

BLACK
ROSE
BOOKS



ART SPACE ECOLOGY

Two Views—Twenty Interviews

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Foreword by Edward Lucie-Smith



Pilar Ovalle selecting wood, 2006
Pirigüico Lake, IX región, Chile © Pilar Ovalle

Nature in Peace

Pilar Ovalle

Born in Santiago in 1970, and having studied fine art at el Instituto de Arte Contemporaneo de Santiago, Pilar Ovalle comes from a generation of Chilean sculptors with a sophisticated capacity of integrating material into an aesthetic language. Many of them have made an impact, emerging onto the international arts scene. The language of materials, the interlocking natural wood forms, sometimes juxtaposed with more linear elements, develops a dialogue with nature as material collaborator and voice in the medium. There is less conceptual control of the material, the process or the conception. Experience and intuition are the vernacular essence of Ovalle's sculpture just as her art is quintessentially linked to nature's processes.

Ovalle's works reference the ancient South American tradition of weaving, notably the Mapuche of Chile who used llama or guanaco wool in their weaving until the Spaniards arrived, whereupon sheep's wool was commonly used.

Ovalle uses a less mutable material, namely wood. The wood she integrates is selected and gathered along lakeshores and in the forests. The weathered aspect becomes part of the language in the art form and is present in the final artwork. The gathering of wood is a ritual for Ovalle that involves the experience of a living environment, provides a context in nature as a source for the art, and requires an eye for an interesting tree limb, branch or trunk. Pilar Ovalle's sculptures were the subject of numerous solo shows including her most recent at AMS Marlborough Gallery in Santiago in 2017.

An earlier show was chosen because the artist identifies so readily with the indigenous woods of Chile. Some tree forms, intertwined with figurative human and tree forms, could be seen at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes exhibition in 2006. In her more recent works, such as Dead Matter Emergencies (2016) exhibited at the Small Gestures Kunsthalle show in Budapest, Hungary,

Ovalle addresses the nature-culture divide challenging our lack of awareness of holistic and physical processes. The parallel comparisons are often between the human body and nature as a body.

Pilar Ovalle's sculptures express the process and experience of life. Her art embodies an ethics of human identity and reveals nature's cathartic and healing capacities, something central to both our conscious and unconscious sense of self. Ovalle's process is exacting, a language that builds on nature's language. Entropy, holistic presence, a dialogue with time about the mystery of life, life's endless cycle are what Ovalle's process and art signifies. Pilar Ovalle is embracing, absorbing, translating, building a co-aesthetic of the future.



JKG: Pilar I wanted to know when did you begin working with wood?

PO: I started with wood in my early years when I was studying art, but in those years I could not find a professor that could teach me, so I was self-educated in learning how to work with wood. I immersed myself in books about traditional carpentry and assembly, and then I moved that into my sketches and ideas. Wood for me is a living material, and I feel it is so malleable.... It gives me endless possibilities to construct on. For me wood is a vehicle towards creative form, from its origins along river shores to driftwood and sunk underwater wood, to the sawmill slabs. Wood generates a dialogue and allows itself to be heard and suggests first impressions of the emerging figures.

Pulso: Maderas and recycled wood, 2014-2016
Galeria Ana Maria Stagno/AMS Marlborough
3.50 x 3.10 x 2.00 metres, Maderas wood
Photo: Pablo Casals © Pilar Ovalle

JKG: Did you grow up in an environment close to nature?

PO: No, I did not. I was raised in an urban environment, in an apartment. Confinement generated in me a deep anxiety. When I began to travel in open spaces in nature in my early twenties I felt completely alive wandering in the woods and hills and I felt overwhelmed, and marveled at the treasures I found on the earth's floor or in and beside the rivers.

My personal practical experience in sculpture has been for me the fundamental source of knowledge that accompanies me in my work. With my process in and around wood at its source point, I discover the craft and technique I will use, and see it as a humanizing spiritual experience — nature is the central axis. When choosing wood my field observations are mainly based on two aspects: first, wood's extra-sensory power transmits to my mind the possibilities of artistic expression, and as a support wood imposes its shape but is extremely ductile and has structural qualities that allow me to project in space with greater freedom than other materials. Wood in this language is secondary to

its final cause. Second, wood as a formal cause evokes deep feelings in me from my own being. As a living material, wood has the power to seek the cycles of life and it is linked to the human and nature's life cycles.

JKG: Chile has a strong tradition of sculpture using wood and there are masters in the field...

PO: Chile is a telluric country with its earthquakes and cordilleras and has a strong tradition of sculptors in metal and stone, but wood has been relegated to utilitarian perspectives and has not been used as an artistic support in sculpture. Very few masters can be named, and very little has been done in the urban scale or out in natural environments and spaces. Using wood to create a new language to express natural and embodied human tensions has been an exciting challenge.

JKG: An early sculpture you made called *Barca* suggests a metaphorical journey. It has a vessel-like form but it's also kind of autobiographical. With its integral wood weave, shaping and fitting, it integrated a vision that goes beyond mere contemporaneity. It's eternal...

PO: Well, "*barca*" in Spanish means, to be precise, a vessel, and a vessel has a symbolic link with death and rebirth as an eternal cycle of which we are not always aware. There is a double meaning: we can symbolically be the vessel itself or be cocooned in it as in a womb.

JKG: And *Flow*, commissioned for a specific architectural space in Oregon, has a flow form not unlike Tadashi Kawamaata's large-scale intervention. Yours has an undulating wrapping that follows the shape and form of this amazing organic architecture. It reflects or mirrors the Oregon landscape outside.

PO: In this sculpture integrated as part of a commission in an architectural space, I tried to achieve a visual and tactile manifestation of the Eternal Return Myth, which is from our human perspective an endless journey to consciousness in everyday time or from birth to death time. *Flow* displays from this infinite pattern, expressing its wonder and transcendence. The wood sections that flow and interweave along the wall suggest time that converges finally in the matrix, which is

ART SPACE ECOLOGY

at the same time, beginning and end, generation and completion.

JKG: *Dead Matter Emergencies* (Ludwig Museum Collection 2016) is like a clarion call. The corpse of a tree communicates a sense of urgency. You can feel the tensions of contemporary life in the awkward juxtaposition of the dead trunk and the finely carved and joined emergent wood forms emerging out of its centre. There is a clash of wood, refined and rough. The Lenga and Paquio wood inside you collected in Patagonia and Amazonia. Like blood vessels or circulatory systems in the tree, the forms could also be human, our blood vessels. How did you come up with the idea?

PO: As you say, the meeting of these two realities or conditions of the same material, wood – dead and living, old and new, scrap and manufactured matter – expresses a duality that I want to show just as the title, *Dead Matter Emergencies*, suggests. As a process, rescuing scrap wood evokes the healing of the earth and becomes a metaphor of eternal return. It has, for me, a dramatic character like the dirt and scrap that is endlessly

accumulating in our environment. It also addresses the meaningless loss of vital time that emerges dramatically that is so evident in our day-to-day life, as a fruit of a system whose cruelty we are not always aware of.

JKG: Your larger than life *Pulso* sculpture, exhibited recently at Santiago's Galeria Ana Maria Stagno AMS Marlborough, was remarkable. You enter it like the body of a whale. It is all made from recycled materials and holds a beautiful integral sense of being, and place.

PO: In the game I have played over many years, using found and accumulated materials and recovered chunks and pieces of wood from my studio, a dialectic emerges somewhere between enclosure and protection, between the living body and the broken object, and it also refers to the limbo between life and death. As out of a big womb, being thrown into life defies death in a cycle that is an image of an eternal PULSE. The fragments of this membrane no longer refer to its origins, the only possibility to continue to feel the pulse of the matter is to transform all these fragments into the construction of a personal alphabet

in an attempt to write a story that beats like a heart in the body of an aging material.

JKG: *Sarcophagi or Shroud Bodies* (2016), in the same show, becomes a reflection on the thin veil between life and death, the container and contained. It's almost Classical or Romantic. The sleeping body of nature exists in tandem with these approximate humans... As signifiers they build a dialogue with our human history, like the sarcophagi of the ancients, the medieval...

PO: Here the work addresses another level of reflection about the body as a continent. The bodies can be understood as boxes, and are defined by their envelope, like housing or the footprint of an existence of a place one dwells as intimate refuge. The boxes or coffins are vertically placed with their front and back both visible expressing the dualistic relationship between life and death.

JKG: They have a totemic dimensionality, but are bodies.

PO: Yes. Between the emptiness and the envelope, I want these forms to address the relationship or

borders between life and death. It's a space that has resonance. The container and the contained reveal our inexact reading of our place in life, and present the possibilities of realizing a total life. As signifiers they build a dialogue with our human history, like as you say with those old wood and stone sarcophagi of the ancients, the medieval... History continues, nature never sleeps.

JKG: And the other Heads/Drawers' cube-like assemblages of wood, emergent elements, partial elements in the show are like burial containers. They feel ancient, but contemporary as well and that is unusual. They suggest a kind of natural intelligence, nature's own intelligence as mirrored in our bio-genetic memory... or something like that!

PO: In a way the heads are also continents, an image of cosmic totality, in another scale – the main scale perhaps – of this discussion and the human condition. Heads are the womb for ideas and the open boxes of self-consciousness when we look or search in its inside parts. I intend to achieve a taxonomy or desiccation of these internal processes. Memories that emerge from it or can be stocked in individual or multiple boxes

in our minds, flowing ideas emerge from hidden fissures to expand and conquer other territories, geometrical parts fit one in another in subtle communication codes. These sculptural gestures and codes intend to reveal some of nature's rhythms and in so doing release the energies of our body memories and its entropy processes.

Flow, 2008
Private Collection, Oregon, USA, © Pilar Ovalle

