

Thomas Lawson essay on Patricia Fernandez

When we think about Spain today we think of a thoroughly modern country, a country suffering the aftermath of a real estate boom, failing banks, bad loans, horrible unemployment. In short, we think of it as a fully integrated part of modern, democratic Europe. But this vibrant democracy, the country we imagine through the films of Pedro Almodovar, is barely thirty year old; until the late 70s it was a dark place, ruled by a decrepit and aged dictatorship, deeply repressive and uncreative. The youth rebellions of the late 60s and early 70s that shook up so much of the cultural and political lives of people in the rest of Western Europe and in the USA bypassed Spain, and young people who wanted more from life had to find ways, both real and imaginary, to cross the border and leave the country.

Like many artists, Patricia Fernandez is interested in mining the fault lines of memory to seek the veins of connectivity that can create a sense of meaning. The impetus for such work is the recovery of a loss, the healing of a trauma, and for most this is as perilous as digging in to any family history. And the truth discovered is always shaded in the partiality and uncertainty of unreliable actors and evidence. For Fernandez the terrain is made more dangerous because her particular family history is subsumed within the larger narrative of the Francoist dictatorship, meaning the potential of any uncovered betrayals, cruelties, disappointments and losses is exponentially more explosive. An act of bad faith in a regular happy family can lead to unhappiness and estrangement; the same act under a dictatorship can lead to imprisonment or death. Equally, those living in a repressive regime develop, as a means of survival, a guarded consciousness in the present, and a carefully shaped and compartmentalized memory to deal with the past.

For some years now Fernandez has been literally building the artifacts and archives of a family that is part real and part imagined. Her raw materials include letters and conversations between herself and her parents and grand parents, as well as photographs, drawings, various sentimental objects. Some of these materials are genuine, some invented or imagined, and the artwork makes no distinction as it reconstructs a grand narrative that is notable for both its imposing physicality and feinting evasiveness. In this iteration of the story we have a newly crafted table with carved top, made of walnut. It is dark and heavy, undeniably present. We are told its design is based on drawings included in letters from the artist's grandfather, and refer to small decorative boxes he carves for family members, using pinewood, the material he used his entire life as a carver of coffins. But how are we to use this table to think of the past? What secrets did a young casket builder know, what has he preferred to forget? What do these patterns represent? What are we to make of the material upgrade from pine to walnut? The dark table, the insistent decoration, the compulsive line force our attention, steer us clear of the ghosts lingering below the surface. The work exudes a sense of the uncanny, and we leave it haunted by the thought that some dreadful truth will come to us, later, in our imagination.

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