not settle on overwhelming the viewer, she keeps her landscape within a scale that supports the view of the interior as a counterpoint. Because only the interior and exterior, seemingly opposites, conjoined into a pair, speak of the essential and the given title to the whole series: "Silence".

A tension is being created by viewing these unequal pairs together, which Gabriela Torres Ruiz conjoins into a dialogue, a fascinating and captivating circle: architecture vs nature, the finite vs the infinite, the abandoned vs freedom, destruction vs the immaculate. All formal analogies set aside, it is mainly their inherent sense of silence which unites these images, rendering them related in spirit.

Silence according to Gabriela Torres Ruiz is to be understood as something all-encompassing rather than just a mere absence of sound. The expanse and variety of silence unfolds itself within these images of nature. The wealth and heterogeneity of this infinitely solacing silence seems to be almost synaesthetic. Contrary to these, there seems to be a somewhat melancholy darkness clinging to the interior spaces. The hollow sound of dying voices seems to be still written into these walls. Whenever a human ear approaches, they seem to echo, not quite submerged into peace. It is this very multitude, the variety of silences conveyed by these photographs, which is so amazing. The over-all view on these diptychs broaden the view onto a silence in all its various qualities as a form of abundance and wealth, a moment of happiness, but also in its gloomy aspects it seems to almost succumb to serenity.

Silence can be sensed here as a loss of timeliness; time as a human measurement is not important any more. "Spaces in time", unfathomable time spans, are being passed passed through. They reach back to the world's very origins. A reference to infinity seems obvious in view to these spacial and temporal dimensions. The viewers glance at the end of Gabriela Torres Ruiz's book is purposefully directed towards heaven to mark a beginning and the end.

What an idea for us, who are allowed to live here; how would our planet sound like without humans? Unimaginable and for us, who are marked by high-speed capitalism, post industrialisation and digitalisation a possibly promised paradisaical state? Gabriela Torres Ruiz pictures belong to a different, past or imagined world. In the beginning of the 19th century, a romantic view on nature had been developed in Germany at a time when it seemed already threatened by industrialisation. Nature, at this point in time became a conscious counterpoint, the subject of literary and artistic contemplation. Gabriela Torres Ruiz mentions among her artistic role models, besides Anselm Kiefer and others, the romantics Caspar David Friedrich and Arnold Böcklin.

Torres Ruiz's photographs are often steeped into a shadowy semi-darkness. These are images of an in-between state, night is approaching, time for the subconscious and dreams. The images of twilight carry a certain inherent magic, a rest of the unfathomable, not fully explicable, which fascinated the surrealists and romantics so much.

The 120 year old text from Friedrich Hölderlin's „Hyperion“ may be read quite easily as a literary description of Gabriela Torres Ruiz fascinating photographs, when it says:

„(...)O Blessed Nature! I know not how it is with me when I raise my eyes to your beauty, but all the joy of Heaven is in the tears that I weep in your presence, beloved of beloveds! My whole being falls silent and listens when the delicate swell of the breeze plays over my breast.

Often, lost in the wide blue, I look up into the ether and down into the sacred sea, and I feel as if a, kindred spirit were opening its arms to me, as if the pain of solitude were dissolved in the life of the Divinity.

To be one with all—this is the life divine, this is man's heaven. To be one with all that lives, to return in blessed self-forgetfulness into the All of Nature—this is the pinnacle of thoughts and joys, this the sacred mountain peak, the place of eternal rest, where the noonday loses its oppressive heat and the thunder its voice and the boiling sea is as the heaving field of grain.

To be one with all that lives! At those words Virtue puts off her wrathful armor, the mind of man lays its scepter down, and all thoughts vanish before the image of the world in its eternal oneness, even as the striving artist's rules vanish before his Urania, and iron Fate renounces her dominion, and Death vanishes from the confederacy of beings, and indivisibility and eternal youth bless and beautify the world.(..)² (Friedrich Hölderlin, Hyperion, p. 3-4)

*[Text by Dr. Sabine Ziegenrucker, September 2018]
(English translation by Keike Twisselmann)*

² Friedrich Hölderlin, Hyperion, 1797-1799, zit. nach Traum und Wirklichkeit, Deutsche Romantik aus Museen der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, Ausst.kat. hg. v. Jürgen Glaesemer, S. 130.