

## An Intimate Story

To Laura, Adrián and Juan

Looking at Karina Beltrán's photographs in the exhibition *Escenarios, Constelaciones, Polaroids* on show at CAAM, one gets the impression that she has always used this medium. Yet nothing further from the truth, for her beginnings as an artist are grounded in painting. The geometric watercolours prior to her departure as a photographer are suffused with the same refinement and calm that have invariably run through her whole practice. That said, the energy emanating from her new body of work intensified with her decision at the turn of the millennium to abandon painting for photography, a discipline that allows her to tell stories differently, speaking to us about her world, about herself and her concerns. Her move to London, the city where she lived for fourteen years and where she completed an MFA in the Chelsea College of Art and Design, brought about a sea change in her career. These new visual and perceptive experiences are patent in the series *The Next Room* (2001). Her deceased grandfather's empty house, closed for more than a year, inspired this series which validates a space created by shadows. Photography allowed her to discover ambiances built by silence. In her night-time strolls around London she observed the lights coming from windows and lampposts illuminating streets and façades. She used them to explore the shades of the light in the home from her memory in order to reinstate the parts of those places where we have lived and which are scattered inside each one of us. She yearns to listen once again to echoes from other days. Absence becomes a frame of mind that takes over the artist in her privacy, making us perceive the home in its sheer purity, with its noises appending a kind of sound body through the extension of its spaces. A new dwelling transporting her towards emptiness, pain and death, destroying any intimation of true happiness.

The artist continued to explore the subject matter of death in the series *My body practicing being dead* (2002-2003), only that here, she herself is the focus. Beltrán looks for places to enact that particularly painful voyage. Self-portraits in which her inert body takes its final rest. A sweet death by a lake, in the snow, submerged in water, on green grass, among wild poppies or on a carpet on which she could take off towards the sky, like in Oriental fairytales. And although the death Karina Beltrán reveals for us is a journey to paradise, this apparently naïve work contains in it a trace of sadness, a malaise that leaves you devastated because death is always a heart-rending event.

The same theme is explored, albeit with new contingencies, in *Apariciones* (2003-2007), where we see images we would have never been able to imagine by ourselves, in a garden, in a park, in the street, inside a home or in a launderette. Karina Beltrán shows self-absorbed beings wandering aimlessly around the city. The artist explains, "those presences get in the way, sneaking between the photographer's gaze and what she thought she had photographed. It has to do with the whole story of spirits, unreal beings appearing in images captured by the camera and unseen by the photographer's eye until the photo is developed. There they are, looking baffled. Have they come from another world? From the past? Or maybe returning to the past, a past where nature was

still possible.” The series conveys a “poetic intentionality.” It addresses those beings immortalised forever by either cinema or literature. The work unveils the view of a personal, private space. The denizens of *Apariciones* wander unseen into and interrupt an action in the very instant the light is captured by the shutter of the camera. Karina Beltrán grants entity to melancholia. She provides a transcendent subject for the verb *to meditate*, for the self-absorption before the landscape, to miss all those things that, after the mental regeneration of the landscape, resonate like a poetic image and as a feeling of sublimity whose reality is requisite if the memory is not to be mutilated. Presences as hypotheses of lives, of universes privately fantasised in which to be and not to be could well end up as one and the same thing.

Karina Beltrán’s work lends itself to manifold readings, but behind each of her photographs we will always find an invitation to dream, to depart from the commonplace. In expressing that will to go beyond the real, the everyday is enhanced, the banal acquires a metaphysical dimension, and along that path she finds a way to make sense of the world. The series *I close my eyes in order to see* (2002) is a good example of the plausible correlation between the material appearance of the objects and beings making up the world, and the beholder’s still undiscovered sensorial universe. The negation of the senses the artist toys with in this suite of works is a device to free us from the human being’s natural resistance to see beyond the evident. This might be the reason why, in Beltrán’s work, the characters fearlessly contemplate vast spaces like the sea or the sky, without overlooking small places or little objects.

The association forged between the minimal and the grandiose is highlighted in *Acerca de cómo construir un sueño* (2005-2007), where we see beautiful coloured spheres reminiscent of planets. The scenes created for this series include maps, objects and household items. The project consists of fifteen photographs, depicting a young woman and various objects: a world map on the wall and a broken candelabrum on a table; several translucent glass balls; and two chairs placed in different positions. In Karina Beltrán’s work, objects take on a symbolic quality. A young woman looks at a map and seems to escape through those graphic representations of the world, at times pointing her finger at specific locations. Maps symbolise the world. Maps of a reality still waiting to be discovered. The young woman’s attitude entails a sublimation; it might be a compensation for the loss of self brought about by a society as mediated as ours. The world map is nothing but an image of the world with a symbolic load: understanding its essence as a conflict between time and eternity, matter and spirit. The world is projected as a set of opposites that are, nonetheless, distinguishable. The act of looking and reflecting while contemplating a world map is tantamount to creating a space between oneness and the world. A territory treated and defined throughout history as the *space between worlds*—a place where a privileged spirit can see the realities under the light of a higher world.

Clearly enough, Karina Beltrán’s discourse is permeated with a dynamic imagination, a kind of aerial freedom that is projected in the aural, the translucent and the mobile. A territory where other artists could lose their way or lose their focus, but in the work of this artist everything makes sense, perhaps

because by impregnating the objects with that psychic dynamism we believe we find surprising hidden forces in their matter and form. Forces penetrating silence. In *The Gate* (2006-2007), solitude is depicted as a source for primeval concerns. The installation shows a double projection in a cinema. As soon as we enter the various spaces in this piece, we are pitched into fantasy. We see a solitary young woman in a dark space. Beautiful, alone, self-absorbed, she has remained behind after everybody else has left, or perhaps she has found a place of identification in the empty stalls she chose in order to sink into her deepest self and thus experience her own meaning as an individual. She could even be unreal. Karina Beltrán is aware that, psychologically speaking, only in our fantasies are we free beings. The beholder sees her through the eyes of the artist looking at her and perceiving the young woman's sensibility, now slightly from behind, now from the front, as if she was about to take one of the seats near her. The disquiet we feel in the nearness to such a sensitive soul inspires a sense of beauty and sadness. We want to look at her, watch her and, without disturbing her, sit and reminisce while dreaming, or dream while reminiscing, truly insightful qualities and truly poetic and profound intentions in this superb body of work.

*Secretos* (2009) is the work with which she took part at the 2nd Biennial of the Canary Islands. In her intervention at the Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the artist reflected on how to interpret Nature through art. She chose to intervene in the gallery devoted to the painter Alfaro, camouflaging her own photographs among the paintings, thus enabling the coexistence of proposals from different periods: two forms of addressing the same reality through the gaze of two artists. When looking at Alfaro's landscapes, Karina Beltrán decided to enter a dialogue with an artist engaged with a realist, sensual naturalism. She approaches the painter from a contemporary viewpoint. In focusing on corners depicted in the paintings, Beltrán uncovers a reality which, in its intimacy, reneges the world as seen by 19th century painting. In Alfaro's landscape, the corner life is diluted. Beltrán's photographs record those moments of approaching the tiny space in which the being withdraws; a space which, in the words of the poet, fits in a child's hand. Alfaro's vision is complemented with her own and reminds us that behind the visible lies what the artist reveals for us: the existence of a world inside another world, of an image that transcends through its spaces. The photographs in this series engage in dialogue with Alfaro's homes, only that the home now conceals other secrets, other experiences, other horizons that, nonetheless, do not forget other times.

The home is one of Beltrán's pet themes. In *Hide and Seek* (2010), a series consisting of both black and white and colour photos, she talks about the relationship between home and body, two strongly connected spaces that make it possible for us to discover our relationship with the world. The image of the home has been turned into a metaphor of the body. We are our body, a dual body full of contradictions, which requires passion to be able to recognise itself.

A lone stroller, a shadow in the dark, shining moonlight, a door left ajar, the barely suggested reflection of a curtain on the wall, or the presence of beings looking without being seen. Photographs that are elusive details of our

existence. Karina Beltrán crosses over to the dark side and the possibility of discovering the uncertainty that haunts us. The work speaks about the seduction and play that seems to trap the victims that hide in the darkness of the night and are reborn every morning in their pain and melancholy, but also in their hankering after new experiences. Desire burgeons as the senses are activated, instincts that sometimes unveil for us our status as hunters or of having been preys. Her characters inhabit a bipolar world, where sexual fantasies help them to discover their most hidden personality. A spirit marked by secret passions, seduction, sexual attraction, desire or voyeurism. The exploration of the body is paramount in this experimental voyage that transports the characters into the darkness of their passions.

The journey is not just a question of movement in space. First and foremost it is the tension, the quest, the exploration and the change brought about by said movement. Key to Beltrán's practice, this subject matter acknowledges a deep-seated desire to escape through knowledge, a voyage acted out in the imagination but also a powerfully felt vocation to intensely experience the new and the profound. We ought to bear in mind that dreaming and imagining are similar to travelling, and that travelling is not necessarily a flight: it is a search that always sheds new light and helps us to find a way out of the labyrinth. Her photos endeavour to find everyday paths, but also unfathomable, profound and metaphysical roads. Both in *El Hilo de los días* (2009) and in *Constelaciones* (2010-2011), the journey is seen in a tour through different countries: Turkey, Greece, Italy, France, England, Spain. A personal trip that pays no heed to recognisable monuments, instead preferring to lose itself in the most intimate corners of the metropolis: a route looking to the surrounding world and listening to the air circulating in the city. An itinerary that enters into the homes she has lived in, expands across rays of sunshine, across the sea, the sky, the wind lashing in trees, billowing clothes and ropes, across lights and shadows, reflections, colour, objects and the people populating the landscape. The work gathers fragments of life that seem to be frozen within time. And while in *El Hilo de los días* we find photographs taken randomly in the urban landscape alongside more theatrical, more dramatised pieces made in scenes where models pose following the requirements of the script, *Constelaciones* is more spontaneous, less constrained. In this suite, in which it would seem that Beltrán stumbles upon her subject matters along the way, chance plays a significant role. Her attentive gaze, curiosity and boundless intuition allow this nomadic artist to depict those non-places immortalised by the French sociologist Marc Augé. We are referring to those anonymous spaces of globalisation—worlds interwoven and engaged in a mutual dissolution. Karina Beltrán conceives her proposals as an ongoing rehearsal that feeds on each new work, on each new reflection. The key lies in the passage, in the journey towards another place, towards the origin, towards her childhood, in search of the light of knowledge but also of evasion or placidness.

Apparently, there is nothing she wants to tell in *Constelaciones*. She lets herself go and presses the shutter release at the first interesting thing she comes across. Her photos capture moments in indeterminate, imprecise places. To our eyes, that decision to create a "found image" could seem fortuitous, but that is not the case. Karina Beltrán is in possession of a solidly-built personal world

that is well able to fit these unplanned images into its discourse. Her love for objects, for details, for light, for the interiors of homes and for landscape is rendered in pieces giving off a sense of serenity. The artist glides effortlessly between the objects, making connections with the world in a work always open to interpretation. This enigmatic series reflects her mood, her gift for creating magic worlds, for lending attention to questions that go unnoticed to most of us. Fragments of lost landscapes regain visibility, survive thanks to their close relationship with a world that seems to share secrets with this artist. Karina Beltrán has never reneged on her debt to painting. The sensuousness suffused throughout the photographs of flowers bring to mind the exquisite work of Georgia O'Keeffe.

The exhibition design for *Constelaciones* is not just a way of presenting the work, but another creative instrument intrinsic to it. The arrangement of the pieces enables one to establish a series of associations of varying intensity between some photos and others, acting as a key element in the interpretation of the whole. An abstract ensemble that portends a new reading for a figurative work. Yet there is nothing accidental about the arrangement: it responds to a methodical, detailed prior work for which she uses graph paper with the same intention as a musician uses a score to signal the introduction of each instrument in a symphony. Through it she forges a close relationship between the whole and the sum of its parts. Each photograph has its precise place and weight within the whole.

The parallelepiped configuring the space is like a piece of white cardboard of which only the dihedral in the corner opposite the entrance is used. The rest of the walls of the room are left blank. A look at the installation reveals an underlying chromatic law behind the arrangement, with a gradual shift from light colours to darker shades. The first photographs show a dominance of the white and pink of the flowers or of the reflection of sunlight on the walls, while in the last ones, the black of the night and of the sea take on an absolute presence; a transition from light to darkness. The bright marble floor of the gallery provides an element of surprise and acts as a mirror reflecting the installation, a reflection that, far from contaminating the whole, seems to endow it with a new dimension.

The thirty drawings titled *Polaroids* (2010-2012) are complementary to the series *Constelaciones* and irradiate an identical calmness, the very same charm. With her move to Madrid, the fact of sharing space with other artists, and the renewed tranquillity accompanying this new phase, rekindled her desire to draw. Karina Beltrán returns to her origins, to painting, and she does so through photography. She uses photos taken with her mobile in rooms of different cities to create drawings in which the details are paramount. In this intimate and poetic story, architecture occupies a core place. Stairs, walls, doors, but also furniture, lamps, windows, bedspreads and towels, are depicted without the conventional framing. Little by little, the lens is further removed until arriving at an abstraction of planes in which we are unable to recognise anything. Some lines are defined by a coloured thread sewn directly in the paper. Each hand-sewn drawing dialogues with the chromaticism of a work suffused with immense lyricism. And whereas the first drawings witness a wary

insertion of the thread, in the last ones it takes up all the space. By leaving loose thread ends she marks and provides a gesturality, underscoring the dramatic quality of her recent work. The colour threads hanging over the abyss of a white plane make it possible for us to imagine a peeling wall full of stories and experiences. The threads expand beyond the limits of the drawing and seem to suggest the possibility of pulling them and closing the space.

In these works we perceive less melancholy and more subtlety. In each corner, there is something of the space Karina Beltrán inhabits within herself, and that is the reason why it is always a half-open refuge. Each drawing shows us a kind of semi-box that is half wall, half door. She seems to use them all to build an imaginary room around her own body. A space that wishes to be inhabited and shared, a place to build an intimate story.

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