Carmen Laffón, Landscape and Locus

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I. [a setting lost to memory, La Cartuja]. Bristling thickets left to their own devices, wild creepers that snake among their branches, vying with them for a patch of soil, wispy osiers, willows and old poplars abandoned to their fate—these are the protagonists of the drawings Carmen Laffón began to create on the island of La Cartuja in 1976. While certifying the city's indifference to that riverside enclave, those landscapes of neglect and fecundity also testify to the vitality of the soil which, fed by the ebb and flow of the mighty waters, sustained life on the banks of La Cartuja. The artist's initial sense of outrage or pity in the face of such abandonment slowly turned to fascination as she discovered the silent power of nature. Her creations are landscapes of encounter, more attuned to the self-assurance of the plants, the aura of humidity or the pulsating rhythm of the waters than to the beauty of the setting.[1]

For many years, the city of Seville ignored the existence of the island just across the channel; the monastery, the chimneys and kilns of the ceramic and porcelain factory, and indeed the entire area of La Cartuja seemed to belong to a separate realm. Few remembered or cared that there, on the estate of Gambogaz, Ignacio Vázquez Gutiérrez used the first mechanical reapers and threshers to arrive in Seville,[2] launching an agricultural revolution around the same time as Charles Pickman revolutionised local industry with his porcelain factory.[3] All of this history had been forgotten, and even the landscape was hidden from view by the old embankment wall, the railway tracks and the artificial barrier that protected them along the length of the riverside avenue now known as Calle Torneo. In the olden days, families from Seville's Triana district would organise outings to La Cartuja, but once the trees that had provided welcome shade were cut down, this tradition was lost. Eventually the only visitors were Pickman factory workers and farmhands employed on estates like Gambogaz, which was awarded to General Queipo de Llano, commander of Franco's fascist forces in the south, shortly after the Spanish Civil War as a gift from the people of Seville—or so they said.

However, around 1968 people began to remember this forgotten territory. It all began with the "Corta de la Cartuja" or "Cartuja Cut", a channelisation project that would straighten the course of the Guadalquivir along a six-kilometre stretch, moving it away from the city and designing a channel to facilitate the river's rapid discharge. With these changes, the rising waters that had flooded the city so often in the past would cease to be a threat. While the project's primary concern was the safety of Seville, it also opened up other prospects, particularly for urban planners.[4]

The area of La Cartuja had been excluded from the city's official zoning plan as it was susceptible to flooding, but the river works eliminated this risk, creating new expectations that were fuelled by a peculiar bureaucratic coincidence. The channelisation project merely aimed to protect and organise the territory, and in principle it had nothing to do with urban planning. Yet it was spearheaded by the Ministry of Public Works, which also drafted the "Urgent Action Plans" for integrated urban development projects (essentially intensive housing construction programmes). Such "action plans" were originally devised for Madrid and Barcelona, but they were extended to Seville and the area of La Cartuja the year after "The Cut" was approved. By some murky bureaucratic design, the project translated into protection for the city and a golden opportunity for property developers. The matter was further complicated by the building codes, which were so muddled that in theory they would permit the construction of up to 75,000 houses on this land, meaning that its population could swell to 350,000.[5] These regulations barely considered the site's historical, artistic or environmental heritage.

Carmen Laffón's drawings were not impervious to this problem or to another difficulty that soon presented itself: the question of what to do with the meander of San Jerónimo, the broad bend in the River Guadalquivir that delimited and practically embraced Seville, dividing it from the district of Triana and the island of La Cartuja. The meander had been modified in the 1950s when it was separated from the *Dársena* or old course by a dam built at Chapina, north of Triana, and diverted west of the historic Moorish quarter. This had been done to prevent flooding, but now that the river flowed through the newly-cut channel the *Dársena* could be extended and its waters discharged into the meander without risk. Thus, if authorities followed through on the plan to move the railway tracks and the banks of the meander were suitably reinforced, Seville would have a riverside promenade. The idea was that all of this would complement the revival of La Cartuja as a space given over to municipal facilities and public recreation, given its natural conditions and the historic and artistic legacy it contained.

However, this tantalising prospect—which materialised to a degree with the Expo in 1992—had to compete with other proposals, such as the idea of damming up the meander to make room for roads that would connect the city centre with the agglomeration of new houses and inhabitants that the Urgent Action Plan had in mind for La Cartuja. This second proposal was wholeheartedly endorsed by Seville City Hall in an agreement signed on 30 May 1973.

Yet there were other voices. Professional and neighbourhood associations petitioned to preserve the meander and adopt a zoning plan for the island that would respect its

[1] Gállego, J., "La Otra Carmen", *ABC de las Artes*, 22, 05, 92, 40-1. On the vegetation of La Cartuja, Sancho Royo, F., "Los paisajes de Santa María de las Cuevas" in VV. AA. *Historia de la Cartuja de Sevilla. De ribera del Guadalquivir a recinto de la Exposición Universal*, Madrid: Turner, 1989, 291-308.

[2] Héran Haen, F., *Tierra y parentesco en el campo sevillano. La revolución agraria del siglo XIX*, M. Marchetti-Mauri (trans.), Madrid: Servicio de Publicaciones Agrarias, 1980, 173-183.

[3] Arenas Posada, C. "La Cartuja de Pickman: primera fábrica de cerámica artística y loza de España, 1899-1936", *Revista de Historia Industrial*, no. 33, Year XVI, 2007. I, 119-143.

[4] On the subject of the urban planning issues associated with the "Corta de la Cartuja" project, I have referred to the documents compiled for the Association of Architects of Western Andalusia and Badajoz, Seville branch, by Alfonso Cruz, José María Lerdo de Tejada, María Prats and María Jesús Rubio. José García Tapial kindly provided me with this source.

[5] In 1970, Seville had less than 550,000 inhabitants.

resources and prevent it from becoming a heavily built-up area. A group of young architects played a decisive role in the debate by founding the Centro de Estudios y Servicios (Research and Services Centre), where they worked to compile a wealth of cultural, historical, artistic, legal and environmental information in the hope that it would be considered by those making decisions about the future of the meander, the island and the city's relationship with the river. Various artists participated in the debate, including Carmen Laffón, using canvas or paper to reveal the great unknown lying just across the river: the natural enclave of La Cartuja, the monastery, the meander and even the skyline of northern Seville viewed from the right bank. The year 1976 (when Laffón's first drawings were produced) marked a turning point. On 29 January 1977, the city council revoked the 1973 agreement and other authorities agreed to preserve the meander and discarded the idea of building up the island.

Knowing the context in which Carmen Laffón created these drawings, it is obvious that they have a political message; yet this does not detract from their artistic merit, which is full and genuine because they render visible what was once invisible. Moreover, they do so without forcing the setting to conform to alien moulds.

Every landscape makes its own demands. If the artist ignores them and instead attempts to use other genre devices, no matter how brilliantly, the resulting image will always ring false. Cézanne said, "The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its conscience," but this requires a deliberate, leisurely exchange between the painter and the natural setting: looking is necessary, of course, but above all it requires letting oneself sink into the inimitable appearances of the place. Those appearances are the *cradle* of the landscape: they bring it into the world and give it sustenance.[6] The drawings of La Cartuja achieve this thanks to the simplicity of their forms. Rather than extolling that natural environment, they allow it to speak through images, not as beauty but as energy derived from the strength of humble shrubs and the persistence of forgotten pools. This vision of nature as energy, as a force, has since become one of the defining traits of Carmen Laffón's landscapes. These drawings may represent the debut of that vision and of another great theme in her oeuvre: the River Guadalquivir.[7] Nature as a force is also palpably present in her depictions of the riverbank in the towns of Coria and Gelves, produced shortly afterwards, while her sketches of northern Seville from La Cartuja foreshadow the structure of the later canvas *Sevilla desde el río* [Seville from the River] (1981).[8] This meditation on and from the river and its banks ties in with Laffón's *Homenajes a Corot* [Tributes to Corot]. The French master's landscapes of the outskirts of Rome are harsh, but they hint at the vigour of nature which, in a more stylised form, would become the *basso continuo* accompanying his entire body of work.

The drawings of the river and La Cartuja underscore the difficulty of landscape painting. The ancients believed that every encounter with nature is a cipher, a riddle to be solved. A natural setting is more than just a colourful mosaic or a group of attractive shapes that appeal to the body and are registered and filed away by it. When we pause before a shrub or rocky outcropping, we immediately sense an *existence*: that *something* that commands our gaze also resists it. It does not waver and fade away like a mirage, and we cannot manipulate it like a daydream. It stands before us, resolute and unyielding; we cannot doubt the truth of its existence,[9] and from that existence it challenges us. This is why outlines and forms point to something beyond themselves: they imperceptibly become possible meanings that seem to beg for clarification.

At times such meanings can be quickly defined. Some are content to name the species to which a shrub belongs or quote the law of physics that explains the halo of moisture crowning the thickets; and there is no lack of those who, pressed by practical concerns, will see a tree or water solely as a source of useful energy. But the artist's gaze lingers. It collects meanings without reducing them to an elegant coincidence of forms, and it is not content to merely transcribe the vision on paper or canvas.[10] The alertness triggered by the encounter is transmitted to the imagination and prompts it not to associate familiar figures but to ferret out whatever new thing the object is struggling to say. Imagination dovetails with the artist's own personal history: habits developed in the course of her interaction with nature, accumulated (and perhaps forgotten) emotional connections, symbols that feed a knowledge which is difficult to objectify yet capable of shedding light on situations... all of this is summoned to clarify the encounter. Perceptions, therefore, are more than mere impressions. Rather, as Santayana says, they fall into the brain like seeds into a furrowed field or sparks into a keg of gunpowder,[11] turning that *something* which is before us into a point of stress and uncertainty that demands a meaning, a name.[12]

II. [*The Vineyard:* fertility and abode]. In the drawings of La Cartuja, those names are neglect and fertility. Nature, though forgotten and untended, is still present as a force. Thirty years later, in the series *La viña* [The Vineyard], we find this nature-as-force again, but it is accompanied by another signification: that of shelter, habitation, refuge. Both elements seem to be related to two formal novelties.

The first is the change in scale: in the four *Vistas de la viña* [Views of the Vineyard] (2006-07) and *La cepa* [The Vine] (2008), the drawings expand to unprecedented dimensions (212 x 150 cm). But perhaps the most significant change is the fact that, in these works, the draughtsmanship is surprisingly close to painting. The light and shadow used to construct the landscape is so richly varied that it immediately recalls Leonardo's reflections on the subject, reminding us that there is an infinite graduation of shades between light and darkness.[13] The five drawings are mod-

[6] For the Cézanne quote and cradle metaphor, see Merleau-Ponty, M., "Le doute de Cézanne" *Sens et non-sens*, Paris: Gallimard, 1996, 23.

[7] Laffón, C., *Visión de un paisaje*, Madrid: Academia de San Fernando, 2000, 27.

[8] Now in the Cajasol Collection.

[9] Merleau-Ponty, M., *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, 50. Conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner based his *After All (Nach Alles)*, 2000, on the relationship between perception and existence.

[10] Hegel, G. W. F., *Lecciones sobre la estética* [English title: *Lectures on Aesthetics*], A. Brotóns Muñoz (trans.), Madrid: Akal, 1989, 181 and 187.

[11] Quoted by Dewey, J., *El arte como experiencia* [English title: *Art as Experience*], Jordi Claramonte (trans.), Barcelona: Paidós, 2008, 177.

[12] Dewey, J., *La experiencia y la naturaleza* [English title: *Experience and Nature*], J. Gaos (trans.), Mexico City: FCE, 1948, 288.

[13] Da Vinci, L. *Tratado de la Pintura* [English title: *A Treatise on Painting*], A.

elled in light, which explains why tonality takes precedence over line and fill over outline. Clear outlines do appear here and there, defining a branch or the shape of a leaf, but the vineyard as a whole sprouts from light. However, as our eye wanders over these infinitesimal tonalities—the ever-so-slight differences between light and shade—we slowly come to realise that matter is the true protagonist. Charcoal and tempera are what lend solidity and consistency to these landscapes modelled in light. This paradoxical encounter of light and matter gives rise to something that defines and identifies these works: rhythm.

Every landscape establishes rhythms: a counterpoint is woven by the contrast between empty and crowded areas, between forms the gaze flits across in haste and others where it is slowed down by a beckoning detail or detained by arresting bodies. But such paintings *represent* rhythm, whereas these drawings by Laffón *produce* it. By differentiating between subtle nuances of light, the diverse density of the matter makes the tree stand out against the thick foliage or tremble in the wind, complicates the relationship between leaves and clusters, or gradually opens up the space to reveal sudden patches of light. The viewer's gaze, initially drawn to the figures, unwittingly begins to trace the cadences of strokes and textures which seem to be the work of a hand that has escaped the control of the domineering eye[14] to follow its own logic. This pre-eminence of rhythm allows the drawings to speak of nature as a force, in part because the figures remain on and do not erase the boundary between matter (which constitutes them) and light (which seems to undo them), and in part because the patently obvious gesture infuses the image it constructs with its own vitality.

However, the alliance between gesture and rhythm and the dimension of the drawings also point in another direction. As drawings, these pieces remind us of the old grisailles, pencil or charcoal sketches which painters used to work out the desired chiaroscuro effect before translating it into colour. But in grisaille, the charcoal or pencil markings were simply a means of giving figures the right sense of volume, and their purpose was to complete the picture—in other words, to construct a unified story. This is not the case here. The importance of gesture and rhythm, and the way the pigment takes on a life of its own (a life of almost pictorial quality), cause the composition to expand and overflow its boundaries. These large frontal drawings meet and invite our gaze, but this expansive quality makes it seem as though they also envelop our bodies. They present us with a figure, but at the same time they create an atmosphere that draws us into its sheltering embrace.

Other works in the series reinforce this idea of shelter or refuge. As sculptures, the *Espuertas cargadas de uvas* [Baskets Filled with Grapes] have visual and tactile properties that appeal to both the body and the eye, but they also create a space that invites us to wander through them, pause among them and even brush up against them. This is a consequence of the piece's peculiar nature, half-sculpture, half-installation, but also of the constellation of images it brings to mind.

The vintage is inevitably associated with a piece of land, a place, a *locus* of dwelling. A vineyard requires constant care and binds the winegrower to its fate; as he grows with it, the vineyard becomes his place of habitation, his abode. The succession of baskets—empty, overflowing with grapes, or filled with shoots to be grafted or discarded after pruning—draws a timeline shared by vineyard and winegrower, showing how the latter, as he inhabits and tends to the land, observes its vital energy, and falls in step with the natural rhythm of the seasons, gradually forges a world where the value of things is not measured in terms of mere utility. The empty basket speaks of waiting; the vine shoots allude to a worked-for yet ever unpredictable bounty; and the laden basket symbolises the fruition of the harvest. Yet perhaps the last of the three has a more profound message: if grapes represent both plenty and promise, the filled baskets may also point to an unspoken yet evident future, the promise of wine to come. This lends the baskets an air of expectancy, of invitation. We sense them beckoning us to the *locus*, a place where things take on shared meanings and the course of events deposits a relational sediment of mutual recognition. Perhaps this is why vineyards are a recurring image of hospitality in Mediterranean culture.

The work entitled *Hojas y sarmientos. Bocetos* [Grape Leaves and Shoots: Studies] is particularly interesting because, in a way, it sums up the entire series. As a "drawing of drawings", it calls our attention to the work that goes into making art. It is not merely a question of skill; above all, creating art requires reflection. The drawn and re-drawn grape leaves and vine shoots seem to document the thrill of that first encounter with the unfamiliar, the moment that triggered a process of reflection in the artist. It is a peculiar kind of reflection, for it avoids defining or specifying that and all subsequent encounters, preferring to let them ripen or ferment so that knowledge, instead of suspending emotion, allows itself to be nourished by it. According to Marsilio Ficino, Apollo is not only Dionysus' brother but also his alter ego.[15] If we do not accept the confusion of emotion (or the heady thrill of passion), it is difficult to arrive at a truly fecund form. The same is true of the vineyard: if the winegrower does not heed the vital energy of the land, which he can never completely control, it is impossible for the plant to flourish, bear fruit and become a locus of habitation and refuge.

III. [clouds and skies]. The vineyard as a symbol of hospitality finds its natural extension in the figure of the climbing grapevine. The original project of *La viña* called for a vine trellis, but the conditions of the space available to the Museo Reina Sofía at the Abbey of Silos were not conducive to this type of installation, and in the end Laffón decided to build an enormous plaster vine[16] to preside over that exhibition. However, she did not relinquish the idea, and when the architect Vázquez Consuegra invited her to design a project for the entry hall in the Palace of San Telmo, she returned to it, albeit with several substantial modifications. On this occasion it was to be an ambitious 70-square-metre piece set in the sail vault above the palace entrance.

The vine—trunks, shoots and leaves of aluminium with an oil paint finish—is arranged on and around an iron trellis

González (ed.), Madrid: Akal, 1983, 387.

[14] Deleuze, G., *Pintura. El concepto de diagrama*, Cactus editorial team (ed.), Buenos Aires: Cactus, 2007, 92.

[15] Ficino, M., *Three Books on Life*. A critical edition and translation with introduction and notes by C. V. Kaske and J. R. Clark. New York: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1989, Book II, Chap. 20 and Book III, Chap. 24.

[16] Now in the collection of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía.

structure, also painted in oils. It is very natural and lifelike in appearance (reminding us of the training wires used to guide the plant as it grows), but the precise geometry of the carefully thought-out design subtly contrasts with the organic, sensual properties of the living vine. The entire installation hangs from the ceiling, and the 90-centimetre gap between it and the vault lends the piece a structure similar to that of a painting, complemented quite artlessly by the blue-grey skyscapes that cover the vaulted ceiling and create a backdrop for the sculpture.

This vine trellis is the product of a meticulous, precise, laborious process which even entailed building a replica of the San Telmo entry hall. Even so, many difficulties only became apparent once the actual installation work had begun. But Laffón had foreseen this eventuality and designed several alternatives for the background of the climbing vine. In the end she decided not to use the more colourful skies, whose intensity might compete with the sculpture and detract from its strength.

The discarded works are 23 large paintings whose overly modest title, *Estudios* [Studies], does not do them justice. To properly appreciate their significance, it might be helpful to recall the photographic series *Equivalents* begun by Alfred Stieglitz in 1923. For Stieglitz, a proponent of modern art in New York at a time when few people there believed in its potential, photography was a field of research as well as an art form. We see this clearly in the series dedicated to the hands of his wife, the painter Georgia O'Keeffe. *Equivalents* is another good example: the camera, perfectly parallel to the sky, captures clouds and lights that are disorientating because they represent a departure from the conventional photographic frame. Photographers usually face things from a vertical position, situating the world before them and at a distance. It is a controlling perspective: from here the photographer explores, scrutinises, observes from an outsider's vantage point and imposes order.[17] This stance is replicated by the very structure of the photograph, which inevitably has a top and a bottom, a right side and a left. Yet this structure vanishes in Stieglitz's photos, and its absence has two consequences. The first is that the severity of the examiner's gaze is diminished: the sky refuses to be ordered, spreading without any clearly defined limits or boundaries. The second is that the scope of Stieglitz's photos does not depend so much on their literal correlation to the outside world as on the fact that, as images, they become a sign of the sky they attempt to depict.[18]

We see something similar in these works by Carmen Laffón. The perspective is not that of one who, feet planted firmly on the ground, confronts and attempts to impose order on the world. As in Stieglitz's photos, in the *Estudios* verticality is lost, and with it all sense of being rooted in and physically connected to the ground which, though it may not grant us strength like Tyrtaeus, at least offers security and the illusion that we are the centre of the universe. Moreover, the pictures occupy an indefinite conceptual space somewhere between figuration and abstraction. Carmen Laffón's painting is not abstract, for it always maintains and relies upon a relationship with the figure. Yet this does not prevent her from adopting a purely pictorial approach and choosing the most suitable languages for this purpose with absolute freedom; indeed, the very richness of these languages is what makes the picture a poetic image of space and of the object. In these studies, the chosen colours, format and texture are worked in a manner that verges on New York abstraction, and it is they that make the panels convincing signs of the sky.

Perhaps there is a nexus that precisely links the two elements. The artist's vision, parallel to the sky, rejects the structure of space in perspective and its tacit desire for dominance. If we concede this, it makes perfect sense for Laffón to paint it by resorting to spaces such as those used by Rothko and Newman. Those pictorial spaces refuse to be manipulated or dominated because they make room for us and give us refuge before we are even aware of their existence. Carmen Laffón's languages are unquestionably free, but they are far from gratuitous.

IV. [*Vision of a landscape*]. This is proven beyond a doubt in her most recent series on the Doñana Nature Reserve or *Coto de Doñana* entitled *El Coto desde Sanlúcar* [The Reserve from Sanlúcar], large canvases (110 x 200 cm) begun in 2005. Our first order of business is to situate these works within the oeuvre of Carmen Laffón. This is her fourth series featuring views of Doñana from the coastal town of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, at the mouth of the Guadalquivir. She began the first in 1979, three years after producing the drawings of La Cartuja.[19] Those early works (smaller than her latest series) were identical in format and had a similar spatial distribution. The measurements of the horizontal canvases come close to the golden ratio (72.5 x 120 cm), with the river occupying the slightly larger lower half, separated from the sky above by a narrow strip of water, the beach and the trees of the nature reserve, which together barely account for one-tenth of the pictorial surface. This border zone disappears in *Mar abierto* [Open Sea], dated in 1993, which may be the culmination of the series: in the absence of the intermediate strip of land, everything is left up to colour and light.

Both elements played a prominent role in the second series, *Vistas del Coto* [Views of the Reserve], consisting of 20 pastel drawings (45 x 62.5 cm) begun in 1998. These bold images of fog banks, twilights and nocturnes might be summed up as a tense balancing act, attempting to respect the theme yet also remain true to the demands of painting. As a result, each piece has its own unique solution which is only perceptible in the process of its creation. That tension is repeated in the lithographs comprising a third series, *Visión de un paisaje* [Vision of a Landscape]—the title of the speech Laffón gave on being inducted into the Academy of Fine Arts of San Fernando—produced between 2010 and 2012.[20] I point out this tension because, to a large extent, it underpins the fourth and latest series, succinctly entitled *El Coto desde Sanlúcar* [The Reserve from Sanlúcar] and exhibited here for the first time in its entirety.

[17] Krauss, R. "Stieglitz: Equivalentes" [English title: "Stieglitz: Equivalents"], in *Lo fotográfico. Por una teoría de los desplazamientos*, C. Zelich (trans.), Barcelona: G. Gili, 2002, 133-143.

[18] Perhaps this is why photos of disaster or misfortune tend to arouse more indignation than compassion: how can a photographer remain detached, unmoved by such scenes? This question was at the heart of the debate sparked by Kevin Carter's notorious photo of a starving Sudanese child being stalked by a large vulture.

[19] Two small oils were painted the previous year, 1978, which might be preliminary studies for the Doñana landscapes.

[20] Exhibited at the Rafael Ortiz Gallery, Seville, February 2013.

Reviewing this succession of works immediately raises a question: What is the reason and meaning of the *series*? First of all, we must remember that the series is a typically modern device. In earlier art history, we find thematic groups but not serial productions. A series is open-ended, whereas those groups were defined and limited beforehand: think, for example, of the seven deadly sins (Pieter Brueghel the Elder), the twelve apostles (El Greco, Rubens, Van Dyck) or the five senses (Jan "Velvet" Brueghel and Rubens). In a series, neither the theme nor its elements are set in stone. The artist finds a *motif* (as Monet found the Cathedral of Rouen), chooses it and explores it in successive paintings, often with no definite end in sight (Monet produced around 40 views of that house of worship). The series emerged in the modern era because artists began to move away from conventionally "art-worthy" subjects: anything could be an artistic theme as long as it was poetically rendered.[21] Yet this newfound freedom—and herein lies the second *raison d'être* of the series—requires experimentation, for the idea must be put to the test. At first, artists experiment to gauge the interest of their chosen motif, the coherence of the outcome with the original intention, or the construction of the picture itself.[22] However, this kind of experimentation soon leads to another: as the series unfolds, the creator discovers possibilities she did not know existed when she began to work. The experiment thus evolves from a simple process of verification to a fertile promise of future discoveries for, as Adorno says, "The artist's imagination scarcely ever completely encompassed what it brought forth."[23] And so the series becomes the gradual revelation of an object or even an entire poetic universe—hence the importance of following where it leads.

Laffón's vistas of the Doñana Nature Reserve do indeed follow the slow modelling process of poetics. In the 1979 series we find two familiar aspects seen in the La Cartuja drawings and *La Viña*: nature as a force and as a refuge. They inhabit the very structure of the paintings: the absence of narrative detail and the orderly arrangement of air, water and earth identify nature's endless flux, which generates forms yet remains stubbornly silent, as the protagonist of these pictures. Moreover, the construction in parallel bands suggests a continuum that spills out of the frame; each individual picture and the series as a whole (for example, as it was shown at the Museo Reina Sofía) seem to envelop spectators and spirit them away to the silent doings and undoings of nature.

Based on these considerations, one might be tempted to compare the paintings with Caspar David Friedrich's landscapes or Mark Rothko's spaces. But such comparisons, however enlightening, are only productive if they are done critically, making a special effort to underscore the differences. Here the dissimilarities are obvious. In contrast to the pathos of northern European painting,[24] Laffón's work possesses the complicity and emotional affinity with nature that characterises the Mediterranean outlook.[25] And as far as Rothko goes, his tragic inclinations ("I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions—tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on," he once told Selden Rodman[26]) have no echo in Laffón's work. However, in the same breath I must point out that this work has connections with both artists which should not be overlooked. On observing Friedrich's work *Monk by the Sea*, two Romantic authors, Achim von Arnim and Clemens Brentano, noted that the picture's poetic force did not stem from the relationship between the depicted object, the sea, and the spectator, but from the spectator's relationship with the painting itself.[27] The painting derives its power not from the skilful representation of a fragment of nature but from its ability to rekindle our forgotten relationship with the natural world.[28] Laffón's first series of paintings of the Doñana Nature Reserve have this same ability, which is closely related to some of the images' specific plastic properties: the transparency of the colours, the often blurred boundaries between the three zones, the intensity of the light. Those same properties, so prominently displayed in *Mar abierto*, could be construed as the nexus between these works and Mark Rothko's paintings.

These two aspects—the fact that these landscapes are, more than representations, images and memories (both emotional and meaningful) of nature, and their firm yet unfathomable spatial structure—are intensified in the drawings of *Vistas del Coto* and the lithographs, and rise to a crescendo in *Cotos desde Sanlúcar*, her latest series. The intensity is not derived from the subject matter—nights, fog, twilights, storms—but from the paint itself. Paint lends firmness to the landscape by using the three-part structure mentioned earlier, but above all by emphasising colour (in some cases to the point of monochrome) and a luminosity conferred by the pigments rather than tonality.[29] This gives the pictures a singular vitality, but it also means that its spaces are somehow uncontrollable, an impression enhanced by the liveliness of the gesture that darkens the brightness of their geometry. The result is a series that offers a vision of nature as present yet unattainable. Nature-as-force and nature-as-shelter merge to reveal a third aspect of the landscape in Carmen Laffón's oeuvre: nature-as-*enigma*.

[21] Rancière, Jacques, *La parole muette. Essai sur les contradictions de la littérature* [English title: *Mute Speech: Literature, Critical Theory and Politics*], Paris: Hachette, 1998, 56.

[22] Adorno, T. W., *Teoría Estética* [English title: *Aesthetic Theory*], R. Tiedemann (ed.), J. Navarro Pérez (trans.), Madrid: Akal, 2004, 39-40.

[23] Adorno, T. W., *Aesthetic Theory*, G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann (eds.), R. Hullot-Kentor (trans.), London: Continuum, 2004, 47-48. Adorno claims to have borrowed this idea from Mallarmé. Duchamp also suggests it in "Le precessus créative", *Duchamp du signe*, Paris: Flammarion, 1994, 187-89.

[24] Rosenblum, R., *La pintura moderna y la tradición del romanticismo nórdico. De Friedrich a Rothko* [English title: *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*], C. Luca de Tena (trans.), Madrid: Alianza, 1993.

[25] Worringer, *Naturaleza y Abstracción* [English title: *Abstraction and Empathy*], M. Frenk (trans.), Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997, fourth printing.

[26] Rothko, Mark, *Writings on Art*, M. López Remiro (ed.), New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006 119.

[27] Brentano, C., "Diferentes sensaciones ante una marina de Friedrich con un capuchino", Duque, F. and D'Angelo, P. (eds.), *La religión de la pintura. Escritos de filosofía romántica del arte*, Madrid: Akal, 1999, 123.

[28] Soto Reyes, J., *Sobre la pintura de Carmen Laffón*, unpublished transcript of the lecture given at the Aesthetics Seminar, Faculty of Information Sciences, University of Seville, 27 January 1993.

[29] The luminous quality of paint can be regulated by adding black or white (greyscale) to the pigment. The variety of light obtained in this way is called tonality. But the intensity of light can also be governed by the choice of pigment, as some colours are naturally more luminous than others. Cézanne was instrumental in pioneering this use of colour.

This is not a new theme. It may have begun with an early anti-humanist, Giordano Bruno, who differentiated between human beings who merely obey the impulses with which nature has endowed them (though these are never ignoble, as they fulfil the requirements of humankind as a natural species), and those capable of feeling a true passion for nature, even knowing it to be overwhelming and beyond their comprehension.[30] This attitude is something more than amorous contemplation or idyllic romance.[31] The enraptured lover understands that Nature is not a mere object of delight, and that she is not made to man's liking nor put at his disposal. She welcomes and shelters him, true, but she also resists his advances; she is his home but also his other, something he can never truly tame except by destroying her. This is precisely why he views her as an enigma and is enraptured with her as such, perhaps because it is only with or hard by her that can he trace his own identity.

The idea of the sublime may serve to illuminate this vision of things. The sublime at once inspires feelings of joy and displeasure: displeasure because the sublime is found in that which is beyond us, and joy because it makes us conscious of our faculty of reason, and therefore of our own independence and freedom.[32] The sublime is thus a source of two-fold *astonishment*: awe before the boundlessness of nature and before the serenity of a soul governed by reason. However, this vision of things makes too great a distinction between intelligence and sensibility. Perhaps Laffón's paintings reflect a humbler yet simultaneously bolder perspective, which we might call an "intelligent knowledge of the flesh". This is the kind of knowledge acquired by those who know themselves to be a part of nature and respect its silence, its endless doing and undoing, its dark fertility, and yet offer words or images to coax nature out of its retirement.

But this requires an alienation, an immersive perceptual experience (as Dewey noted, "To par-take and to per-ceive are allied performances"[33]) that does not eschew emotion or shy away from intelligent signification, so that the *productive* imagination (a term Kant used to distinguish it from mere associative imagination[34]) can forge "a union that marks a new birth in the world".[35]

This is the effort that underpins the long, gradual evolution of these paintings. They culminate in what we might call a shuddering art, for it constantly vibrates in the tension between a thirst for truth so fierce that it is willing to sacrifice appearance in order to do justice to nature's silence, and its inherent nature as art which prevents it renouncing that same appearance.[36]

[30] Bruno, G. *Eroici Furori Dialoghi Filosofici italiani*, M. Ciliberto (ed.), annotated by Nicoletta Tirinanzi, Milan: Mondadori, 2000. Part I, Dialogue III.

[31] Bruno, G. *Eroici Furori Dialoghi Filosofici italiani*, M. Ciliberto (ed.), annotated by Nicoletta Tirinanzi, Milan: Mondadori, 2000. Part I, Dialogue I, Note 28.

[32] Kant, I., *Crítica del Juicio* [English title: *Critique of Judgment*], paragraphs 23, 27 and 29.

[33] Dewey, J., *Experience and Nature,* London: George Allan & Unwin, 1929, 345.

[34] Kant, I., *Crítica de la razón pura* [English title: *Critique of Pure Reason*], B181/A 142.

[35] Dewey, J., *Art as Experience*, New York: Wideview/Perigee Books, 1980, 267.

[36] Adorno, T. W., *Theorie esthetique* [English title: *Aesthetic Theory*], R. Tiedemann (ed.), Marc Jimenez (trans.), Paris: Klinksieck, 2011, 271 ff.

V. [other views of the river]. Carmen Laffón's protracted meditation on nature and painting—in other words, on landscape—is not limited to her various series on the Doñana Nature Reserve. In 2008 she struck out in two new directions under the titles *Bajamar* [Low Tide] and *Orillas del Coto desde Bonanza* [The Shores of the Reserve from Bonanza], which she continued to pursue until 2014.

In both cases, the structure is different from that of the *Coto* paintings: the three-part composition is replaced, in the four pictures entitled *Bajamar*, by a patch of land in the foreground whose hazy borders are still being rearranged by the tide, followed by the waters whose definition becomes increasingly sharp as they approach the horizon line where, finally, the sea curves up into a sky that seems to soar over our heads. In the *Orillas* paintings, the clouds and water faintly echo the final canvases of the *Coto* series, but the trees, bushes and thickets are more distinguished and tinged with a hint of sensuality.

However, the novelty of these works is not limited to the above-described features. While it is true that the four *Bajamar* pictures contain the same poetic elements found in the *Coto* landscapes (nature as force, place of refuge, enigma), they are also infused with a palpable tranquillity which stems, in my opinion, from a composition that relies more on structure than on the interrelation of its elements.

The measurements of these four canvases come very close to the golden ratio, and this proportion is repeated in the division that marks the horizon line in three of them (*Línea del horizonte* [Horizon Line] *I and II* and *Bajamar: eucaliptus* [Low Tide: Eucalyptus]), reserving the larger section for the heavens. In the fourth painting, *En la Jara: Bajamar* [At La Jara: Low Tide], the distribution does not follow the divine proportion, but the construction in parallel planes is so orderly that it is hardly altered by the indistinct vegetation in the foreground. And so we find that there is an order in these pictures, a structure that gives each one a sense of unity without denying nature its dynamic motion.

As this unity is not achieved by balancing or offsetting its visual elements but by the structure itself, we can safely call it a non-relational composition. The painting is, essentially, a self-supporting construction. This is undoubtedly aided by the use of the golden ratio in the first three pictures, but another decisive aspect is that the different natural rhythms (the vaguely defined silt-like earth, the ebb and flow of the water, the fluctuating light and the alternating clouds) are incorporated into geometric shapes they know and recognise. Here Laffón uses a style of draughtsmanship that might be mistaken for painting, with a richness of nuance similar to what we see in *La viña*, to construct plane after plane without resorting to lines. The edge of the shore, the rolling waves and the horizon fall into place, one after another, as the painter's deft strokes erase the boundaries between geometric and organic. The unity of the painting depends on this singular alliance. To maintain such a painstaking construction, the artist avoids detail by stylising the figures and the paintings take on a quasi-ascetic air, renouncing or minimising the use of colour. The serene tranquillity emanating from these pieces is probably owing to their peculiar composition; however, setting this impression aside for now, I feel it is important to note that the style of painting seen here is quite different from that found in the *Cotos*. We will come across it again momentarily.

We have already seen how the *Bajamar* series differs from those dedicated to the Doñana Nature Reserve, but there are

also significant differences between both of these series and the paintings entitled *Orillas del Coto desde Bonanza*. The two vertical pictures that open the series and the large diptych (212 x 324 cm) created more recently repeat the familiar three-part structure (sky, earth, water), but the point of view is considerably lower than in the *Coto* series, raising the coastal vegetation to become the main focus of the composition. The cloud-studded skies and especially the thread of the river are the product of passionate, gestural painting reminiscent of her latest *Coto* series, but this frenzied energy subsides among the trees, shrubs and coastal undergrowth, not due to the effect of the form's construction, as in the *Bajamar* series, but because of how the dense vegetation (rendered tactile by the use of tempera paint) is perfectly at ease with own identity, making no attempt to conceal or restrain its sensuality. Perhaps that fusion of sensuality and ease has a rightful claim to the name of beauty. Through self-reliance, nature eludes the rational moulds that attempt to impose an artificial order and our instinctive drive to find, more than anything, satisfaction in it. And yet elusive nature uses sensuality to show us its nearness and affinity: it reminds us that we, too, belong to nature. This beauty is fleeting: if we tried to uphold it as the unequivocal truth of nature, we would fall into the trap of deception; if we attempted to complete, extend and capture it, we would be guilty of sensationalism.[37] Beauty, in its fleetingness, is first and foremost *a lure*: it stimulates and prods us to meditate on nature and on ourselves in it.

Thus, the *Orillas del Coto desde Bonanza* paintings bring another dimension of nature to light. Beauty joins the ranks of the now-familiar trio of force, refuge and enigma. But this dimension has an added value: by stirring both affect and intelligence, beauty makes us restless and drives us to discover and consider the other significations or facets of nature. Sometimes this fleeting beauty mingles with them, seemingly serving as a vehicle for all other significations: it brings them closer, highlights them and is even transfigured in each of them. Perhaps this is why I am reminded of the adage with which Breton concluded his novel *Nadja*: beauty will be tremulous or will not be at all.[38]

VI. [solitude: the studio on Calle Bolsa]. Beginning with the drawings of La Cartuja, we have covered a significant part of Carmen Laffón's landscapes and traced the evolutionary process of a dense poetic object, the River Guadalquivir. The year 1975 was an important date in this reflective, systematic process of meditating on and cultivating the landscape. It was then, one year before the La Cartuja drawings, that the artist began a series of daring works, her views of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Laffón provides us with clues to those landscapes' point of origin in a series begun in 1999, *El estudio de la calle Bolsa* [The Studio on Calle Bolsa].

This was not an ordinary studio, just a room on the rooftop of an old house on a street, Calle Bolsa, in the low-lying district of Sanlúcar known as Barrio Bajo. As the relatives who offered it to Carmen Laffón also lived in the house, the studio gave her independence as well as a homely place of refuge.[39] Once a laundry room or indoor space for hanging out the washing on rainy days, it had since become a kind of storage loft. Laffón found a use for everything that had been secreted in there: unwanted furniture, old doors, wine crates, trestles and ladders were organised into a studio where she worked with no disruptions other than an occasional offer of coffee from the thoughtful family downstairs.

She never truly left this creative haven: from 1975 to 1978 she painted two large views of Sanlúcar (114 x 200 cm) at the studio,[40] and around 1989 she came back to work on new urban landscapes in which monkey puzzle trees figured prominently. In 1999 she returned again: the building was to be remodelled, and she was notified in case she wanted to retrieve anything from the little room. Everything was still there, just as she had left it. Nothing seemed to have changed. The vertigo of experiencing that frozen moment in time led to a decision: she would condense the memory of that place into sculptures and large drawings.

One piece in the series—exhibited together only once, at the Leandro Navarro Gallery[41]—is of particular interest for our purposes: *Bodegón apoyado en una mesa* [Still Life Leaning against a Table], a sculpture in painted bronze that echoes the traditional genre of interiors. In it we see a small, plain table such as one might find in a modest kitchen, with a cup and saucer and a sugar bowl on top and a crate for wine bottles tucked underneath; behind and to the right is a window with two fastened shutters, and to the left a still-life picture leans against the table. Another table with three almost cylindrical objects was carved in bas-relief on a bronze plate. This table bears a certain resemblance to its sculptural counterpart, but it includes a very elaborate panel that contrasts with the ascetic simplicity of the latter. The group invites contemplation, but it also can and should be physically experienced. As an installation, it commemorates the spatial relationships of that humble studio whose secluded peace is assured by the tightly fastened shutters.

Although Rembrandt portrayed himself in the workshop, alone before a canvas,[42] the solitary painter in the studio is primarily a Romantic ideal. Kersting painted Friedrich working alone, cut off from the outside world,[43] effectively illustrating one of the Greifswald painter's favourite sayings: "Close your bodily eye, so that you may see your picture first with the spiritual eye."[44] Let us not be distracted

[37] Schiller, J. C. F., *Cartas para la educación estética del hombre* [English title: *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man*], V. Romano (trans.), Buenos Aires: Aguilar, 1981, Letter XXVI.

[38] Breton, A., *Nadja*, R. Howard (trans.), New York: Grove Press, 1960, 159-60. The translator renders it as "Beauty will be CONVULSIVE or will not be at all." Breton expands upon this aphorism in *Mad Love* (Mary Ann Caws, trans., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, 10-19).

[39] Between 1973 and 1975 Carmen Laffón lived in Madrid, and although the faithful support and friendship of gallerist Juana Mordó was never lacking, she grappled with loneliness during those years. Somehow, she says, her Aunt Carmela must have sensed this, for the good woman travelled all the way to Madrid to offer her the little room on Calle Bolsa.

[40] The painting produced in 1975-77 is now owned by the Juan March Foundation in Palma de Mallorca, and the other from 1977-78 is in a private collection in Seville.

[41] Madrid, May-June 2004.

[42] This small panel (25.1 x 31.9 cm) is now held at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

[43] Oil on canvas, 53.5 x 41 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. This portrait does not seem to reflect Friedrich's normal working method; in his 1805 sepias, he appears alone in his studio but not isolated, as the windows are wide open.

[44] Arnaldo, J. (ed.), "Fragmentos para una teoría romántica del arte", Madrid: Tecnos, 1987, 53. English translation quoted in Burwick, F. and J. Klein, *The*

by the mystical overtones: the painter's isolation is indicative of his capacity for invention and ultimately symbolises the modern individual's autonomy of thought and sentiment. The studio is the material extension of that free will. At the dawn of the modern era, the dignity of such a space was a privilege reserved for the humanists: Antonello da Messina, in 1474, and Botticelli, in 1495, transported St. Jerome from the desert to a *studiolo* not unlike the one Quentin Metsys created for Erasmus in 1517. Back then, the workshops of Renaissance artists were bustling hives of activity rather than havens of solitude.[45] However, little by little painters also earned the right to enjoy that space of quietude and inner reflection.

The studio or atelier is a place of work, but also of meditation and freedom. One sees the world more clearly from the studio, for in solitude everything that meets the eye may be consulted with oneself and decisions are easier to make. The closed window in *Estudio de la calle Bolsa* is therefore a symbol of that proprietary space where seclusion and freedom go hand in hand. We might even go so far as to see the closed window as the promise of a picture which cannot be improvised or sought after, because one must go out to find it. Perhaps this was the process that led to the first views of Sanlúcar.

In those early vistas, which depict the houses of Sanlúcar in greater detail, the rooftop on which the studio stood is visible in the foreground. The flat roof is even more prominent in the pictures from circa 1989: in a humid atmosphere that betrays the proximity of the river, building tops and monkey puzzle trees stand out sharply behind the rooftop parapet, an empty plane worked in a highly pictorial manner. All of these pictures suggest that Carmen Laffón wanted to connect the landscape with her vantage point and the place from which she decided to paint it,[46] the window we cannot see but which allowed her to see and appreciate Sanlúcar as it gradually slopes down to the Guadalquivir.

Later, in 2004, after the show at the Leandro Navarro Gallery, Laffón began a painting that she would finish in 2013 of the window seen from inside the studio. Now open, it continues to attract and guide the gaze, leading it to rest on the rooftop. A few trees and houses in the distance are barely visible at the top of the picture. It may be that the long pilgrimage we have traced through the history of her landscapes required a period of preparation, a time in a withdrawn, almost hermetic retreat such as Laffón found on Calle Bolsa.

VII. [the gift of language]. Modern thinkers devised a strictly individual space where pure sensations are received, adjust and compose themselves, and can be critically judged. This space is none other than the consciousness of the modern individual, and it is at the heart of the value attached to the painter's studio. However, this notion of consciousness raises several questions. For some authors, this idea of a reserved, almost isolated space is clouded by the shadow of myth.[47] The notion of pure consciousness fails to consider that when it begins to think, judge and decide, it is already conditioned by interactions with the natural and social environment, and above all by language. Even soliloquy may be nothing more than "the product and reflex of converse with others".[48] For this reason the studio and its seclusion, being indicative of the artist's work, must be rounded out by other more tumultuous, less controllable but ultimately decisive *loci*: not only do these other places influence the artist's preoccupations and initiatives, they also facilitate and fertilise them.

Carmen Laffón seems to suggest this in a work she produced to mark the 400th anniversary of the publication of the first part of *Don Quixote*. This piece, entitled *Cajón, mesa y atril con libros grandes y pequeños* [Crate, Table and Lectern with Large and Small Books], was part of a project organised by the Museo Reina Sofía that also included contributions by Eva Lootz, Susana Solano, Cristina Iglesias, Blanca Muñoz, Andreu Alfaro, Martín Chirino, Rafael Canogar, Juan Navarro Baldeweg, Darío Villalba and Miquel Navarro. As a sculpture it manages to define the surrounding space, but as an installation it invites us to stroll between its two components, a table in apparent disarray and a silent crate adjoining a set of shelves topped by a lectern.

The "table" is a large rectangle of painted bronze resting on an industrially manufactured support structure. We might define it as a horizontal haut-relief: books, loose pages, folded sheets and blocks of wood (makeshift lecterns?) upset the smooth surface, creating a powerful rhythm that contrasts with the uniform soundness of the metal. This formal aspect aside, the objects form a map which forewarned spectators must reconstruct little by little. Cervantes's personal literary preferences, revealed when the priest and the barber conspired to cull Don Quixote's library, are also present here, scattered across the table, shelves and lectern. We find the same titles that were spared from the purging flames: *La Galatea*, Cervantes's own novel, *La Diana enamorada* by Gaspar Gil Polo, and *Las lágrimas de Angélica* by Barahona de Soto, which the priest defended, and the four books of *Amadís de Gaula* saved by the barber. These are accompanied by *La Segunda Parte del Orlando*, a Spanish-style sequel to Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* penned by Nicolás Espinosa, and *Historia de las cosas del Oriente* by Amaro Centeno, a fictitious account of the eastern lands of Tartary and Cathay. Peering out from among the books is a delicate portrait of a woman with the bearing of an Italian lady (perhaps that which Don Quixote gave to the genteel Dulcinea, the peasant woman from El Toboso?) as well as a sketch of the profile of *Gattamelata*, the equestrian statue Donatello created to immortalise the political *condottiero*, perhaps foreseeing the end of the heroic age of chivalry.

In a way, the books and figures are possible elements of the world of artists: present in the age, they guide their intel-

Romantic Imagination: Literature and Art in England and Germany, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996, 384.

[45] Chastel, A., "L'Artiste" in Garin, E. (ed.), *L'Homme de la Renaissance*, Paris: Seuil, 1990, 249-282.

[46] Recht, Roland, *La lettre de Humboldt: du jardin paysager au daguerréotype*, Paris: Éditions Christian Bourgois, 2006, 27 ff.

[47] Some view this notion of consciousness as a construct or contrivance. Rather than positing a springboard for modern philosophy, the primary aim of the thinkers who came up with it in the 17th century may have been to establish an intellectual sphere in which science could be pursued freely without fear of theological anathemas. See Rorty, R., *La filosofía y el espejo de la naturaleza* [English title: *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*], J. Fernández Zulaica (trans.), Madrid: Cátedra, 1983, 127 ff.

[48] Dewey, J., *Experience and Nature,* London: George Allan & Unwin, 1929, 170.

ligence, make valuable impressions on their sensibility, provide structure for their fantasies and organise their tastes and dislikes. No artist springs like Athena from the head of Zeus, fully armed and equipped. Rather, artists are slowly wrought in laborious interaction with language and culture; both have been conferred upon them and must be considered a gift.[49] Everything artists believe they have created or are capable of inventing can ultimately be traced back to the language and culture they were given.

However, we have not yet examined the other half of the piece, the large sealed crate. In a way, it is an extension of the studio metaphor: this is the individual space of a peculiar artist like Cervantes, whose life was so eventful that I am reminded of Bias, the Greek philosopher who, in his perpetual wanderings, claimed to carry with him all that he possessed of value—namely, his ideas and freedom of thought and speech.[50] However, the tightly shut case also summons memories of Don Quixote's walled-up library. From this perspective, the books and drawings are charged with ambiguous significance. Are they the fuel and product of Cervantes's fantasy, or are they also a reflection of his melancholy yet insightful vision of the impending demise of the old ideals, not only of medieval chivalry but of an entire era?

The connection between an artist's ideas and work and the language and culture in and from which she thinks and works is also apparent in a more recent piece by Carmen Laffón, *Bodegón con libros* [Still Life with Books], created *ex professo* for the collection of the University of Seville. Although the books are piled on the work bench, the picture's organisation confronts two very different legacies: classical art and Picasso. On the table, the names (Velázquez, Murillo, Zurbarán, Bécquer, Machado, Cernuda) and books in relative disarray remind us of how we grow, living in language and culture. Meanwhile, the vague pictorial richness of the background seems to preserve a few traces of that solitary space reserved for the individual, the studio.

VIII. [the value of the *zone*]. As the modern era came into its own, the idea of the painter's studio changed. Courbet envisioned it as a space capable of encompassing all of society and culture, including the state apparatus and the new bourgeois and working classes. Around the same time, Baudelaire admired the scaffolds that surrounded the new buildings which were changing the face of Paris,[51] and some years later Apollinaire bemoaned the fact that this same city made even automobiles look like artistic antiques.[52] There was a need to link art to the new social reality, which explains why Russian Constructivists and Bauhaus teachers decided to transplant the artist's studio to industrial warehouses and engineering laboratories. Meanwhile, Marcel Duchamp and Kurt Schwitters attempted to relate art with the manufactured or discarded objects that comprised everyday life. Artists began to question the isolation of the studio and view it with suspicion.

Art had declared its independence from science, morality and religion, but this new space of freedom was also potentially insular. Museums, art galleries, art journals and even academic degrees signalled the emergence of a separate world: autonomous, yes, but also alienated and detached from the shared social experience.[53] This typically modern tension between the autonomy of art and art as a social reality proved that the solitude of the studio was no longer enough; not even a connection and familiarity with artistic forms would suffice. Artists also had to step outside the studio and the art establishment itself.

These preoccupations gave life to a recent series by Carmen Laffón which has never been exhibited until now, *La herrería* [The Smithy]. The pieces were inspired by her frequent visits to a blacksmith's shop that produced a number of elements for *Parra en otoño* [Grapevine Trellis in Autumn]. This installation presented difficulties that were beyond the capabilities of conventional metalwork and required the skilled services of an industrial workshop that still practised certain artisanal metallurgy techniques.[54] It was there, in a context outside the art world, that these works came into being.

These are bold, even disconcerting pieces. Some might easily be mistaken for mere industrial objects: *La Cuba* is nothing more than one of those skips commonly hauled about by lorries, a solid, bright blue geometric shape with a few vine shoots trailing out of the open tailgate that whisper a faint rhythm. *Caballetes con palos, vigas y sarmientos* [Trestle Supports with Sticks, Beams and Vine Shoots] is exactly what the title announces: materials set out on a work bench, ready for use, along with a few shoots left over from the pieces cast for the grapevine trellis. *Caballetes con tronco verde* [Trestle Supports with Green Log] is a work along the same lines, except for the strong note of colour added by a log similar to those on which the trellis structure was based.

As is often the case in Carmen Laffón's oeuvre, it is difficult to assign these works to one particular artistic genre. We might call them sculptures, as they are three-dimensional pieces, but because they incorporate non-artistic, found and chosen elements (and in some cases consist of little else), it might be more accurate to regard them as assemblages and file them under the heading of ready-mades. Yet this solution is not satisfactory, either, for do not the vine shoots and bright hints of colour distance these works from the Duchampian principle of the "beauty of indifference"?[55] But perhaps we are barking up the wrong tree, so to speak; maybe we should simply say that these works are incisive precisely because they defy classification or, better yet, because they are so far removed from any conventional idea of art and even from much of what characterises the art of Carmen Laffón.

[49] Heidegger, M., "La esencia del habla", *De camino al habla* [English title: *On the Way to Language*], Y. Zimmermann (trans.), Barcelona: Serbal, 1987, 141-194.

[50] This also inevitably conjures up the memory of Ernst Bloch, *Entremundos en la historia de la filosofía. Apuntes de los cursos de Leipzig*, trans. and intro. by Justo Pérez del Corral, Madrid: Taurus, 1984, 19.

[51] Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* [English title: *The Flowers of Evil*], LXXXIX.

[52] Apollinaire, G., *Alcoholes* [Original title: *Alcools*], J. Abeleira (ed.), Madrid: Hiperión, 1995, bilingual edition, 8-21.

[53] Shiner, L., *La invención del arte. Una historia cultural* [English title: *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History*], E. Hyde and E. Julibert (trans.). Barcelona: Paidós, 2000, 307 ff.

[54] The González brothers' smithy in Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Thanks to their intimate knowledge of vineyards, the smiths were able to help Laffón work out the details of how a vine grows, the relationship between stalk and leaves, etc.

[55] Duchamp, M., *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson (eds.), New York: Da Capo Press, 1973, 30.

As many of you may know, the word "zone" comes from a Greek term that means belt. Apollinaire dedicated a poem[56] to the zone, the undefined space that encircles the modern city and marks its expanding girth. It is a no-man's land where the rules of tradition are broken, a defiance that also entails a loss of the protection they afford. Symptoms of everything that might prolong the city and improve its prospects emerge in the *zone*, but those signs also seem to challenge its present and past. In the zone, the city breathes a sigh of relief, revelling in the sensation of freedom from clichés and stereotypes, but it is never truly at ease because it knows that this is not solid ground and the future is far from certain. Modern art also has a *zone*, a fringe territory at once promising and disconcerting. This area is defined by works that dare to dialogue with the non-artistic, with the prose of our way of life (which is growing day by day), and translate it into poetry. These works expand the boundaries of art, and for that very reason they disturb its repose. In these works that cultivate novelty, the flip side of fecundity is uncertainty. There is an element of risk not only in the artwork but also in the future it heralds: the conservative query, "Is this art?" is usually followed by another, "And after this, what comes next?" Yet for all their inherent risks, these works have, for over a century and a half, allowed us to reflect not only on art but also on the world. That is the value of the *zone* and of these pieces by Laffón which, as you may have guessed, do not inhabit the zone: they are the first to discover and chart this unknown territory.

Thus, *La herrería* has the value of novelty, blazes trails and, above all, triggers debates. But there is something more to these pieces, something that sets them apart from Carmen Laffón's other three-dimensional works. *Canastas llenas de uvas* [Baskets Laden with Grapes], *Bodegón apoyado en una mesa* [Still Life Leaning against a Table] and *Cajón, mesa y atril con libros grandes y pequeños* [Crate, Table and Lectern with Large and Small Books] are sculptures with all the hallmarks of installations which, as I mentioned earlier, invite us to walk around and through them, examine them up close and physically explore them. But the pieces in *La herrería* shun detail; they present a unified front for straightforward contemplation, at most producing an effect of scale that sparks a desire to go toe-to-toe with them. This is clearly illustrated in *Caballetes con elementos verticales* [Trestle Supports with Vertical Elements]. The meagre structural properties (unity, totality, rhythm) of this simple support, fabricated at the smithy as an auxiliary tool for performing some unknown task, intervene in and transform the space.

This artistic modus operandi, which relies more on the total structure of the work than on the balanced relationships between its parts, and which seeks above all to be a construction, is not new in the work of Carmen Laffón, though it is fairly recent. We find traces of it in some of the sculptures and drawings from *Estudio de la calle Bolsa*,[57] and its influence is also apparent in the *Bajamar* series. We will see it in full bloom in the next series, *La cal*.

IX. [a *locus* of memory, *Lime*]. Lacking the industrial stamp of the workshop or the aura of artistic merit, lime had a consistency all its own in Mediterranean culture. For some it was practically a way of life, and it undoubtedly marked the life experience of the vast majority. Lime burners, whose job was to obtain lime by heating limestone to very high temperatures, lived in huts or cottages near the kilns while they worked, as they had to constantly stoke the fires, maintain the right temperature, monitor the process and prevent possible collapses. First they loaded the kiln, and once the calcination process was completed they had to wait for it to cool before finally unloading the quicklime. This took approximately thirty to forty-five days, not counting the time required to select the stone from the quarry and gather firewood in the forest.

After this point, the lime began to circulate in society. Quicklime was useful for preventing or delaying decomposition, but it was most commonly employed in construction by mixing it with water. A more diluted mixture known as lime wash or whitewash was a ubiquitous part of daily life due to its multiple benefits: it provided protection from the heat and epidemics, preserved walls of earth, adobe and brick from the damp, and lent streets and interiors a special dignity. As soon as the rains passed the whitewashing would begin, and the operation was often repeated within the same year on those parts of the house that tended to accumulate grime. These periodic paint jobs were so important that many country estates and farms entrusted them to an expert whitewasher, who kept the tools of his trade stored and ready for use in some out-of-the-way corner of the property.

Carmen Laffón stumbled across such a collection of tools while visiting an hacienda called El Fontanar in the township of Puebla de Cazalla, and she interpreted them as signs of a major shift in our traditional culture. This, too, is a locus—or, more accurately, the memory of a locus, as it may already be lost to us.

Some of her pictures depict this very corner reserved for the equipment used in whitewashing. Tubs, buckets, brushes and paint sticks are piled together under a great blind arch. But let me be more precise, for this description does not do justice to the scene. The large blind arch is framed by a plane and both, though seen slightly sideways (the point of view is off-centre and to the right), have a considerable consistency. Arch and plane define the pictorial frame and the light, shining from the left, weakens and almost disintegrates the strong geometric forms. The light itself defines a new plane whose brilliance and fluidity compete with that of the arch, even while its geometric form completes it. Thus, the alliance between light and geometry defines the painting. Their combined force is so powerful that the buckets and tubs spontaneously morph into cylinders or truncated cones and the sticks become lines. Moreover, in its flirtation with monochrome a picture like *La cal. Bidones a carbón* [Lime: Tubs in Charcoal] intensifies its constructive power, confirming and ratifying the type of composition we saw earlier in the *Bajamar* series. This constructive quality is so strong that it can assimilate the hints of colour that appear in *La cal. Bidón azul* [Lime: Blue Tub] without fear of weakening. Another two works in the series, *La cal. Carretilla* [Lime: Wheelbarrow] and *La cal. Bidón rojo* [Lime: Red Tub], are even bolder because the supporting role of the arch is considerably lessened, and yet they fearlessly tackle the problematic simplicity of the plane.

[56] Apollinaire, G., *Alcoholes* [Original title: *Alcools*], J. Abeleira (ed.), Madrid: Hiperión, 1995, bilingual edition, 8-21.

[57] Some of this was pointed out by Guillermo Solana in "Bodegones silenciosos de Carmen Laffón" in *El Cultural*, 27 May-2 June 2004.

The result is surprising. These pictures do not just *re-present* lime; they *realise* it, make it present. Rather than describing or narrating its past role in culture, they make us feel it by means of simple yet well-defined, powerful planes. Even those pictures which might seem more informative at first glance, like *El aljibe* [The Cistern] or *La pileta* [The Basin], are not merely descriptions of these elements but illustrations of the wide-reaching influence of the lime culture. This is the poetic power of construction: the perfectly gauged rapport between geometry and light ultimately does everything the picture wanted to say.

The "world of lime" makes its final appearance in a work that is initially disconcerting, *Carretilla de cal* [Wheelbarrow of Lime]. Two things stand out in this piece: the literalness of the figure, and the way it defines and almost dictates the format. With regard to the second, we see that the picture is an enlargement of the wheelbarrow: the shape and dimensions of the latter dictate those of the canvas, and its tray tinges the surrounding area with rust-coloured hues. On the other hand, the figure is accorded an importance reminiscent of the value attached to the pieces found in or derived from the blacksmith's shop. The figure's literalness leaves virtually no room for any idea but the hard, almost crude presence of the wheelbarrow. However, in this case there is another factor which I believe is important: that literalness suggests that both figure and painting might well be emblems. The old wheelbarrow evokes the now-absent whitewashers—usually manual labourers who were also getting on in years—and so, almost unintentionally, symbolises the end of an era. The determination of those who continue to use traditional lime kilns and insist on their undeniable environmental value is encouraging, but other forms of production and distribution are already so ingrained in our way of life that the world of lime may already be a thing of the past.

X. [the garden, landscape and locus]. We have followed the trail of Carmen Laffón's landscape art and then retraced our steps to discover the various locations from which she has worked: the seclusion of the studio, immersion in language, the relationship with socially shared experience and cultural tradition. Together they comprise a *locus*, a space that is uniquely hers, a place that grows with her because she slowly shapes it even while she is being moulded with and in it.

Landscape and locus are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Laffón's landscapes have a special way of coexisting and forging ties with nature, as her academy induction speech made patently clear. The affinity between landscape and locus is expressed with particular intensity in one of her recent projects, a series of drawings dedicated to the famous gardens of *El Generalife* in Granada, produced between 2006 and 2011. The garden is an excellent example of this convergence: as a manmade construct, it can be construed as a landscape, but long before this word became applicable it was first and foremost a place, a *locus amoenus*.*58*

In order to examine this issue properly, we should begin by recalling the original distinction between landscape and garden. "Landscape" was synonymous with territory, and therefore applied to the generally coarse and occasionally inhospitable areas that surrounded and were visible from the city.[59] The garden, on the other hand, did not seek to imitate nature's spontaneous beauty: it was, above all, a construct whose artificial order denoted the intelligence and hand of man.[60] This idea is apparent in the walls and ceiling vaults made from plants and flowers favoured by painters of the *Quattrocento*. However, these quasi-architectures were gradually replaced by a clearer image of nature, not as *landscape* but as a mere *background* for figures. Chastel notes that this new image, at the dawn of the 16th century, represented a challenge for painters[61] and was embraced for both artistic and philosophical reasons. The artistic advantage lay in the fact that relinquishing semi-architectural backgrounds in favour of fluid vegetation defined by light and colour allowed artists to integrate their figures using chiaroscuro, which strengthened the unity of the picture. The philosophical motivations are provided by Leonardo and his idea of the inexhaustible, unpredictable fecundity of nature.[62] Both reasons may have come into play when Da Vinci created the rugged landscape behind the garden in his *Annunciation*, which some experts[63] have dated to the years of renewal mentioned by Chastel. Yet this first timid appearance of the landscape had little to do with the garden: each evolved along its own separate path. The landscape garden would not take root until the 18th century,[64] and another century would pass before painters developed a poetic vision of the garden.

Consequently, in order to examine the El Generalife drawings with true rigour, we must bear two things in mind. Firstly, the union of the landscape painting and the garden is essentially a modern invention; and secondly, these drawings depict an Arab garden and therefore shed little light on the memory of the landscape garden—the succession of natural vistas typical of English gardens—or on the Romantic ideas that inspired the Central European forest garden.[65]

It is no coincidence that the close bond between landscape painting and gardens was forged in the modern era, for it was then that cities began to lose their tangible proximity to nature. The detachment was spatial (the modern city pushes farmland away and erects barrier after barrier to separate itself from the natural world: industrial facilities, railway tracks, roads, wastelands, rubbish tips) as well as temporal, for time became primarily a measure of work and productivity, and life was no longer guided by natural cycles. As a result of these changes, our connection with nature was weakened and, in some cases, severed altogether.[66] The ensuing malaise fanned the desire of certain artists to establish colonies in towns like Pont-Aven or Auvers-sur-Oise,

[58] Maderuelo, J., *El paisaje. Génesis de un concepto*, Madrid: Abada, 2006, 21, 173 ff.

[59] Maderuelo, J., *El paisaje. Génesis de un concepto*, Madrid: Abada, 2006, 24 ff.

[60] Maderuelo, J., *El paisaje. Génesis de un concepto*, Madrid: Abada, 2006, 176.

[61] Chastel, A., *El gran taller de Italia, 1460-1500* [English title: *Studios and Styles of the Italian Renaissance*], A. del Hoyo (trans.), Madrid: Aguilar, 1966, 317.

[62] Da Vinci, *Scritti letterari*, anthology edited by A. Marinoni, Milano: Rizzoli, 1991, 185.

[63] Pedretti, C., *Leonardo: A Study in Chronology and Style*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973.

[64] Maderuelo, J., *El paisaje. Génesis de un concepto*, Madrid: Abada, 2006, 189.

[65] There are echoes of this garden in Handke, P., *Poema a la duración* [English title: *To Duration, A Poem*], E. Barjau (ed.), Barcelona: Lumen, 1991, 31.

[66] Recall, if you will, the Post-Impressionist landscapes of the outskirts of Paris, where fields of sickly crops and industrial sites are interspersed with vast tracts of wasteland.

while their more urbane colleagues incorporated the recreational spots frequented by city-dwellers in their landscapes, depicting country outings, bathing excursions and regattas.[67]

In this context, the garden acquired new value: it gave birth to the park, a public space for urban society, and was added, with varying degrees of privacy, to the homes of the middle and upper classes. In such cases, the garden was usually classified as a domesticated fragment of nature. But it would be more accurate and productive to say that the garden had become, above all, a metaphor—not for nature per se, but for humanity's longing and nostalgia for nature. However many plant species it may contain, the garden is always permeated by the absence of nature, and when we stroll through it we know ourselves to be immersed in an artificial creation which, though it barely manages to sublimate the prosaic logic of everyday existence, has the potential to awaken our forgotten sensuality, banish our fear of using imagination and make us suspect that perhaps there are other ways of interacting with the world around us.

If this is true, we might say that in the garden the time of perception is more important than what is actually perceived. The alternations that channel our gaze so deftly it can be unsettling encompass far more than the eye can take in.[68] Every instant can point to something above and beyond the corseted experience of the daily grind, filling the present with memories we did not know we had and dusting off shelved hopes.

From this point of view, the drawings of El Generalife can be seen as a string of unexpected contacts with nature. Unlike the encounters in forgotten settings, such as the banks of La Cartuja in 1976, these contacts may not have anything new to offer: their bounty consists in repressing the fears awakened by emotion and restoring our ability to imagine. And so a single motif can become the driving force behind multiple images, each with its poetic significance: the oleander lanes, the cypress-lined paths or the contrast between the cypress's slender profile and the sensual, almost anarchic fullness of other trees. Each of these contacts brings us face-to-face with the imminence of nature (no matter how far our civilisation has run from it) and the different possibilities of being and living with it.

This temporal dimension is underscored by the fact that it is an Arab garden. It does not offer open rolling vistas, like the English garden; it does not attempt to subjugate nature by imposing the yoke of order on its vitality, as the French garden aspires to do; nor does it aim to conjure up nature's primordial forces, like the Central European version. The Arab garden appeals to each of the five senses and reaches out to embrace the body. This is the ultimate goal of the soft gurgling of fountains and channels, the scent of flowers, fruit trees and aromatic herbs, the sharp brilliance of the ceramic tiles, the texture of the creeping vines, the sudden colour of a bloom and the sky's reflection in the gently undulating waters of quiet pools. That passionate desire to envelop the body is intensified by the garden's secluded nature: protected by walls and dotted with small pavilions, it resembles a private microcosm. Hence the significance of the wall-canvases which allude to and conceal the outside world, and the planes that confer distinction upon water jets, pools and fountains.

That sensory abundance and the idea of a world apart, typical of the Arab garden, reinforce the modern poetics of the garden—in other words, its metaphorical power—which, rather than providing consolation or escape, awakens the distant memory of ourselves as a part of nature. Therein lies the value of these drawings: they are *landscape*, because they evoke nature in different ways; and they are *locus*, because, in addition to showing us how the artist gradually partakes of the garden's sensuality, they offer something akin to a condensed artistic and emotional education which equips each of us to construct our own poetics.

XI. [slow homecoming]. Even in its heyday as a ceramic and porcelain factory, La Cartuja was surrounded by gardens and orchards. Orange and lemon groves and vineyards shared the soil with palm trees, rows of cypresses, dense clusters of aromatic plants and beds where roses may have bloomed with the help of two waterwheels that provided abundant flood irrigation. Since the days of the Carthusian monks for whom the island was named, this distant heir of the Arab garden was home to various pavilions and chapels. Thus, when the monastery was being restored, it made perfect sense to erect a pergola over a fountain at the western entrance to the North Cloister, in the Priory Garden, and leave the entire structure to the prolific devices of the trumpet vines.[69] Laffón decided to add a bit of bronze to this corner of the grounds, a frequent preamble to exhibitions held at the Centro Andaluz de Arte Contemporáneo.[70] To the left of a large work bench we see the floor plans for the pergola, on which the pillars have been slightly emphasised, and in the centre, on a makeshift easel, rests an engraving in very low relief—almost a drawing on metal—of the fountain, pillars, leaves and flowers. This work, which Laffón started in 2013 and completed quite recently, seems to close a great circle that began with the 1976 drawings.

Slow Homecoming, a novel by Peter Handke,[71] is the story of a long, nomadic quest for spaces. These spaces do not lend themselves to calculation or yield to constructive ambitions. They are simply given, and in the course of those chance encounters they slowly shape the main character. Perhaps this show can be summed up in a similar way, as a series of successively discovered spaces which the artist, Carmen Laffón, makes her own even while she is moulded and shaped by them. The odyssey begins with the unexpected vitality of a forgotten patch of earth and ends with this work, the gateway to an exhibition that is the accumulation of her successive encounters.

[67] Crow, T., *El arte moderno en la cultura de lo cotidiano* [English title: *Modern Art in Common Culture*], J. Chamorro Mielke (trans.), Madrid: Akal, 2002, 11-44.

[68] Jakob, Michael, *Paysage et temps*, Dion: Infolio, 2007, 25.

[69] Many architects were involved in the restoration and remodelling of La Cartuja. The project for the monument zone (what was once the monastery) where the pergola stands was designed by José Ramón Sierra Delgado and Ricardo Sierra Delgado; the Royal Pavilion, in what is known as the Outer Complex, was assigned to Fernando Mendoza Castells and Roberto Luna Fernández; the current headquarters of the Andalusian Institute of Historical Heritage were restored by Guillermo Vázquez Consuegra; and Luis Marín de Terán, Aurelio del Pozo Serrano and Emilio Yanes Bustamante restored the receiving pavilions of the old Pickman factory. The project officially termed the "Restoration of the Site of La Cartuja" was entrusted to Francisco Torres Martínez.

[70] During the 1st Contemporary Art Biennial of Seville, Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota created a performance piece entitled *During Sleep* for this space, which featured 24 young women lying, eyes closed, on individual beds arranged beneath the flowering trumpet vines.

[71] Handke, P., *Slow Homecoming*, New York: New York Review Books, 2009.