



Lucía Vallejo Garay



A place to rest forever

Begoña Torres

The interest for the past is, in reality, an escape from one's own time. Nietzsche's message of "eternal return" is always accompanied by the constant questioning about one's own existence. Time is a circle; past eternity and future eternity are not straight paths, but rather, end up meeting each other. The memory of the past acts in the present as an unconscious motivation.

The initial origin of this idea is in the poetics of the "sublime" and its recovery from the historical and religious component. The Romantics, in their flight from society, in their disillusionment and ennui, took refuge in inner space, aspiring to the infinite, the supernatural, the understanding of beauty as a symbol of what was concealed.

This disenchantment of the artist for the life of his times, finally pushes him to adopt a sole solution: withdrawal into inactivity and dream. The works of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, of Gautier – let us remember his *Roman de la Momie* (1858) or *Une nuit de Cléopâtre* (1839) – or of Baudelaire, passing through the Decadent movement, Poe or Huysmans, among many others, make references to cosmologies and mythologies that are remote, but deeply rooted in the collective subconscious.

Neither is this current alien to our times. Dieter Roelstraete, in "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art" accurately observes that one of the decisive ironies of our times is the fact that a great part of the most advanced artistic production concerns itself (in its choice of materials as well as techniques, in form and in content) with the ancient, the obsolete, the out-of-fashion, the past. Works of art are interpreted as the shavings, fragments of an unknown, irretrievable whole.

Fragmentation has always been a condition proper to seeing the past. Man has only had the chance to know this past through its archaeological remains, its fragments. Many artists of modern times have discussed the evocative power of these interesting "splinters".

It is precisely here where I want to place Lucía Vallejo's installation for Tabacalera's La Fragua exhibition hall. Here, the artist has managed to turn a market architecture of industrial cast into an archaic and anthropological setting, where the echoes and niches of death reverberate.

Lucia manages to accentuate the dramatic, ambiguous and mysterious character of the space, falsifying reality, intensifying its similarity to a diorama and evoking an impression of artificiality. It could be said that we have suddenly come upon a funerary chamber in ancient Egypt where several mummies who somehow seem to have kept themselves preserved in a sort of funerary urn in which to remain unchanging and immobile are resting, like sleepers encapsulated out of a science fiction film.

We could say that the artist has built a “reliquary” located, moreover, in the exhibition hall of a possible museum – the new sanctuary, a place where all funerary furniture is religiously collected in a reserved area, like the treasures the pharaohs buried.

E. Jünger compared the tombs of ancient Egypt to our contemporary museums, underscoring their relative equivalence: both are concerned with keeping death and disappearance at bay.

As though they had survived a catastrophe, the pieces of this installation are isolated amongst themselves and in permanent dialogue with this chosen space: a strange and magical place outside time, where they seem to breathe slowly and listen peacefully to each other.

Nevertheless, life in its real sense is totally absent. These figures are the “others”, images of the dead; sober, depersonalized and schematic, which attempt to represent the “idea” of men and, in this specific case, women as fossil records.

This is also the representation of the organic and the inorganic, of the living and the dead, and because of this has much to do with the fetish. Fetishes make things out of persons, dividing their bodies into parts that become material elements or objects that are easily touched. An image of the unity between life and death, like a vibrant spiritual cord managing to bind both worlds.

Although these sensations may seem proper to something very distant in time, the reality is that many contemporary artists have exploited the repugnance and discomfort they produce in viewers. Just by way of example, we can cite the secular reliquaries of Damien Hirst, who shows the same taste for dusty, spent materials, or his methacrylate boxes containing “embalmed” animals, which recall those test tubes of human remains or malformed foetuses collected by old science museums.

Lucia nonetheless always employs delicate symbolism, consciously avoiding anything that may suggest corporal, visceral, putrid or abject proximity.

Unreal and allusive in character, her installation is a scenario born of artistic, literary and even cinematographic images slumbering in our subconscious and ready to explode at the slightest noise.

As was to happen with the *Wunderkammern* – chambers of wonder or cabinets of curios that sought to systematically collect everything existing in the world into a dream of total scientific knowledge that would include everything extraordinary or unheard-of; stones, shells, skeletons of peculiar animals, human bodies, foetuses, fossils, mummies, ruins, etc. – this exhibit contains within itself something enigmatic, something that must be deciphered, like an emblem.

This also has many connections with Dutch still life painting – *vanitas vanitatem*, the “vanity of vanities”, and *memento mori*, “remember you must die” – underscoring that so many of the things occupying our time are really ephemeral, in a world where nothing is permanent, nothing is important.

Life is ephemeral, but its imprint might persist indefinitely. Lucia is interested in traces almost wiped out, ruins understood as footprints and evidence (or announcements) of the existence of something prior, to which it is possible to return only obliquely, through evocation.

Interested in the emotional qualities of materials, in the gap between painting and the sculpted form, in the object as embodied metaphor, she manages to create an image that oscillates between the allegorical and the decorative, an ambiguous relationship between sculptural form and painting “incarnated” in a place, which creates space; a “body”.

Ground-breaking artists had already begun to take pictorial practice across uncharted ground that could be categorized as an *expanded field*. It was a rupture with the bounds of easel painting, abolishing the window



and mirror dialectics on which the foundations of the space for pictorial representation had rested since the Renaissance.

The painted form expands, released from the surface of the canvas to acquire independent existence in three-dimensional space. The transition from painting to object also marked a turning point in the work of Lucia, who, since her beginnings, experimented with the limits of frontal and static vision, with the restrictions imposed by the stretcher, the physical delimitation of paint, and the visual and plastic ambivalence of objects.

The comparisons that the artist makes between container and content, material and colour, object and surface, form and space, also require an intuitive response from the visitor, who may wander inside the exhibition space and between the pieces, which

stimulates senses other than sight, affecting the body of the viewer itself.

The mummies are not portraits. They have no differentiated features, but they do serve as plastic symbols, with sexual identity (gender) and a textile wrapping that, like skin, seems to cover a body. It could be said that the textile material – the canvas – softens the profile of the solid figure it is assumed lies beneath.

They have taken on the value of an archaeological discovery, moving in the terrain of excavations; they have something visionary, chimerical, since they make it possible to hear voices that had been inaudible for a long time, buried, attempting to make sense of things beyond grasp: the passage of time and the narration of our transit through the world.

Memento [Mori] and Golden Reason: The Smile of Mummified Figures

María de Fátima Lambert

“ If I take a moment in time, that moment is neither today nor tomorrow, nor yesterday. But if I take the present, that includes all time ”

Meister Eckhart, *Treatises and Sermons*

“ Memory is that fictitious clarity of superimpositions that annul each other. Meaning is that kind of map of criss-crossed operations, like scars of successive blows ”

Ana Hatherly, *351 tisanas*

“ The sea raises an archaic smile
Of statues —as though by mistake—
Sometimes they cross glances
(Where is the old hesitation of
the journey?) ”

Sophia de Mello-Breyner, *El sol el muro el mar*, Islas

Memento mori is an archive of simulations where light is silent (like the title of the 2007 Carlos Reygadas film).

In iconography and in the terms of western art history, *memento mori* is the designation given those paintings on themes considered to point out or warn about the transitory nature of life, the

awareness that everybody must “remember thou art dust”, that one must flee the mundane, and the vanity that seduces mortals. Curiously, despite its use of the Latin expression, the Classical world recurred more often to the motto *carpe diem*, remitting us to a dichotomy of understanding on advising us to enjoy life, since death was certain.

The consolidation of Christianity fully introduced the myth of paradise, gradually increasing the significance and scope of the idea of *memento mori*. Nevertheless, in essential terms – whether we expound on the maxim *carpe diem* or *memento mori*, admission of human mortality is an irreversible fact behind the iconic character of artistic creations holding symbolic and even allegorical value. During the Middle Ages, the literal terms of the concept were defined and its visual elements determined, which would result in explicit and direct iconography, such as skulls, hourglasses, Death wielding his scythe or dealing cards and throwing dice on the terrestrial globe (e.g.), a corpse shown as a skeleton, etc. – in a word, all those visual symbols recalling the ephemeral dimension of humanity.

“ Our life is a journey
Through Winter and Night,
We look for our way
In a sky without light ”

Song of the Swiss Guards. 1793

Thus reads the epigraph to Louis Ferdinand Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night*. The concept of the ephemeral implicit in this conceptual framework –both ontological and anthropological– was assimilated and spread by European culture, assuming rhizomatic meanings in artistic praxis,

which simultaneously confronted it as an expression of aesthetic seduction and an irreversible threat to the human element. It may be underscored that, initially, the designation “ephemera” applied to fragments, objects, artefacts, etc. included in collections, despite their not having such intention or function at the outset (papers, fabrics, different types of small or medium-sized objects of no lasting value for personal or family use, etc.). Such objects were proper to a period of time in human life. They made temporality explicit, measured in the linear terms of the mundane, beyond the cycle of eternal recurrence expressed by the sacred, which, by analogy, associates to the funerary rites of the Egyptians. On its side, the metaphor of the journey is poetically articulated in the irrevocability of the ephemeral in an existential dimension. The mummy, with its hieratic appearance, stabilizes the momentum of the voyage. The draped fabrics signify the unequivocal impulse of flight and travel beyond unsurmountable limitations.

Related to the [literary and] pictorial category of *memento mori*, vanitas art accounts for another subtype belonging to the genre of still life. Both proliferated above all starting from the 17th century, depicting skulls, mirrors, clocks, candles lit or extinguished, fruit or flowers. Other objects are also valid as symbolic elements for expounding on the condition of mortality, and musical instruments, books, wine, etc. have been represented in European painting, giving us to understand that everything in life is vain. The term *vanitas*, in the sense adopted by theologians, philosophers, artists and aesthetes, comes from the *Book of Ecclesiastes* [1:2] “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher ... all is vanity”. During that period, general religious conviction consisted of believing that life on Earth was simply a preparatory transition for eternal life after death. In the continuum of artistic production and, above all, in modern and contemporary art, other visual elements of symbolic value were identified, adding to the *iconology* in the wake of Cesare Ripa.

“ Your mummy is in the British Museum
among the sad rows of the second floor. (...)
Thus you dried up serenely, while
what you were was quickly lost
in the human memories you inhabited. ”

Jorge de Sena, *Artemidorus*, *Metamorphoses* [Poem II]

In Lucía Vallejo’s case, the mummies form part of the iconographic glossary systematizing the symbols of *memento mori* quite explicitly and legitimately.

The mummies symbolize the human element in a “state of suspension”, but not exclusion from that category, by virtue of the meaning and pragmatism that the Egyptians attributed to them. This also applies to the succession of “shrouds”, rigid and extending in their curved baroque folds, luminous and empty golden wrappings embodying the negation of death. Mummification was a position of negation, in which death is understood as a passage. Through a chain of premeditated actions, mummification was assumed as method and ritual, fulfilling its role in the negation of death and aspiring to “annul” it in a given act that would persist in other, more diluted and less anthropomorphically direct circumstances – portraiture is numberless in its forms, first drawn, painted or sculpted, and, more recently, photographed and recorded on videotape or in cinema. On another hand, funerary masks continued to be present in symbolic cultural (and artistic) practices, applied to persons whose memory it was needful to perpetuate. To oppose the movement of time that does not allow for permanence, for bound and anchored reminiscence, immobilized so as not to be seduced by the voluptuousness of death, perhaps... since

“ ...dreams do not [survive]. Prometheus Unbound shall fade ...
Time deals hastily with them who deal hastily with it.
Saturn eats his own children ... ”

Fernando Pessoa, *Páginas de Estética e de Teoria Literárias*

The bodies, the mummies ascend, situated in that territory of transition. In a certain way, we are in a “golden temple” that propagates silence. The suspension of the ordinary is the artist’s decision, transcending the ascendancy of objects and channelling it towards the immaterial. In other words, despite the reverberation of the three-dimensional elements represented by the mummies quasi-embodied, there is flight towards the immaterial; a clamour.

“ ... I stop including myself
Within me. There is no
Here-within or there outside.
And the desert is now
Turned upside-down.
The idea that I move
Cannot recall my name. ”

Fernando Pessoa, «*Episodes - The Mummy*», *Poems*

The viewer accessing the hall, approaching and situating himself at closer distance, encounters a grand scenario. A certain vocation to the grandiosity and fear qualifying and representing experience of the sublime subsists. The eleven three-dimensional elements are enhanced by an unexpected approach, since it is not usually possible to appreciate mummies in aesthetic

terms. It could be said that the experience they convey is characterized by ascension to a state of spontaneous sublimity.

The eleven female mummies heighten the tremor that experiencing the sublime may inspire. In dialectic terms, they are located between the two opposite poles that 20th-century art surmounted and abetted: between the expansiveness and/or predominance of aura in art and its eradication/annihilation [destruction]. The mummy, in a borrowed extrapolation such as this, could by analogy and metaphor externalize the paradox of a certain definition of art [modern and contemporary].

The sculpted pieces of so much density penetrate us viscerally through their simulation of absence, of non-existence – viscera transposed and portrayed in the concealment that the strips of cloth encase in the act of simulation. In other words, in Lucía Vallejo's three-dimensional pieces, under the stigma and designation of "mummy", there [perhaps] presides the obsession to redeem the inevitability of death through a glamour that excites and deceives the viewer. Lucidity rapidly asserts itself over the shock provoked by a tragic scenario that dominates the lesson that the archaic Greeks have taught us: that expressive arts are capable of propitiating extreme experience, engendering redress for the deepest repressed impulses. Catharsis, achieved through excessive crescendo [pathos], was a guarantee of mental health [our Greek forbears had previously noted this on observing a strategy with the audience, showing how the aesthetic effect of the arts on the public is an act that is lost over time]: radical emotional experience and the release of dramatic excess demanded remission from pain and suffering. Thus, human beings detached themselves from the constructs that their own humanity unequivocally created and imposed upon them.

A mummy shows a related threefold function on being artefact/remains, relic/body and artwork/museum piece, thus transcending far beyond the literal condition of individual body, which is, almost always, also anonymous. The body, in a mummy, becomes an absence. It stabilizes, it is suspended. A time-transcendent psycho-affective mapping of lost individuality, overtaken and possessed more by social than by [inter]subjective concerns will prevail. It is observed as a paradigm or paradox, in consonance with questions that are verbalized, but it rarely maintains its name. And it is known how the name of each person is decisive (for good or ill). Almada Negreiros says so in her 1925 novel, *Nome de Guerra*, underscoring the power and consequences of individual names. Mummies, who do not enjoy the benefit of names, are protected but do not obtain/enjoy feelings that are filtered out by that sort of protective film Clarice Lispector referred to:

“ And whoever lacks the strength to do so, let them cover every nerve in a protective film, in a film of death that lets them tolerate life ”

Clarice Lispector, *Discovering the World*, 23 November 1968

The mummy loses the affection of her lover, her husband, her children, her family, her friends ... She will subsist, living on in the legacy of her subjects, in generational and historical proximity. The corpse, progressively weakened, shows evidence of the drive for subsistence, despite the irreversibility of the corporal; hence, death, which is the simultaneous destruction of the "self" and the "ego". "Quieter than a mummy" is a very common expression in Portugal when referring to someone who does not know, or cannot or does not break his silence. It thus bears a burden of impotence or a decision to remain silent, not to communicate. In another sense, it means to suspend dialogue and so many other arrangements as may be extrapolated, depending on the context of what is expressed. On another hand, proverbs and popular sayings commending and lauding the wisdom of silence are numberless. Silence is gold.

Lucía Vallejo's mummies stoke the need for questions in contemporary society; they require us to explore a corridor (in the mastaba/exhibition hall) where the riddles are not those of a sphinx, but rather lie within ourselves. The mummies are astute, domestic and ambiguous, existing between the reality of bodies of window display mannequins and the fictional reality of turning into figures of gold and fabric. Gold and fabric are almost antagonistic materials: they symbolize wealth and poverty. Nevertheless, they are equal in the silence, in the hieratic character they depict in the installation *Memento Mori* by

Lucía Vallejo, since gold arrests, and the fabric pressing around the bodies renders them even more immobile.

The magnificence of gold has covered churches since the Baroque, mingling with the shadows and striking fear into the hearts of visitors, who, from the outside, saw churches of darkened stone and massive geometry. The dread subsided until the period of the empires and the sacking of riches, along with the implicit mission of acculturation. In the case of Spain, it is associated to territorial incursions and religious architectural construction, the discovery of solid civilizations and cultures with formidable and perfected detailed attributes. Mummies distilled the density of aesthetic strangeness raised to a degree of higher appreciation. Masterful details characterize some of those enduring relics that we are able to admire in museum settings.

The Spanish golden age, even now – whether in the European or South American imagination – offers ambiguous routes that move between the contemporary consciousness of a post-colonial era and the unquestioned myths of previous periods in Iberian history. It is the fascination, the voluptuousness applied to the making of superior poetic and artistic artefacts and creations that we read, see and enjoy. That propagate themselves in fantasies that always placate us.

Lucía Vallejo's mummies are touched by gold; they glow. They might be thought to have been hit by a Midas-touch effect – a prohibited and punishing gesture. Not because the mummies had overriding ambitions, showed impulsiveness and hungered for power: *Turn iron (or stone) into gold by touch*. The living body or artefact touched by Midas lost its existential condition, turning into gold and dying, converting the king into a pariah. In the case of the purple mummies, it is perhaps the exact opposite that the public should perceive. In the absence of voluptuousness, they were punished by history. These are ideas that emerge from the symbolic burden, the multiple meanings that gold embodies. The ages of the world in Greek mythology still hold sway over our fantasy and frequently serve as metaphors: ages of Iron, Bronze, Silver and, without a doubt, Gold.

In an era where artists privilege the notion of archives (in immaterial form) with regard to the diverse substances comprising these, Lucía Vallejo develops an aesthetic discussion that affects their symbolic effectiveness and the repercussion of her refined and erudite works, allegories that the audience can access, expanding upon their own interpretations, extrapolating contents and images. Some helpful questions could be raised: how does one observe, analyse or interpret, how should the audience evaluate the different senses in which archives are transfigured into works perpetuated in contemporary art? How does one confront the variants arising from the philosophies of the imagination as regard conceptual bases to systematize (and stimulate) visions that prove to be of greater intensity, influencing the global situation of western European society with regard to what its history attributes to these, as well as what objectively happened?

Pre-Columbian civilizations inundate us with objects, artefacts and works to be taken along three axes: aesthetic value, artistic value and "commercial" value. All these values are subject to the symbolic value they are acknowledged by intertemporal dominance.

The work of Lucía Vallejo offers reflections on silence, on the manner in which it emanates, taken within the matrices of the western imagination. To meet this supposition, the sculptress withdraws into a mythical period long before in time: she evokes these constructs in the morphology of these eleven anonymous figures wrapped in themselves that show the relentlessness of destiny. They neither simply exhale nostalgia nor mere melancholy. They call upon us and warn us so that we desire to act, displaying themselves beyond the conventional skin that "mummies" possess in our culture. Converging in them are superimposition, the opaque density of historical time, all those names that remain to be said and are no longer called beloved. Mute beneath the strips of untainted and luminous cloth, they radiate from within the redeeming identity that can finally restore the power of speech ("Speech is silver, silence is gold".)



Lucía Vallejo and the golden ages Blanca de la Torre

“ Whosoever knows this formula shall remain intact on earth, close to Ra, and shall have a wondrous burial, close to Osiris. Knowledge of this formula is very useful to man in the Beyond. Bread offerings shall not lack and he may come before (Ra) in the course of every day. This has been truly effective millions of times. ”

Chapter 71, *Book of the Dead*

A large golden portion of wall by way of altarpiece is accompanied by eleven mummies in a state of levitation, beneath which their earthly shadows project through cloth saturated in gold, achieving a sophisticated play of space with an elegant choreography.

Coherent with her previous work, Vallejo takes one more step in her way of sculpting paint, tearing it off the stretcher frame. It has been some time since this artist began to carve her canvas, decomposing the paint and modelling her forms to free-standing pieces in a process of deconstruction and reconstruction; a process entailing extraction from the canvas that is here

revealed as an emphatic and severe installation, where every piece affirms its autonomy while reinforcing the almost operatic character of the sculptural ensemble.

It is said that for Michelangelo, sculpture was a simple question of removing everything unnecessary from a block of marble. A certain Michelangelesque *pathos* is also contained in Vallejo's work, in this gesture of stripping the sculpture contained in painting, in releasing it from its two-dimensionality. To the renaissance artist, "good painting is the kind that looks like sculpture".

Vallejo's work, although simple and bare in appearance, contains the entire history of art in one gesture. It speaks of metamorphosis, processes of transformation, media, forms, bodies, material.

Her work, moreover, enables us to follow multiple threads in the history of art, one of which could be gold. Since its appearance six thousand years before our day, during the golden age of the Palaeolithic, it has been an element bound to the history of civilizations, to their peaks and their decadences.

The first examples appear as early as Prehistory, one of the oldest being a votive chariot found in Trundholm (Denmark), done in gold and bronze as an offering to the sun god and dated around 3,000 B.C.

It was to be Egypt which would consolidate itself as the greatest gold-producing power of antiquity, achieving one of its peaks during the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Lucía Vallejo herself found inspiration in the mummy of a woman to be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Madrid, the cartonnage of which corresponds to that same dynasty. Egyptian mummies from the royalty and noble classes



were usually covered with masks of gold, a metal also largely present in the funerary furnishings that accompanied them. Vallejo's mummies are shaped from mannequins, likewise of women, wrapped in that type of sacking, a material that may also serve us in tracking another of those possible histories of art.

For the Phoenicians, gold was the objective of their business transactions. Even Herodotus points to the exchange of merchandise for gold that the Carthaginians plied along the coasts of West Africa. It was to be during the period of Constantine when it became mandatory to pay taxes in the precious metal.

Vallejo's work calls to both spirit and matter, reminding us of the telluric relationship between gold and death – in Egyptian funerary rites, but as well among the Greeks, who placed gold coins on the eyes of the dead (or gave them a golden branch) to pay Charon upon crossing the Styx, which served as the border to the underworld.

Here in Greece, it was to be mainly the Aegean islands and the coastal regions that counted as the principal sources of gold. Crete would become famous for the treasures of King Midas during the Minoan era, which possibly gave rise to the well-known story about the king who turned everything he touched into gold.

But Greek gold was possibly better-known through its myths than its history, such as the tale of Jason and the Argonauts, a group of heroes who sailed on the Argos in search of the golden fleece, a feat they would finally achieve thanks to the aid of Medea, who was in love with Jason. Or through the daughter of the king of Argos, Danae, imprisoned by her father out of fear that the prediction of an oracle who augured that he would be assassinated by a son of hers would come to pass. That would not impede Zeus from turning into a rain of gold and falling upon her, leaving her pregnant with Perseus, who would finally fulfil the fateful prophecy. And how can we forget the golden apples from

the garden of Hesperides, which gave immortality – two concepts bound together up to this day – and the first of the tasks that were assigned to Hercules.

If we are to look at another historiographer, Pliny the Old (23-75 C.E.) points out that the first gem in history was the ring that Zeus obliged the liberated Prometheus to wear, a stone "mounted in a horn of gold kept in the Roman Temple of Concord". This author gives the origin of this material as a region in India where the ants dug it up.

“ Therefore we searched around everywhere by ourselves and by our agents for an abundance of precious pearls and gems, preparing as precious a supply of gold and gems for so precious an embellishment as we could find; and convoked the most experienced artists (...) ”

Panofsky, E., *Abbot Suger on the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Art Treasures*.

During the Middle Ages, the Byzantine and Carolingian Empires would use gold for its symbolic aspect, both political and religious, although book illumination and the decorative arts were to reflect best the mark of power underlying the use of this material.

These allegorical attributions were well-understood by the man who would lay the foundations for Gothic art and the opulence associated to all religious art forms: Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis (1140), advisor to Louis VII of France, who opposed the aesthetic ideas of Bernard of Clairvaux, the driving force behind Cistercian influence. For Suger, gold and riches brought men closer to God, as churches were not merely temples for prayer but also places where lay persons contemplating the light that came in through the glazed windows, striking the gold, would feel the reflection of divine light.

In this age, we find the relationship between the mineral and the myth in both Rhenish gold and the ring of the Nibelungs – a Germanic legend that would later inspire the four Wagner operas – and in the extensive discussion we would open, were we to think of alchemy.

“ (...) Ransack'd the Center, and with impious hands Riff'd the bowels of thir mother earth For Treasures better hid. Soon had his crew Op'nd into the hill a spacious wound And dig'd out ribs of Gold ”

Milton J., *Paradise Lost*

Gold would continue dominating Renaissance culture, that historical and cultural category brought to us by Vasari, which still persists as a reference for eras of western development: Fra Angelico, Masaccio, Piero de la Francesca... but as well for Brueghel and Van Leyden.

Yet, it is in the Baroque, particularly in Caravaggio, where we will find more references for Lucía Vallejo: chiaroscuro, altarpieces and altars, *memento mori*, humidified cloth and a taste for theatrics, dramatic effect and complex compositions and structures.

Her fabrics – both those she covers in gold leaf and those of previous works, generally high-toned red and blues achieved with pure pigment – adopt the same Baroque movements and dynamism: that slow and violent exaltation that also speaks of an undisputable mannerist influence. It could be in the work of two great women artists of that day where we might derive her fabrics and apparel: the Flemish artist Clara Peeters or the Italian, Artemisia Gentileschi.

Despite the fact that her work rings clearly of Italy and, above all, Flanders, Vallejo also finds inspiration in a pathos reminiscent of Spanish baroque sculpture. The sizing on the wrapped

mummies recalls how Gregorio Fernández portrayed skin, giving them a patina of brilliance similar to that underscoring the tension of bone and muscle in the works of this artist from Valladolid. However, we might also glimpse influences from the school of Seville, recalling those cloaks of the Immaculate Conception to which Martínez Montañés applies the technique of gold leaf *estofado*.

Then, there is the obsession with death. A rhetoric of death and life in Vallejo's work – not necessarily religious, although verging on an exercise in spirituality and solemnity – evokes that sacred iconography populated by skulls. The artist approaches *vanitas* with the same courage with which she deconstructs and constructs pictorial sculpture of her own.

It is hard to talk about gold without alluding to the pre-Hispanic and colonial. Wonderful examples of pre-Columbian art may be seen in Bogotá's Gold Museum – not necessarily symbols of wealth in this case, but of power and divine qualities. Some examples of colonial art gave rise to a wondrous syncretism of elements, such as golden Solomonic columns with decorative foliage indigenous to Peru. Golden as well the formidable armour of Hernán Cortés, of whom the legend recounts that the Aztecs mistook him for Quetzalcoatl, opening the chapter of bloody colonization masterfully portrayed by Werner Herzog in "Aguirre: The Wrath of God" (1972).

Neither was this lacking in fiction, and lands where gold did not spring from the Waters through myths

“ If I place honey [and gold] on my head, it is inferred that
I am doing something related to thinking ”

Joseph Beuys

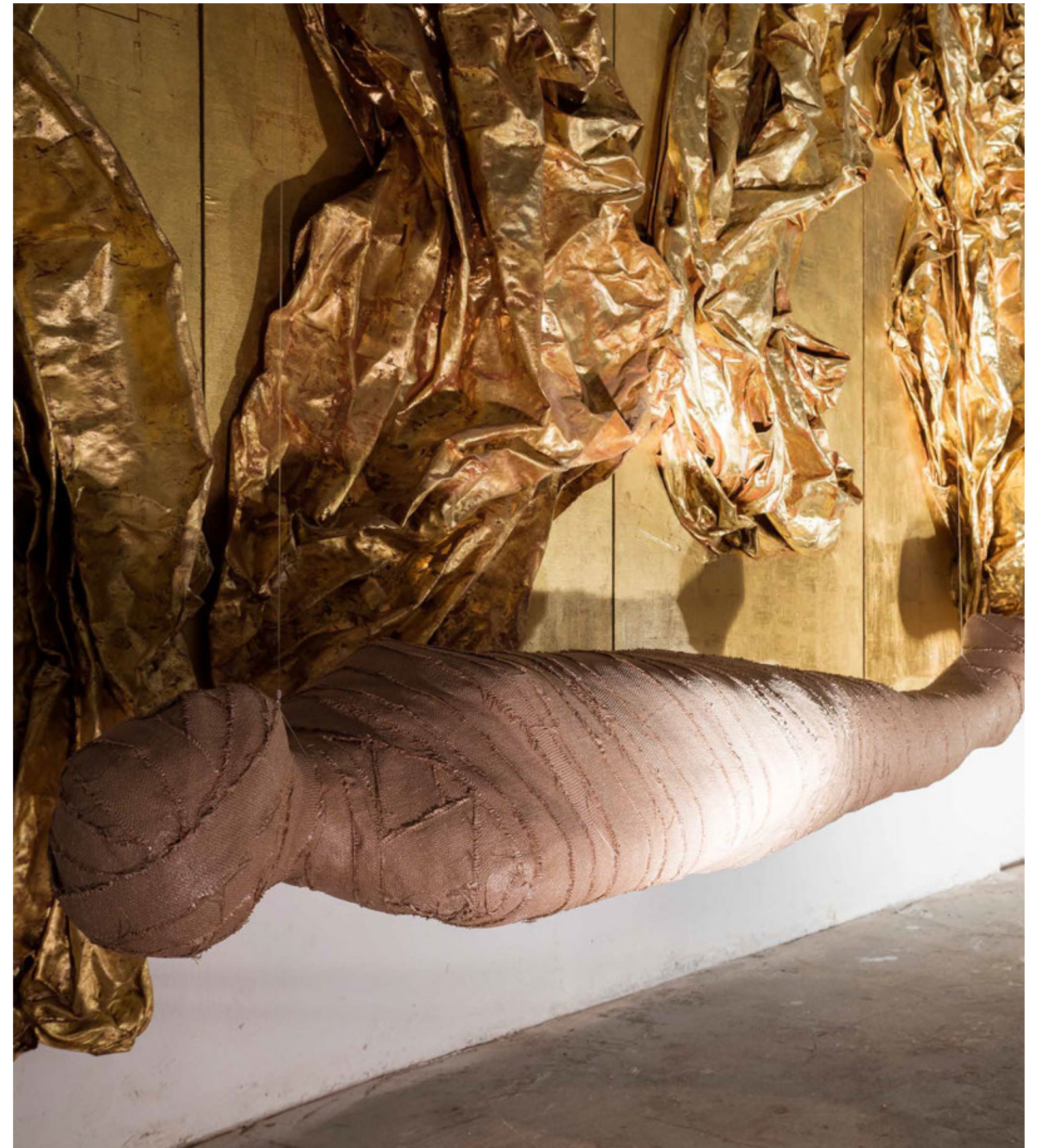
such as El Dorado or Atahualpa are few.

Romanticism, Art Nouveau, Art Deco, the Viennese Secession ... so-called contemporary art is filled with a whole range of periods and schools marked by gold. Curiously, the golden phase of Gustav Klimt would be what launched its great commercial success.

Louise Bourgeois, Orlan, Silvie Fleury, Jannis Kounellis, Georg Baselitz, Andy Warhol, Franz West, Terence Koh, Teresa Margolles ... the contemporary artists tempted to fall into the power of the precious metal are not few. One cannot avoid thinking of the horizontal golden paint of Yves Klein or of his gold body-prints, of Sherry Levine's urinal, the backgrounds in the paintings of Gabriel Orozco, Robert Rauschenberg's gold paintings, Dahn Vo's US flag on carton, Chris Burden's bullets ... In a Prague Art Festival for which I was one of the curators in three editions, a Swiss artist, Enrico Centonze, offered gold soup to viewers. Even establishments such as the Bass Museum in Miami and PS1 have devoted specific exhibits to artists working in gold.

The gold in Vallejo's fabrics substitutes time. It is painting that dies and is reborn, a process of transmutation that talks to us about the life of the material, about a certain mysticism that consumes, an old dream of homo faber: that of collaborating in perfecting matter, while ensuring one's own perfection, as Mircea Cantor would say.

This association between gold and immortality has persisted since antiquity, since it is still advertised as the star ingredient in some creams designed to combat the inevitable passage of time, or even as a component of bottled water. Signals like these are what Gilles Lipovetsky interprets as reflections of a new consumer concept, a sign of the will to transcend in our surroundings: the eternal luxury of hypermodern times.



Vallejo's way of capturing history with gesture, archaic and contemporary, calls upon these great histories, which Arundhati Roy claimed was her great secret – precisely, not to have them. Lucía Vallejo's work resolves itself in a spot-on synthesis of disparate influences: east and west, the pagan and the profane, different periods, styles and currents containing a sort of historiographic pharmacopoeia. We should be grateful for artists who remind us that the histories of art were made without periods or interruptions, and that what is contemporary is never so. Vallejo shows us the palimpsest that is the history of art itself, beyond the epochs, periods or ages. Perhaps, as Gombrich said, in reality art as such does not exist, and there are only artists.





Conversation with Lucía Vallejo
Carolina Díaz Amunarriz

Walking into the exhibit "Memento Mori" – remind us as it may of our own mortality – tells us that before death comes the experience of life.

The installation that Lucía Vallejo has done expressly for La Fragua exhibition hall is striking in its great beauty. Eleven mummies levitate barely a few inches from the floor. In their ascent to the other world, they leave behind the vestiges of their mortal existence, what were once their valuable belongings. Eleven pieces of moulded cloth. Eleven shrouds of gold that remind us of what was never ours.

In this conversation, Lucía deals with different subjects such as death, disease, fear, painting, the masters she admires, colour, creation, dreams ... In a few words, her life.

How did the idea for this exhibit emerge?

I visited the archaeological museum and took great interest in the mummies. I began to snap pictures rather intuitively, and seeing the similarities between the mummies and my way of working with cloth, I found them quite suggestive.

I began to research about the Egyptians and was able to learn a lot, not only about the mummies, but the way they applied gilt, something I had already done in many of my works.

Rationally, I thought of an installation that, although departing from the mummy, would express what I felt, which was the opposite of what the Egyptians did. I was inspired by them, but I consciously wanted to disagree with them because my ideas are radically different. I wouldn't want to bring anything along when I died, since nothing would be of use to me except my soul.

At first, my idea was to work along the lines of the mummy, but along the way this mingled with my feelings, such as fear of death, of passing time, of aging and disease. My intention was to reflect my concept of mummies, very much the contrary to that of the Egyptians; but as I executed the piece, I progressively left my imprint on it, and in this work, I reveal a lot of myself.

What is the meaning of the mummy?

The body, the mind, time and disease.

And the gold?

Wealth, beauty, earthly things.

This *anti-mummy* idea seems to me quite suggestive.

Can you talk a bit more about it?

What interests me about mummies is the psychological part about going against time. The body ages and decomposes and we want to resist that. Still, what really scares me is not the aging and the dying, but disease, more than death itself. Seeing how disease weakens a body is very tough.

I'm also hard-put to accept the passage of time although I may not agree with that way of living. I live in a society that fights against it and everything around us sends messages about the need to seek youth. And finally, I ended up making eleven mummies of eleven perfect bodies of women.

Why women mummies?

Perhaps at one time I was doing it unconsciously, but I have always been interested in my feminine part, in being a woman and being a mother and, moreover, I have always felt drawn to the work of women. I am interested in the entire universe of women.

There is always a feminine part in my work. In this one, it is female mummies; in the previous work at Casal Solleric there were dresses. I recognize myself in the body of a woman. I feel more comfortable, but I do it unconsciously. My body dictates it.

What does the mummy and the non-decomposition of the body have to do with it?

In your work you decompose the canvas, which is entirely opposed.

Coincidentally I'm making mummies that go against the disappearance of the body, but at the same time I continue to decompose the canvas. I have also been doing it with paint for quite some time because this movement that I form part of interests me a lot. I want to continue working along this line because it poses a daily challenge that personally does a lot for me.

You say you have inspected yourself. What does this have to do with you?

It's an autobiographical work. It narrates a part of my life.

Does it talk about your fears?

One of the keys to this exhibit is fear. Fear of disease, death, the passage of time and the decomposition of the body.

Is death an obsession?

I don't think so. I have the normal fear we feel for the unknown. But death for me is a suggestive theme in which I have an added philosophical interest.

The spiritual and the earthly – although these seem irreconcilable concepts, both are indissolubly present in your work. Is it an encounter or a disagreement?

My interest is in the symbolism of the contrast between both. Death stands before all that beauty because at the moment of death, everything disappears in a second and only the soul remains. Gold is a manner of symbolizing the temporal.

I have always been interested in death. In fact, the first piece I did was the skull. Sometime ago I suffered the death of someone close and that reflects in this work.

I have also been working with gold for some time. For instance, one of my first works, *Corruption*, was made of gold. It's my way of symbolizing the mundane: beautiful, but not pure.

Experiences enable us to say things better. Death the concept has become death the reality. Is this the difference accounting for the qualitative leap in your work, conveying so much more strength?

Yes, it's true. Not only have I always dreaded death; on experiencing that fear up close, it becomes more real. But it is not just fear, as I said before; I have always had an interest in it.

Do you want us to be aware of a mortality that we are always trying to keep at bay in society?

Of course I want us to be aware of our mortality and to hold it present in our lives.

In these pieces, I also want to reflect everything opposed to what society seeks regarding the passage of time. The fear of aging makes us yearn for eternal youth, like the mummies that fight against time and try to stop it. In this work, I want to underscore the importance of being able to age

Although the gilt pieces allude to the earthly, they look like shrouds. Is that your way of showing death, not just of the body but of material goods?

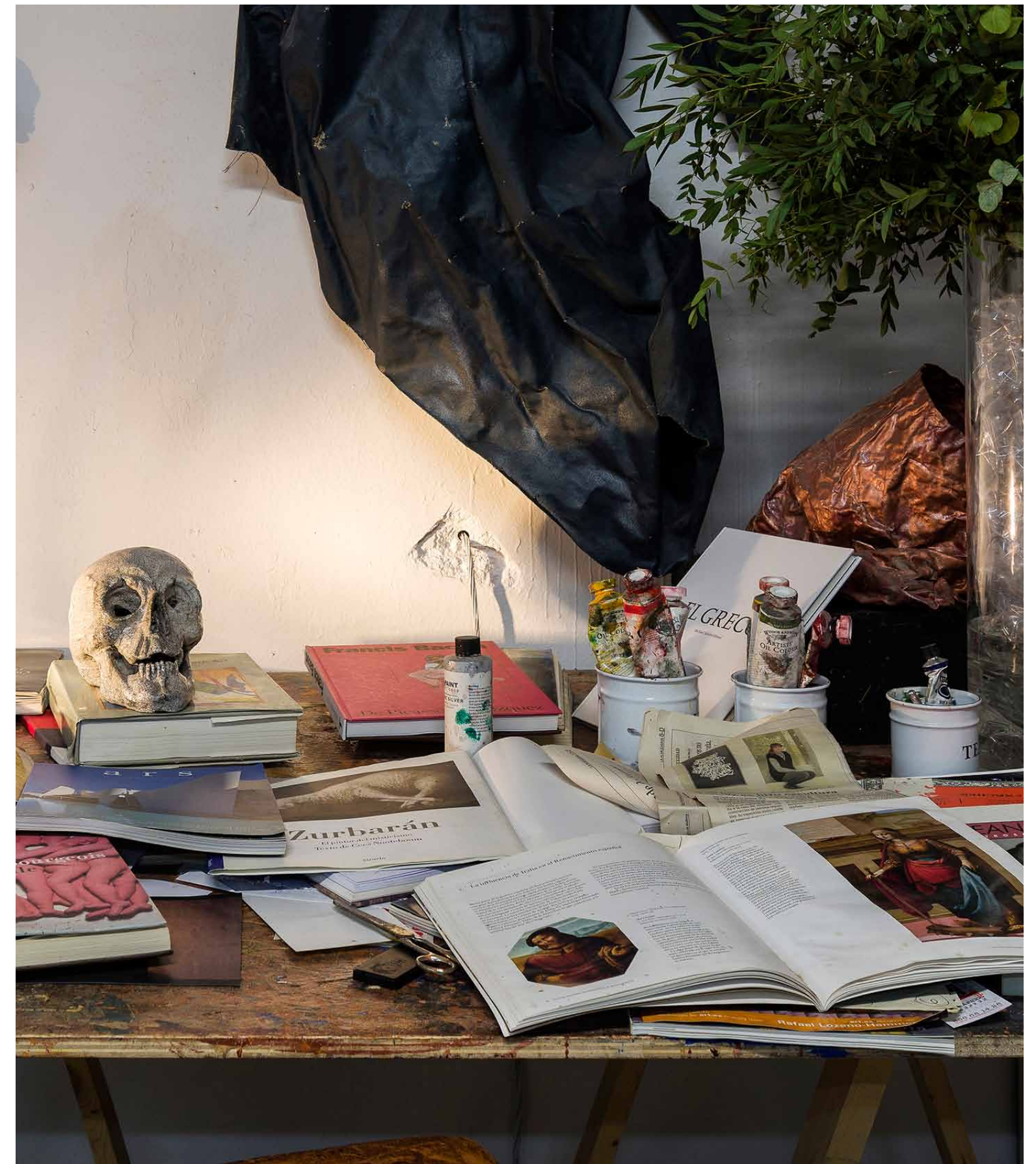
Yes, I see it clearly, they are shrouds. This is the imprint of the person, covered in gold, but still his imprint, suggesting the vacuum.

I have been exploring the vacuum for some time. The District 4 exhibit I did some years ago was entitled *Folding the Vacuum*. I did a work, *Absence*, in which an installation reflected the absence of being. It is the physical and psychological description of the vacuum left by the body once it has died.

That same exhibit showed a key work in my career, *Ophelia*, sculpting the profile of a woman's body on cloth.

Zurbarán's shrouds have made enormous impact on me and I'm very much influenced by them. The essence of the vacuum that a soul creates calls my attention profoundly. Also, when I began to research mummies, I saw my veil pieces reflected in the body imprints.

In my work *Soul*, a cloth flies as though a Zurbarán shroud were rising to the heavens. In the fabric, the earthly and the kingdom of shadows come together.



You say that when you leave, you only leave behind material goods; that nothing remains of the essence of the person, but that is not completely true. One also leaves an imprint, although this is not physical.

Yes. There is a part of being an artist that gives an answer to all this. You want to leave behind something in this world. It is one of the challenges we artists face. In works of art, you do leave behind part of yourself. It is your response to life. The only thing you can leave behind in life is art.

Through creation, you set aside your fears and fly. You confront the unknown, not just bravely but revelling in it.

I like the creative process and I'm not afraid of the blank canvas.

The whole activity entails love and hate; there are tremendous ups and downs. It's very frustrating not to be able to always materialize a concept. Execution of the work is a difficult moment because you're so immersed in it that during the process, you're only able to see the flaws. I'm referring to the technical flaws, which sometimes cloud the idea.

I take extreme pleasure in beginning to conceive works, but afterwards it turns into suffering and tedium. The moment of materialization seems less exciting, but after a while I'm once more able to enjoy and end up being satisfied with the work.

Tell us about your transition from painting to sculpture.

There's a part of the work I enjoy – going against the rules. If the canvas is flat, I want to twist and cut it. I want a two-dimensional material to have three dimensions. If the body decomposes, I want to preserve it.

Although there already was a previous time serving to bridge my work on canvas and my sculpture-paintings – I'm referring to the work, *Ophelia*. This piece was the first that transformed my work on canvas into sculpture-painting, marking the end of a period and the start of another. In it, I began to sculpt the canvas, and for the first time I used the human body, although it didn't stop being a painting because I continued to use colour and pigments.

The previous tears became folds. On the other hand, the work became less abstract. There was also conceptual change because that was the time I began to talk about death.

And from sculpture to installation? This exhibit is your second *in situ* project for an exhibition hall. The first was in Casal Sollerio, but this is more mature and more ambitious. What was the transition like from working with pieces to working with much more complex installations?

I took the biggest step in Casal Sollerio. I did an exhibit that was the logical continuation of *Ophelia*, albeit with a big twist, because the work had become an installation. I filmed a video reflecting how it was an installation and I designed it as a whole.



This type of work is much more permissive for artists, but at the same time the challenge is much bigger. The video showed how an installation emerged from its conception, how an idea arrives, all the philosophy behind it, the fears I faced; I show my personality, talk about the literature I read and the process of executing the work.

In that installation, I continued to work with the human body through the empty costumes of women. The next step brought me to the mummies.

However, the mummies brought another important advance: I no longer sculpt the vacuum because the mummy has become a solid figurative object. But I continue to use abstraction in the gilt pieces.

Once this step is taken, you can't turn back anymore. You can only move on.

Even the golden pieces are denser, losing the lightness of your previous pieces.
Why is everything heavier, with that much greater substance?

I'm entering a new phase in my work. On the one hand, I increasingly feel stronger, and on another, my interest in aesthetics is gradually waning.

The mummies could also have emerged from the folds of cloth, like *Ophelia*.
Why did you want to give them a more realistic appearance?

That's the next step. It's one more advancement. I moved from fold to fold + body and now I am partly abandoning the fold to focus more on the body.

In contrast, the pieces on the floor are more abstract and by using the golden cloth you are giving continuity to your previous work. Why do you twist the folds?

It's something instinctive. Since I was small I've made works in which I sculpted people who twisted and extended hands or feet from bodies without a trunk.

In an interview that I read about Bacon, he said he didn't want things distorted *per se*, but because he wanted to show strength. I feel the same way.

I've always been interested in expressionism. One artist that influenced me a lot was Egon Schiele. His drawings have fascinated me since my first contact with them. How they expressed emotion!

Another work that provoked the same effect in me was "The Scream" by Munch.

Speaking about your influences, I know that Bacon is a very important artist to you. What aspect of him does your work contain?

Everything about him interests me and he's an artist who has influenced me a lot, not only in the subjects he handles but also because of the strength with which he conveys them. He's a master. I share his longing to contribute something new to the history of art, and the analysis he conducts into himself is something that I also practise.

Who are the other artists you have used as models?

Lucian Freud, in his textures and handling of flesh.

Louise Bourgeois because she makes me reflect.

I like works that make me vibrate, that have a soul and that speak for themselves. That convey something to me and make me feel.

In my works, I also seek the same. I want them to express. I'd even say I want to express pain that sometimes becomes aggressive. I don't want the work to transmit sentiments such as ire, but I unconsciously discharge my anger, my frustration, my fear and my rage into it. In fact, it occurs to me that the worse my state of mind, the better I work.

In general, I find all the expressionists interesting. It is a way of life. I'm very expressive and I do therapy through creation.

Another artist who has always attracted me is Lucio Fontana. I very much liked how he was able to transform flat and conventional works into other, three-dimensional pieces by tearing. I was also interested in his more rational part, revealing a tear and looking through it. By tearing the work, he not only transgressed it but raised it to another category. He breaks moulds and that is what I want to do.

What do you hope to get out of it?

Why do things have to be a certain pre-established way? I'm attracted to the psychological part of breaking, above all, stereotypes.

Years ago, I made a work entitled *Struggling to Fit In* where I tore up paper and compressed it. This way, it changed from a two-dimensional work into a three-dimensional work. Afterwards, I put it into a case that was smaller than the piece itself, so it was hard to fit in. I closed it up, and the sculpture partly squeezed into the space and partly expanded outward.

This piece talked about how people don't fit into stereotypes. In fact, I was like that until I went to study in England, where I felt free for the first time. That country was a great discovery for me, not just artistically. There they allowed me to be creative; in a nutshell, to be what I was. I felt absolute freedom and then began to develop as an artist, although I was very young.

I did my first sculpture at 13. At that time, I already felt curiosity about taking the flat form of materials to transform them into sculpture.

On another hand, I need my work to express pain and aggression when I feel rage.

I see strength, but not aggression.

I hope so. Deep down, I don't want to transmit aggressiveness, but that's what I think emerges when I feel frustrated. The workshop brings everything out.

Then what would you want viewers to see in your work?

Above all, strength. I'm not interested in their opinion about aesthetics. My intention is not for the work to be beautiful or not, but for it to transmit something deeper that goes beyond the surface. I want the works to have their own soul. I guess that's the aim of all artists...

I remember so well a Munch exhibit that I saw in London. I couldn't stop crying, and to think he wasn't an artist who drew me in any special way.

But for example, nothing done by Louise Bourgeois has left me cold.

The conceptual component in your work is very important. What is the process like? Do you think of what you want to transmit and look for the way of doing it, or do you work unconsciously?

Both things. I try to transmit the concept, but sometimes the concept is stronger than I am.

For example, in this work I wanted to talk about the soul, the fact that you don't take anything to the other side, but afterwards things you never thought about emerge spontaneously.

You're very lively. Why do you always focus on death in your work?

Because that's what life is. Life ends in death, there is no life without death. They go together. Learning to live is knowing you could go in an instant, not suffering by thinking about it, but giving it the value it has.

I'm very much afraid of the changes in my life. When I was small I took refuge in my world of fantasy and now I find that refuge in creating works.

You're afraid of the changes in your life but you're not afraid of confronting a new work, which always entails a change. In fact, it is a great moment of pleasure. Is that your way of facing it and freeing yourself?

The creative part of conceiving something new and trying to capture it is the most exciting aspect. Constant creation has become a need. The greater the challenge, the greater the pleasure.



For you, the creative process is as important as the result itself. But in turn, the process may be divided into two: the purely creative part, which you like, and materializing the work, the more boring but necessary part. Why is it so important for you to transmit the creative process in your work to the public?

Because I find it a pity that people only remember the aesthetic part of the work. Not everyone investigates beyond the visual. I'd like them to go into greater depth and I know that the more information you give them, the more comprehensible the work can become. I don't want them to remember just the superficial, so I like to remind them that there is much more. This is one of the reasons for doing installations. They are more complex works in which many more things can be told.

It interests me for the viewer to know the origin of the resources, how the work was conceived, what I researched to arrive at it. When you understand the process, the piece holds much more interest for you.

I would not want my work to be purely aesthetic. I need to convey the concept. I reject aesthetics if it blocks viewing the essence and if the exterior can cloud the interior.

I need everything to have an explanation. That may be because I'm an art historian besides being an artist, but I give the concept the same value as the final result.

Sometimes aesthetics can be a barrier that blocks seeing who you are. When I began to work, I thought that was what I sought; consciously or unconsciously I didn't want people to see who I was, who was behind each work. Now that I've lost that fear, I feel the complete opposite: I wouldn't want the viewer not to see me.

I think this negation of beauty in works is something in the mind that doesn't fit into the reality of your oeuvre. Your first pieces where preparation was more mechanical, less thought out, but with greater aesthetic intention, were doubtless less beautiful than the later ones where you gave priority to the concept above everything else.

It's true, I've grown as an artist. Beauty lies in strength. I feel stronger, and freer to draw myself out than when I was a child.



Tell us about the materials you use. Why are you interested in pure pigments?

The use of pure pigments comes from a crisis I had at a given moment. I needed to break with every previous given and that forced me to research. I had to reinvent myself once more.

The first thing I projected was to set aside painting highlights. As a historian, I began to research our artistic heritage and found what I was looking for in old paintings. In the end, everything turned out well and my previous course had a lot to say in that.

I did my research paper on Giorgione because I was very interested in mannerism, its lengthening of the figure and its cold colours. It's a movement that has always fascinated me. Perfection had already been achieved with the Renaissance, in proportions, colours, so they had to reinvent painting and began to change perspectives, colours ... I resort to mannerism a lot. To me, it's one of the most important movements in the history of art. At the time, I regularly went to the Prado and sought my own inspiration in the classics. I began to do contemporary work based on what we have learned from the history of painting.

It was then when I began to treat pigments as they did. To manipulate, first, the canvas, without preparation, and afterwards, to prepare it as they did, with rabbit glue, fish glue. It was a great challenge for me.

Another movement that also influenced me a lot were the Pre-Raphaelites, whom I was able to know in greater depth during my stay in England.

Nowadays we are living times very similar to theirs. What was then the industrial revolution is now the technological revolution: either you jump on the revolution bandwagon or you remain in a more nostalgic era, as they decided to do.

I'm interested in the idea of a return to origins and even in the rejection of that revolution. But I don't identify with it up to the point of avoiding technology. Indeed, I use it, but I do feel nostalgia for other, more rudimentary times of high craft. Like the Pre-Raphaelites, I chose to follow my path and I like that part of the classics. I have also worked a lot on El Greco's green. I like it because it is an acid colour that inspires me.

Through my studies of Dutch painting, I have tried to revive other colours that we are losing nowadays. For that reason, research and recovery in our history seem important to me. 17th-century Dutch still life and vanitas paintings have been some of my inspirations.

These days, I continue working on the folds made by the classics. One small fragment of their paintings is a contemporary work by itself.

What would you want people not to forget about this work?

I'd like to convey the feeling of loving and appreciating life without at any time forgetting our mortal nature, since this makes us perceive the importance of things and situate them where they respectively belong. The immaterial as against the material.

But what I would really like is for the viewer to be able to feel something seeing the work. It will suggest different things to each individual and different feelings will arise. But if I manage to wake something in them, I will have achieved my aim.

M E M E N T O M O R I

L u c í a V a l l e j o G a r a y

del 28 de abril al 11 de junio de 2017

La Fragua. Tabacalera

c/Embajadores, 51. Madrid

De martes a viernes de 12 a 20 h. Sábados, domingos y festivos de 11 a 20 h. Lunes cerrado

Organiza Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte
Subdirección General de Promoción de las Bellas Artes

Transporte y Montaje expositivo

SGR Exposiciones

Comisariado

Carolina Díaz Amunarriz

Iluminación

Intervento

Coordinación

Sara Rivera

Seguro

Poolsegur-Hiscox

Diseño gráfico

Gabriel Corchero Studio

Comunicación

Conchita Sánchez



PROMOCIÓN DEL ARTE