

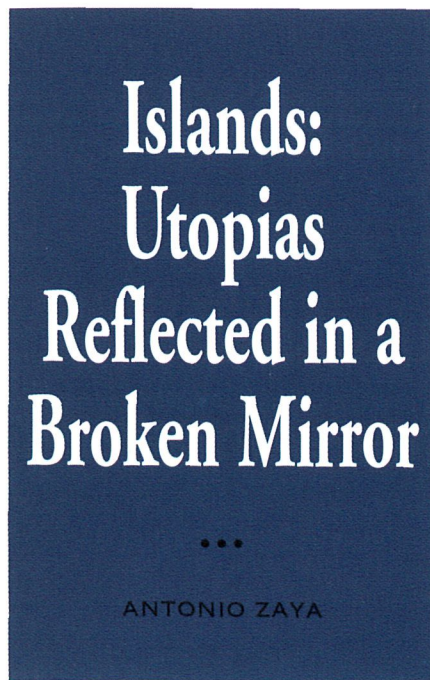
DOSSIER: ISLANDS

“The voyage of the Melampus lasted three years. It reached Tahiti, spent two months in Samoa and one in the Marquesas islands. After Perth, the islands seemed like Eden...But, unfortunately, an Eden which was not only unaware of Calvinism, capitalism and industrial slums, but also had no knowledge of Shakespeare and Mozart, scientific knowledge and logical thought. It was paradise, but it was no use, no use for anything. They continued on their travels. The ship sailed past Fiji, the Carolinas and the Salomon Isles. They continued along the north coast of New Guinea, and in Borneo a group landed, captured a pregnant orang-utan and climbed to the top of mount Kinabalu. Then they spent a week in Pannoy and two weeks in the Mergui archipelago. And after that they set sail westwards, towards the Andaman Isles...”

Aldous Huxley. *The Island*. Editorial Sudamericana (Edhasa). Barcelona, 1971.

“The last work of fiction we know is Yambulo’s Island of the Sun, which is generally considered to be the culmination of Greek poetic utopias. In it, a stock of happy men live blissfully unaware of the moral, physical and social doom suffered by the rest of humanity.

This fantastic island is circular in shape, with a total area of 5,000 furlongs. It forms part of a group of seven islands which are all similar, and



Guillermo Paneque. From video *Suave no tan alto... (un bajorreliere)*

is situated on the equator, so the days and nights are of equal duration and there are no shadows at midday. The sun is always high in the sky, and provides this imaginary place with all the benefits of its powers.

They worshipped the sun, the sky and all the celestial lights. The fact that there were seven islands, and also their circular form, show that they were designed in close connection with the movement of the planets.”

Luis Cervera Vera. On Plato’s Ideal Cities. From a speech read at his reception on 4th April 1976. Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid, 1976.

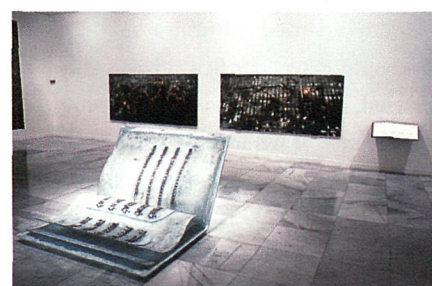
As curator of this exhibition, chief curator of the CAAM and now assistant director, Orlando Britto’s international debut is an ambitious voyage. To paraphrase Marie-José Lemarchand in her well-known introduction to Saint Brandán’s travels [1], the vessel in which Orlando Britto sets sail along with 28 artists (twice as many as the monks who accompanied Brandán) is reminiscent of the ship used by Eneas. But, as Stevenson said [2], “it is very hard now to invent a new adventure which can capture the interest of our superior sensibilities”. Perhaps this adventure, this invention, is “practically impossible”. But are the pleasures of adventures really non-existent or trivial? If there is one thing this exhibition reveals, it is (to paraphrase Borges [3]) that today, amidst the rigour of complete disorder, nothing is impossible. Most current exhibitions prefer us to forget their role as aesthetic and cultural devices, attempting instead to provide a new kind of credibility. Orlando Britto



Jacqueline Fraser.



Nikos Charalambidis.



Emilio Isgró and Guillem Nadal.

creates an Odyssey whose only key is our own question, which it answers with an unusual array of imaginary assumptions upheld by the exhibition itself; not by revealing the extent of its remote hells, but with domestic, everyday images reflected in a mirage of fragmentary over-exposure, or the multiplied rays of blinding sunlight in a burning, broken mirror.

At the round table running parallel to this exhibition [4] (also including lectures by the Cuban artist Antonio Benítez Rojo and Eugenio Padorno from the Canary Isles, which are reproduced in this issue of ATLÁNTICA), Iván de la Nuez mentioned his perplexity at being invited to participate in ISLAS: at first it seemed to make no sense at all, but once he was there, he found that the exhibition was certainly not lacking in emotions. ISLAS may lack continental, colonial motives, but it does not lack meaning, at least for island-dwellers, who have always pursued the utopia of liberation. Thus ends Jack Beng-Thi's poem published in the catalogue (volume I): "there are also nameless isles which, from birth, repeat the word freedom".

According to Luis Cervera [5], "Utopias arise in periods of unrest and imbalance, resulting from an outbreak of social or political problems; they are peaceful, even secure refuges for those who are suffering from all kinds of upheaval". We should point out that Orlando Britto is concerned first and foremost with the society in which he lives, and his main aim is to portray a contemporary aesthetic island or a kind of unprecedented cultural utopia. No one could deny that Britto has achieved his goal, nor that this is the fundamental significance of his idea and the reason for the consequent encounter of artists from more than 20 islands spread across five continents. The monumental, visionary island of this exhibition is organised conceptually (arbitrarily) by

means of a pre-established (and undiscussed) geographical illusion to which all the pieces are submitted, each fulfilling its assigned role. In the end, utopias always stem from an unreal premise (global insularity) [6] and, although they advocate an idealistic concept to which they aspire (difference), they often end up as what they are not supposed to be (identity).

Following the strict itinerary of the exhibition, we find that its beginning is in fact its end: New York, the Big Apple.



Ashley Bickerton. *Cousteau Totem (Jacques and his pudenda)*, 1993.

According to Britto, "a strange sense of unreality" envelops us when we contemplate the twilight landscapes captured by New York artist Barbara Ess, and her archipelagos of opposite faces, which reveal the sense of perpetual, anonymous isolation resulting as much from the crowded streets of the Big Apple as from the visions of vast wastelands seen by a solitary onlooker. From the start, we are stranded in a sea of unrecognisable or forgotten faces, or completely alone in front of this never-ending landscape. Neither are we compensated for this absence of others with the multitudinous, spurious visions

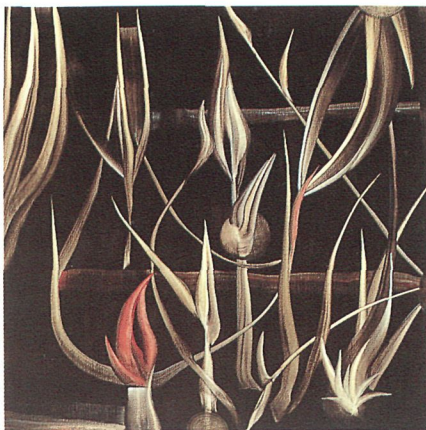
of Cypriot artist Nikos Charalambidis, in which we can recognise some of the faces that have interrogated history, geography and a mixture of the two. But, like Ess, Charalambidis provokes the same sense of vertigo with his collages and the use of tourist fantasies which question his island's multiculturalism. Instead of uniting, this insular reality divides; integration actually becomes exclusion.

The ground floor of the exhibition ends with a comprehensive selection of work by Irish photographer Willie Doherty, who portrays the debris or foundations of his "Factory", perhaps illustrating Eduardo Westerdahl's "laboratory" or Manolo Padorno's "beautiful workshop", and taking advantage of the curator's interpretation of them. This concept of initiation, of the destruction which precedes construction, is developed further on with the use of fire in the work of Ward, Nadal and Marcheschi.

On the first floor, the debris of Doherty's "Factory" gives way to a house containing another house, like a set of Russian dolls. It is the other "Factory" of Marc Latamie, from Martinique. This piece, built in wood and zinc and containing its exact replica inside, creates a dizzying displacement between the observer and the houses when contemplating the interior/exterior. It presents the different, dislocated dimensions of both container and contents, in a spiral game where the spectator loses all sense of situation and real dimensions.

Next, Ashley Bickerton from Barbados, who now lives in Bali, presents two examples of submarine archaeology; the first, made with beach debris washed ashore, is arranged like pieces in a naval museum in homage to Jacques Cousteau. The other reveals the "unhappy marriage" between fantastical characters from land and sea. In his unique allegories of the Caribbean,

Haitian artist Hervé Telemàque uses collage to represent his society's multiculturalism. In these pieces, wood and sackcloth are the povera elements used as metaphors for the fragile drift of meaning, in constant movement. Like the other Cuban artists, Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal and Manuel Mendive, José Bedia (all of whom have exhibited previously at the CAAM) creates an aesthetic meta-discourse of religious, African descent; all three artists are concerned with the transculturalism, syncretism, cross-breeding and multiculturalism of island realities. These are the concepts which form the theoretical and literary framework behind ISLAS, and they are the true linking elements among such diversity. By this I mean that islands have been, and still are, "spaces for the assimilation and continual re-processing of external cultural influences" [7], as Hideo Namba explained and Orlando Britto also said with reference to Japan. The work of Japanese artist Yumiko Sugano portrays the natural

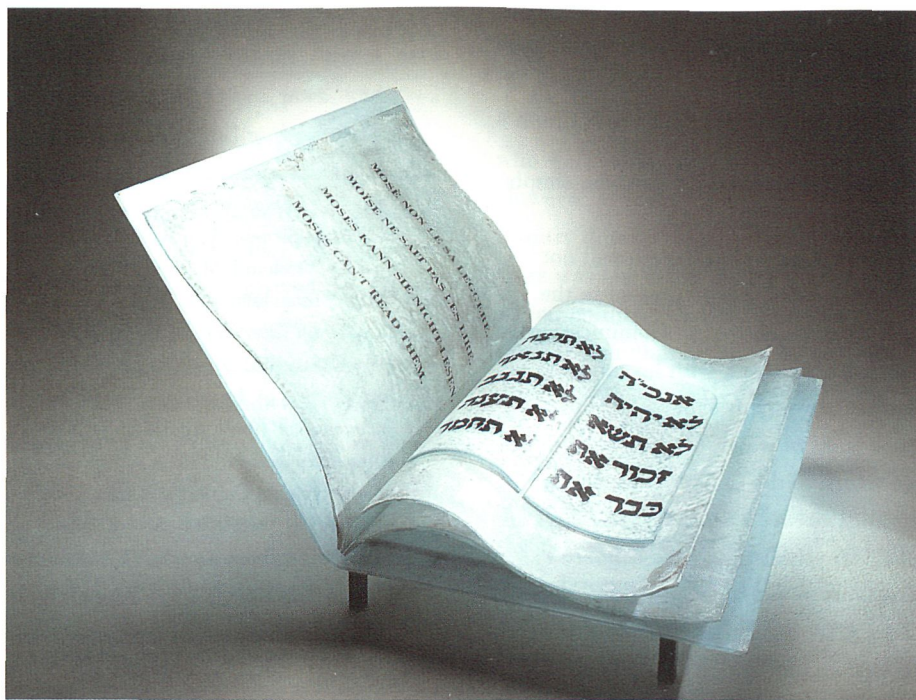


Sema Castro. *Fergel*, 1997.

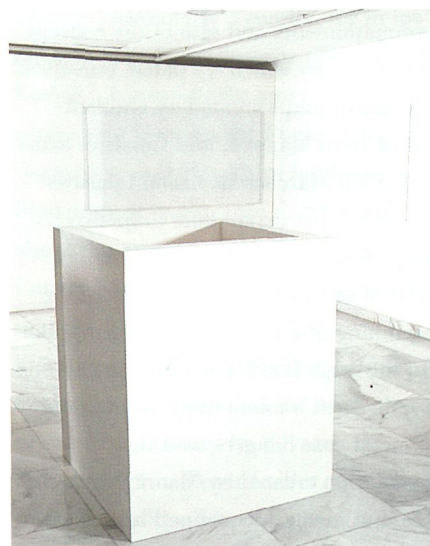
enchantment of a terrifying island fauna, ruled by storms, sharks, an imprisoning circle and countless attacks on its shores/borders, as well as the purely geographical facts. There is also enchantment in the work of Icelandic artist Sigurdur Orlygsson, where both machines and landscape, nature and technology, cohabit in a startling marine life. But Orlando Britto approaches this fantastical territory from a literary,

mythical perspective; they are poetic, utopian fables which are impossible as yet beyond the realm of art, despite Auschwitz. But, he added, this same idea of multiculturalism is also present in the sugar installation created by Jack Beng-Thi from the Reunion Isles, reminiscent of Latamie's work. And it reappears in the work of Moustaphá Dimé, from the legendary Atlantic island of Gorée (Senegal), who in turn shares the Cuban artists' interest in povera art.

On the second floor, the body, which had already been portrayed religiously by the Cubans (Olazábal, Mendive and Bedia) and fantastically by Bickerton in his "unhappy marriage", is once more the focus of attention in the work of Bernardí Roig (Balearic Isles) and Richard Reddaway (New Zealand). The former's solemn, sadomasochistic amputations are a stark contrast to the latter's cloned fragments. The ellipsis of these impossible, kaleidoscopic identities continues with the hygienic/mystic minimalism of Francis Naranjo (Canary Isles) and the intimate, film-like



Emilio Isgró. *Le Tavole della Lege ovvero la Biblia di vetro*, 1994.



Francis Naranjo. *Enquistements*, 1997.

observations of British artist Mark Waller: two installations whose sense of isolation and levitation highlight their insular nature and draw attention to their strength of expression.

In the central room on the second floor there are several pieces which stand out conceptually as well as visually. The first is a piece by Jamaican artist Nari Ward, consisting of 365 scorched baseball bats resting on a collection of oven hotplates. As Orlando Britto says, this is “a direct reference to everyday reality” in the ghettos: Harlem isolated from Manhattan (like Latamie’s house within a house). Likewise, American artist Toland Grinnell’s “Mast” is an allegory of posthumous isolation; as Britto adds, it is “a relic of his old island “Booty: The Island” (featured in a previous issue of *ATLÁNTICA*), “an attempt to preserve his old plum-cake island, which has been eternally condemned to the space of memory”.

Next to Grinnell’s “Mast” is a sculpture by Sicilian artist Emilio Isgró called “Las tablas de la ley”. This glass sculpture warns us of the fragility of the commandments and also of the concept of identity by which we define ourselves. The burnt maps created by Guillem Nadal from Majorca, and Corsican artist Jean Paul Marcheschi’s island jigsaws are ritual ‘fire ceremonies’; repetitive, fragmentary, and preoccupied with a kind of territorial cleansing before the beginning of a new cycle of redemption. On the other hand, Icelandic artist Anna Eyjolfsson’s totem made of hundreds of metal coat hangers, and the installation created by Maori (New Zealand) artist Jacqueline Fraser (whom our correspondent Jonathan Allen interviews in this issue) both use ancestral cultural elements from the surviving iconography of their respective traditions, and there are considerable similarities in the work of these two artists despite the distance which

separates them. Guillermo Paneque (Seville, Isla de la Cartuja) represents a unique island among so many others. Not because of his use of multimedia (which is shared by Charalambidis, Mendive, Latamie and Mark Waller), or the sense of isolation which is common to all the artists: his work is unique because it has the faith in patience of



Santiago Rodríguez Olazábal. *Yo desplegué las velas*, 1997 (detail).

one who waits alone, or one who simply waits.

This hope that the sea will not become a tomb is also present in the spectacular creations of Dominican artist Marcos Lora Read, with his amazing surfboard which is capable of riding huge walls of water. On this great wave we return to the Canary Isles, with a contrast between Sema Castro’s intricate plant labyrinths and Luis Palmero’s luminous minimal constructions.

After our voyage around this artistic archipelago, constantly on the move and with stopovers in Manhattan, Cyprus, Ireland, Martinique, Barbados, Haiti, Cuba, Japan, Iceland, Reunion

Isles, the island of Gorée (Senegal), Majorca, New Zealand, Gran Canaria, Great Britain, Jamaica, Sicily, Corsica, Isla de la Cartuja (Seville), the Dominican Republic and Tenerife, we will probably feel exhausted and full of questions, like after any great adventure. That is how I feel after boldly setting out on this utopian journey around these ISLANDS on your behalf. The concept of islands is in itself very complex; as Britto states, it is “a strange sort of unsolvable problem, like a spiral which goes over and over the same questions. The nearer you get, the further away you are”. And here there is the added difficulty (to use Latamie’s metaphor) of linking 28 islands which each belong to other islands in turn. The resulting feeling of helplessness haunts us whenever we look into the broken mirror of our own impossible identity, and see our differences which are not essential but irreplaceable.

In short, as Alexandr Soljenitsin wrote in “Archipiélago Gulag” when transcribing a letter written by an ex-convict: “the only people who can understand us are those who have eaten with us at the same table”.

- [1] Benedeit. *El viaje de San Brandán*. Ediciones Siruela. Translated by Marie-José Lemarchand. Madrid, 1976.
- [2] Op. cit. Introduction by Jorge Luis Borges. *La Invención de Morel*. Adolfo Bioy Casares. Alianza/Emecé. N° 393, p.9
- [3] Introduction by Jorge Luis Borges. *La Invención de Morel*. Adolfo Bioy Casares. Alianza/Emecé. N° 393.
- [4] In which Remo Guideri and Dan Cameron also participated.
- [5] Luis Cervera Vera. *On Plato’s ideal cities*. Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando. Madrid, 1976.
- [6] *The timid tree of collectivity has been singled out and defeated*, according to Foucault.
- [7] Orlando Britto. *La Provincia*. Interview with M. S. A., 18th September 1997.