

## Dwellings of water and light

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### An empty stage

The journey of emptying the body in space that charts an essential part of the destiny of modern sculpture also marks a limit that opens up a fertile path towards an empty stage. In its wake, among so many other memorable rooms, we find the one sketched on the corner Oteiza deploys in honour of Velázquez, that golden wall next to which Kounellis hangs his coat and hat at the end of the journey, the room flooded by Beuys with an imperceptible fluid or the vulnerability of Juan Muñoz's theatrical floors. And right there, in the track left by those scenarios of absence, José Noguero also builds his poetics, with their strange visionary fantasy.

Assuming recurrent strategies which his generation has inherited from the behaviours introduced into the evolution of the discourse of sculpture around the beginning of the last third of the 20th century, Noguero establishes dramatic compositions which, with very few elements – hardly a human or animal figure, the appropriation of an element of the ornamental tradition, the odd lonely object or furniture referent – and often adopting a strategic alteration of scale – which with the sperm whale in *Pottwal* takes on an oceanic dimension – focus their essential invocation on the silent song modulated by voices intertwined with light and space. In his use of photography, far from the divergent stories which are so common in other contemporary sculptors, we might see a mere testimonial extension of the objects. But not so, as Miguel Fernández-Cid rightly pointed out; it is through tight control of the lighting and the spatial framing which enables the materialisation of the photographic image and the distance so often added by the reversal in the mirror that that cosmos, with definitive clarity, finally determines its eloquence.

And, for all Noguero welcomes new symbolic manifestations at the heart of his stage construction, as we shall soon see they are still the seeds of and the keys to the work shown in this exhibition under an insignia which, in the homophony provided by Sanskrit, allows the artist to superimpose in a single image what is encoded in the architectural diagram, the plot of a story and the essence that draws out the most intimate meaning of all things.

### **Living in the water**

The metaphorical cycle Noguero proposes in many of the recent pieces he has brought together here produces a central imaginary. As detonator of that imaginary we have in fact to situate two coinciding experiences referring to cultural and geographical coordinates which are far apart from one another, but share the same structure. Chronologically, the earlier one is the documentary material provided by a journey to Brazil and, more specifically, a stay in Manaus, deep in the heart of the Amazon region. In that habitat, marked by its essential relation with the river, he is seduced by two kinds of unusual and somehow complementary dwellings, the two sides of the common river determiner, the large vessels converted into houseboats and the buildings raised on pillars to prevent flooding when the river rises, which belong in the lineage of palafittes. Then, among the added paradoxes thrown up by the changing water levels, he finds those steamers stranded on the edges, far from the shore, which conjure up the titanic antithesis of that other boat sailing on dry land through the jungle in pursuit of the hallucinated dream of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*. More recently, on one of his stays in India, Noguero came across an essentially identical situation in Srinagar, the summer capital of the state of Kashmir, once again a city linked symbiotically to a river, the Jhelum, and, by extension, the longer side of Lake Dal. And there too buildings raised on stilts, and the British tradition of the houseboat, the product of the ruse which legend attributes to one Kinnard, an ingenious formula conceived to get round the rule introduced by a Dogra king which forbade foreigners to own land in the valley.

But, as was to be expected, in both cases the sculptor's fascination with that outlandish extension of the concept of inhabitability chooses as a model, not the brand new lake bungalows on pillars found in so many pseudo-adventure destinations in Latin America or the sumptuous floating mansions of the booming tourist industry in Dal, but those other more marginal and spontaneous versions used by the local population. For within that new territory with a more exotic register that has found its way into his work in recent

years, Noguero's choice has to do with the outline sketched in a statement drafted a decade ago where he defined, in these terms, one of the germinal vectors of his poetic identity: "I have a preference for deserted factories and country landscapes. I value the emptiness of former lives, forgotten events or presences."

In any case, that double typology, the palafitte and the houseboat, is reflected by two of the basic pieces in the show. The first, for obvious reasons, is undoubtedly the one that takes its theatrical dimension to the most explicit limit. However, due both to its compact layout, reduced almost to the purest construction schema, and to the heightened feeling of immaterial lightness that the floor raised on pillars arouses in a threshold similar, we might say, to the annulment of weight in Chillida's suspensions, the work glides, far from any striving for dramatic effect, towards a formulation taken to the boundaries of the archetype. There is something about the second piece, meanwhile, a houseboat also with a stylised diction, with the figure of a man sitting on the prow, whom Noguero endows with the emphatic expressiveness which distinguishes his characters today as opposed to the anatomical conciseness used in earlier periods, of an allegorical confluence or a reformulation of a recurrent motif in the sculptor's cosmos since a very early stage of his career. I am referring, of course, to that metal boat which some readings – Castro Flórez', in fact – have associated with the notions of transit and finiteness, along a path which, as we shall see, is in no way incongruous here.

Then, in relation to both pieces, a photographic diptych in its turn prolongs the game with a reference to the element added within that same microcosm by the little boats associated with small-time river transport and trade, where the artist draws inspiration once again from both the Amazon launches and the *shikaras* of Srinagar. The sequence that materialises through the images shows, in one case, a kind of canoe, on which a number of white sacks with undefined contents are arranged and, also on the prow, another expressive plaster figure which, in the position of the arms, is sketching the action of rowing. In the next image we see the same canoe with its cargo and, next to it, on the ground, the destroyed figure, in a narrative break where the appeal to the fragmented shape, so typical of this artist's work, acts eloquently as an unequivocal reference to our own fleeting condition.

And that triad marks out the theatrical horizon that dominates the exhibition, an illusory enclave that divides the floor of the room into a virtual mirror membrane of wavy quicksilver and forces the spectator making his way through that perimeter of fantasy to walk, as one might say, literally on the

waters. For the imagination conjured up on this occasion by Noguero is none other than living on water. Living afloat, as they say. And both this home that rocks us like a loving cradle and the dwelling built on liquid cement immediately evoke those other houses in Lope's famous verse, raised in their case on "tender sand," which Borges associated in his rewriting with the inevitable futility of all human effort and, despite that, the paradox of its stoical necessity. An emblem of the fragility which, nonetheless, in Noguero's discourse reaches into instability to explore another confine alien to any trace of melancholy. The one that binds existence, the intimate nature of the world we live in, our home on earth, indeed, to that river, always another, which Parmenides places as the substance of reality, of identity in change and the ceaseless turning of the wheel of transformations. We dwell, as the artist's vision reminds us, on what flows. And so, in that watery universe, the house on stilts and the houseboat are home to ways of life which, if we think about it, are to a large extent opposed. One, the way of someone who lives allowing himself to be carried along or dragged by the current; another, doubtless aware of that inevitable flow, knowing that everything passes, but in his place, impassive, as the song goes, "watching life go by."

### **Luminous place**

And so Noguero concludes the range of metaphors of the inhabitable, ending by adding to those visions of transit a last pair of staged pieces that seem to break the sequence established up to that moment. Variations, in this case, around the paradigm of the cubic figure and therefore moulds of a metaphysical space which, as a result, is even more radical in its stark, literal geometry. Twin cubes in one case, in the line of the modulations of Morris or LeWitt, which open up the abyss of their inner night to us; the other a celibate cube and, hanging almost at floor level, a lamp which, like Zeus's incontinent golden desire on Danae, pours a brilliant bluish rain towards it. And, of course, despite the divine meteoric simile, here it is not water but the void and the light we inhabit.

Anyone who is surprised by finding the use of such a bare, aseptic lexis here, set in the line of minimalism, and assumes that he is seeing a strategic break in the artist's creative behaviour is quite mistaken. For one only has to realise that far more than the anthropomorphic figure, the motley animals, the appeal to ornament, the solitary chair or the mirror, from the very beginning of his career and still today, more than the houseboat and the palafitte, it has always been the bare space, fenced off by the ridges, present or otherwise,

of a stage box, and the way it reveals at its heart the incidence of “a slanted light,” of the kind Emily Dickinson turns on in her poem, that has provided the themes that build Noguero’s work. Space and light and nothing else, therefore, in the end. Or an epiphany of space made light, if you prefer, as a definitive hope of the inhabitable, in the restitution of all absence, where the loop closes the return to the bright home that awaits us at the heart of the origin.